

Neo-liberal Green Grabbing and Green Washing in *Minas Gerais*, Brazil: The Case of Ibitipoca

Apropiación verde y lavado verde neoliberal en *Minas Gerais*, Brasil: el caso de Ibitipoca



Scott William Hoefle

Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro,
Brasil.

scotthoefle@acd.ufrj.br

scotthoefle@hotmail.com



Vicente Paulo dos Santos Pinto

Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora,
Brasil.

vicente.pinto@ufjf.edu.br

Abstract

The neo-liberal turn of Brazilian conservation policy after 1990 is questioned using critical concepts from political ecology and environmental history perspectives: carbon colonialism, green grabbing, urban exploitation of the rural in the form of bio-centric nature enclosures and green washing unsustainable activities through green talk and environmental compensation. These issues are illustrated in an example of a large private nature reserve in Minas Gerais, perhaps the most environmentally blighted of Brazilian states after centuries of mining activities. 21st Century global political ecology methods are used to locally, regionally, nationally and globally contextualize the case study researched in fieldwork undertaken in 2023 in the locality of Ibitipoca, situated in a High Mountain enclave located within the Atlantic Forest biome of the state. Decades of prior research in different Brazilian biomes and regions are mobilized to demonstrate how the large private nature reserve displays all the hallmarks of green grabbing, green washing and elitist eco-tourism. The case also presents a Brazilian example of what Latour (2018) called the elitist bunker/gated community mentality involving Local-minus faux traditionalism in which elites opt out of Global-plus modernization and limit the scope and scale of reparations for environmental destruction perpetrated elsewhere by creating specific green havens for their own personal use.

Keywords: neo-liberal conservation policy, green grabbing, green washing, Minas Gerais, Brazil

Resumen

El giro neoliberal de la política de conservación brasileña posterior a 1990 es cuestionado mediante conceptos críticos provenientes de la ecología política y la historia ambiental: colonialismo del carbono, acaparamiento verde, explotación urbana de lo rural en forma de cercamientos de la naturaleza de carácter biocéntrico, y el lavado verde de actividades insostenibles a través de discursos “verdes” y compensaciones ambientales. Estas problemáticas se ilustran con el ejemplo de una gran reserva natural privada en Minas Gerais, quizá el estado brasileño más degradado ambientalmente tras siglos de actividades mineras. Se emplean métodos de la ecología política global del siglo XXI para contextualizar el estudio de caso a nivel local, regional, nacional y global, basado en trabajo de campo realizado en 2023 en la localidad de Ibitipoca, situada en un enclave de alta montaña dentro del bioma de la Mata Atlántica del estado. Décadas de investigaciones previas en distintos biomas y regiones de Brasil se movilizan para demostrar cómo la gran reserva natural privada presenta todas las características del acaparamiento verde, el lavado verde y el ecoturismo elitista. El caso también ofrece un ejemplo brasileño de lo que Latour (2018) denominó la mentalidad de “bunker elitista” o comunidad cerrada, que implica un falso tradicionalismo de tipo Local-minus, en el cual las élites se sustraen de la modernización Global-plus y limitan el alcance y la escala de las reparaciones por la destrucción ambiental perpetrada en otros lugares, mediante la creación de enclaves “verdes” específicos para su uso personal.

Palabras clave: política de conservación neoliberal, acaparamiento verde, lavado verde, Minas Gerais, Brasil

Introduction

Political Ecology and Radical Environmental History/Studies perspectives are used to demonstrate how neo-liberal conservation actors in Brazil are of upper-middle and upper-class urban origin and possess a bio-centric view of nature in which human presence is ideally limited to tourist activities catering to middle- and upper-class urbanites with similar social backgrounds. These urban-based actors perpetrate **green grabbing** by taking advantage of rural decline and out-migration of the young to buy up land cheaply in areas that had been historically marginal for productivist export agriculture and so relegated to poor farmers. We argue that the whole **green enclosure** process involves what Kelly-Reif and Wing (2016) called **urban exploitation of the rural** and **urban environmental parasitism**, in which reducing global emissions is forced on to marginal areas of the countryside rather than resolved in any significant way in the cities or in the agribusiness sector. The case also demonstrates how the owner of a large nature reserve engages in **green washing** a lifetime engaged in strip mining, road building and clear-cut land leveling for the construction of housing estates, industrial sites and commercial facilities.

Finally, in the conclusion, drawing on relational socio-ecology, solutions are offered on how to overcome the shortcoming of conventional bio-centric conservation, which limits itself to preserving or recreating a few pristine nature reserves, and so in the end authorizes unfettered development in the rest of national territories. Instead of what Latour (2018) called flawed Local-minus or Global-minus kinds of environmental conservation, Global-plus Terrestrial/planetary strategies are advocated in which environmentally benign and socially inclusive conservation/development is promoted everywhere in the world, North or South and urban or rural.

Critical interpretative concepts for questioning neoliberal bio-centric conservation and carbon colonialism

The concepts of **conservation refugees**, **environmental dispossession** and **environmental ethics** from Radical Environmental History and Studies are combined with the concepts of **carbon colonialism**, **green grabbing**, **nature enclosures**, **green washing** and **urban-rural exploitation** from Political Ecology to critically evaluate neo-liberal bio-centric conservation policy.

In a global context of environmental backsliding, geopolitical wars over energy sources, violent counter-imperial movements and increasing social and regional inequality, after 2000 Environmental History took a radical turn. A new generation of historians started to castigate past iconic actors of bio-centric conservation, such as Marsh, Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon, that only took the good of the ecosystem into consideration and so justified ethnic and class cleansing of the landscape. In the hundred-year conflict between Western conservation and native peoples and poor peasants, the latter have been criminalized, dispossessed and turned into conservation refugees in order to produce pristine Nature to be visited in the comfort of a Sport Utility Vehicle or luxury mobile home by well-to-do urbanites from rich regions. Starting in colonial times and continuing into the present, bio-centric Western worldviews of an essentialized Nature without (rural) human presence have been imposed on the rest of the world in order to create distilled nature reserves free from anthropic action. Local populations were removed from their ancestral territories and their productive systems deformed (Adams, W. & Mulligan, M., 2003, Dowie, M., 2009, Griffin, C. *et al.*, 2019, Jacoby, K., 2014). Antonio Carlos Diegues (1996) was a Brazilian pioneer of this critique of bio-centric preservation of untouchable Nature.

Against environmental dispossession caused by conventional bio-centric conservation, Radical Ecologists and Environmental Historians refuse to conceptually and spatially separate nature from society. In their holistic view culture and environment are considered to be entangled entities and

conservation policy needs to be decolonized of US-style national parks. Instead European-style conservation/heritage units with sustainable human use within larger regional planning units are advocated. In place of elitist bio-centric environmental ethics, pluralistic **homo-ecocentric environmental ethics** are advocated in order to attend to both human and ecosystem value and moral status (Adams, W. & Mulligan, M., 2003, Merchant, C., 2004, Pepper, D., 1996).

Contemporary Political Ecology also presents critical views contrary to bio-centric conservation. Political ecologists focus on how poor vulnerable rural and urban social groups suffer disproportionate risk from environmental degradation, carbon emissions and global climate change at the same time that they can lose their livelihoods to make way for essentialized nature (Huber, M., 2017, Holifield, R., 2015, Peet, R. *et al.*, 2011, Taylor, M., 2015). Political ecologists also criticize policies of mitigation of climate change based on carbon trade-offs for involving carbon colonialism within countries and between the Global North & South (Bumpus, A. & Liverman, D., 2011). In effect, such policy green washes unsustainable agricultural, industrial and services activities, occults the destructive nature of capitalism and permits postindustrial and recently industrialized countries to continue polluting if they compensate this with state and private grants for conservation in poor countries (Peet, R., *et al.*, 2011).

Adding insult to injury, the blame for rising global emissions was long placed on deforestation in the developing countries and not on industry and post-industrial life styles, which produce most of the emissions. China alone produced 31.5% of all global CO₂ emissions in 2023 and the United States 13.0%. Brazil is often portrayed as the villain in this narrative due to its tropical deforestation, but it only contributed 1.29% of global emissions in 2023 and its share has been falling over time (Richie, H. & Roser, M., 2024), mainly due to deindustrialization. Indeed, since 1965 growth in global emissions due to land use change (forest to field, field to city) has been flat, about 5 billion tons of CO₂ annually while emissions from fossil fuel for powering industry and lifestyle amenities increased exponentially from 5 billion tons in 1890 to over 36 billion tons in 2022. Leading industrial countries pollute the most. In the 19th Century the United Kingdom was the worst polluter, then in the 20th Century the United States and finally China is today (Richie, H. *et. al.*, 2023). This kind of environmental injustice was finally brought up for the first time in a World Climate Summit held in Belém do Pará in 2025 but the issue was shelved allegedly for further study.

Blaming tropical deforestation for incessantly rising global emission is not just bad faith, it has validated green grabbing of lands in the Global South and green wars perpetrated against tribal peoples and poor peasants there who resist leaving areas set aside for full conservation and carbon compensation (Bicalho, A. & Hoefle, S., 2022, Bumpus, A. & Liverman, D., 2011, Büscher, B. & Fletcher, R., 2014, 2018, Forsyth, T., 2003, Hoefle, S., 2013, Peet, R. *et al.*, 2011). As most nature reserves are created in essentially rural areas, Kelly-Reif & Wing (2016) consider this to constitute **urban-rural exploitation**. Land is said to be cheaper there and no one ever suggested leveling Wall Street and replacing the skyscrapers with forest. Maintaining or recreating nature reserves in some parts of the country side located far from cities and agribusiness zones in turn justifies dumping unwanted dejects in the marginal countryside as well as locating any undesirable polluting activity out there, all of which frees cities and agribusiness from their duty to seriously reduce their emissions. In other words, setting aside some nature areas authorizes unfettered development of the vast majority of a national territory. Because of this, Kelly-Reif & Wing (2016) consider **cities to be parasitic** in environmental terms. Metro areas spew out enormous amounts of air and water pollution and garbage whose meticulously domesticated Central Parks and Hyde Parks do not compensate in the least. Here we explore a similar case of a private nature reserve which in no way compensates the environmental destruction perpetrated elsewhere by its owner.

Class conflict becomes even more apparent when critical views of rural and eco-tourism are included in the evaluation of environmental policies. These leisure activities are often the only public use permitted by national park administrators and private nature reserve owners, and once the rural poor are duly cleansed from the **natural landscape**, the main beneficiaries are urban middle- and upper-class individuals, i.e. people with a similar social background as the park administrators. This in turn accentuates bias against poor rural folk (Bicalho, A., & Hoefle, S., 2022, Hoefle, S., 2016).

Contextual research methods

This case study builds on prior research in the Atlantic Forest biome undertaken since 1987 on issues involving metropolitan and essentially rural farming and fishing systems in mountainous and coastal Rio de Janeiro state, bio-centric conservation and green enclosures and penetration of urban-industrial capital into the accessible countryside in the form of eco-tourism, rural tourism and second homes (cf. Hoefle 1992, 2014, 2019, 2020a, 2022). Over the years, research was conducted by one of the authors and his students in central and south Rio de Janeiro state and more recently in the north part of the state. Methods worked from the bottom-up involving first comprehensive interviews of 238 farmers and fishers with regard to environmental perception and ethics, productive systems and methods, self-provisioning and market articulation, income and lifestyle amenities, access to public utilities, educational and health services and religious and ontological outlook.

This “primary” information was then contextualized outward with the use of methods from critical global political ecology involving analysis of political discourse/narrative of social actors situated at multiple scales/local sites of analysis, archive research and the critical sociological investigation of complex governmental and non-governmental institutions. I stress “contextualized outward” to avoid getting bogged down in the geographical scales versus flat ontology debate (cf. Jones III, J. P. *et al.*, 2011, Marston, S. *et al.*, 2005, Neumann, R., 2009, 2015). Experience from detailed research of the adverse relationship between riverine peasants and private reserves in the Pantanal wetlands biome of western Brazil also proved helpful for interpreting the case study (cf. Bicalho, A. M. S. M., Hoefle, S. W., 2022)

With this experience in mind, field research for the case study presented here was targeted at the example of a large private nature reserve rather than a comprehensive study of rural and urban actors situated around the famous Ibitipoca State Park. A general panorama of this process was provided in an interview undertaken in May, 2023 of the director of the Ibitipoca State Park (who was once a student of one of the authors). The IbitiProjeto private reserve in turn was researched through the eyes of its manager and its owner as well as of an owner of a neighboring simple eco-lodge who is in open conflict with the private park. During the course of a day the manager took us around the reserve where we met biologists and visited the various conservation and eco-tourism facilities. When we finally interviewed the reserve owner we adopted more of an anthropological approach of letting him explain everything in his own manner rather than imposing a questionnaire on him. As we were dealing with a rich and powerful individual in Brazil, letting the man talk freely made merit out of necessity. The eco-lodge owner was already familiar with one of the authors and he also has sought atonement for his past as a consultant for downsizing state-sector enterprises. This man gave up everything to do this, including his marriage, while the private park owner still operates his mining and construction firm. Acts speak for themselves.

The neo-liberal turn in brazilian conservation policy

During much of the 20th Century conservation policy in Brazil mimicked the state-led US model of bio-centric national parks. Inspired by Yellowstone, the Brazilian Forest Code of 1934 enabled the creation of two of the first three full-preservation National Parks in a mountainous region of Atlantic Forest located between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. A third National Park was set up at Iguaçu Falls (which is also within the greater Atlantic Forest biome). In addition to these, a large conservation area already existed within the city of Rio de Janeiro since the 1860s. Ideally only nature tourism could be practiced within the limits of the parks and luxurious lodges were built in some of them for the well-to-do to visit **nature**. In fact, some farmers, who had been living in the areas for centuries before the parks were created, were allowed to stay because compensation for expropriation took decades to occur if it happened at all. A list of banned activities completely deformed their productive systems in the cynical hope that the farmers would leave on their own accord and so not need to be compensated. The Forest Code of 1965 in turn created new kinds of conservation of units: full-preservation Biological Reserves and Ecological Research Stations where only research can be undertaken as well as National Forests where economic use can occur.

Then from 1990 onward in an economic context of hyper-inflation and ballooning national debt, the bankrupted federal government turned to two kinds of neo-liberal conservation which effectively pushed the cost of preserving nature areas on to rural landowners. One form of conservation forced farmers to maintain between 20% to 80% of their land in native vegetation, which varied according to biome. In addition, twenty meters of gallery forest had to be protected in either side of water courses in all biomes. Another highly relevant neo-liberal measure for the present work was a presidential decree of 1996 which permitted setting up Private Natural Reserves (RPPMs). In theory, private reserves promote sustainable use conservation but it is the landowner who defines what sustainability is and that is usually bio-centric conservation units without the presence of indigenous peoples or poor peasants. This provoked green enclosures in the Atlantic Forest and Pantanal biomes (cf. Bicalho, A. & Hoefle, S., 2022, Hoefle, S., 2019).

In 2000 the National System of Conservation Units (SNUC) was implemented in Brazil, which made an important distinction between full-preservation units on one side and on the other nature reserves with multiple sustainable uses. National Forests, Extractivist Reserves, Sustainable Development Reserves and Private Reserves fall into this latter group, which allow low-impact land use and permit prior residents to stay, particularly if they are legally constituted **traditional populations**, such as Amerindians and historic riverine peasants of the Amazon, who are numerous in that region. Consequently, this second kind of conservation units is concentrated in the Amazon while bio-centric National Parks and de facto bio-centric Private Nature Reserves are the norm elsewhere in Brazil.

The atlantic forest context of the case study

Within environmentalist discourse and older kinds of environmental history concerning degree of deforestation and conversion to cities and farms, the Brazilian Atlantic Forest is considered to be the most threatened biome in the country. The biome occupies an area of 1,315,460 km² situated along the east coast of Brazil, stretching from Rio Grande do Norte state in the north to Rio Grande do Sul state in the south and includes our case study, albeit in an enclave of high-altitude vegetation located at 1,200 meters.

Warren Dean (1995) in a historical study of deforestation of the Atlantic Forest since Portuguese colonization in 1500 up to 1990 details how over the centuries successive export cycles provoked extensive forest clearing until only 7% to 8% of the original forest cover remained in the late 20th Century. This occurred because the biome was the first to be occupied by European colonists and

today most of the Brazilian population still lives in its teeming cities located on the coast or just inland. The Brazilian environmental historian José Augusto Pádua (2002) also treated the destruction of the Atlantic Forest by a colonial land use system based on large landowners using slave labor to produce commodities for export.

During the 1980s regional trends were set in course which changed the long-term dynamics from deforestation to forest regeneration in the Atlantic Forest. Highly competitive export commodity production arose in the Central-West region of Brazil. Afforestation did not occur on flatter lands of the Atlantic Forest which not only remained competitive in commodity production but also adopted what Wilson and Barton (2015) call super-productivist systems. Both trends caused farm redundancy and forest regeneration in mountainous agriculturally marginal parts of the Atlantic Forest, much like what occurred in the U.S. Atlantic Forest during the 19th and 20th Centuries (Hoefle, S., 2019).

In the mountains located behind the industrial cities of the South and Southeast regions, farming remained dynamic in valley bottoms where vegetables and fruit are produced for the metro market but became redundant on the upper slopes like the case study where forest re-growth has been concentrated. In a classic push-pull migration pattern, the farm sector lost population to the industrializing cities during the latter part of the 20th Century, which restricted planting labor-intensive crops and caused problems with farm succession. At the same time, from the 1990s onward, numerous conservation units were set up in the mountains where most of the remaining forest of the biome was located. Poor farmers bore the burden of this policy because in the past the higher slopes were not appropriate for export crops and historically these lands were left to smallholders whose farming systems have now been deformed by unjust conservation measures (Hoefle, 2021).

Consequently, these developments transformed deforestation to afforestation in the Atlantic Forest, particularly if one counts robust secondary growth as forest like the Brazilian Census does, which reported 27% of the biome in forest (IBGE, 2026). The environmentalist NGO SOS Mata Atlântica calculated 24% of the original landcover remaining but only 12.4% is considered to be mature forest, so as its web page proclaims, the forest biome “is ready to store more carbon” through greater reforestation (SOS Mata Atlântica, 2025). Now let’s turn this urban-biased narrative around and look at afforestation from the perspective of poor farmers of the biome.

Farmers in the Atlantic Forest suffer further restrictions than those applied to other biomes. In 2006 the implementation of Law no. 11.428/2006 prohibited cutting primary forest and cutting secondary growth with a diameter of more than 3 cm, i.e. the equivalent of a year of fallow growth. These restrictions barely affect commodity farmers in long-deforested flatter land of the biome who can even compensate using all of their land if they invest in private or public conservation elsewhere in the biome. Most small holdings are encountered in steep terrain that is situated in two parallel mountain ranges which roughly run north to south down the lower half of the biome: the Serra do Mar (the Coastal Mountains) and the Serra da Mantiqueira further inland (where our case study is located). At the time of the new law, many of these farmers used four to six-year fallowing within non-productivist farming systems and with the stroke of a pen they lost two-thirds of the productive land that was in fallow. The steep terrain of these farms has numerous small water courses subject to gallery forest restrictions. As a result, interviewed small farmers of the upper slopes had between one half to two-thirds of their land in forest, well above the 20% legal requirement (see Hoefle, S., 2021 for greater details).

Many Brazilian metro areas are located in the Atlantic Forest biome and are the main source of air pollution from remaining industrial activity and a fleet of private and public cars, buses and trucks. Extensive water pollution of rivers is caused by poorly treated sewage. Torrential rainfall

causes extensive urban flooding and overflow of sewage, which is aggravated by widespread land capping. With the exception of the city of Rio de Janeiro, relatively few wooded areas exist in the other metropolises of the biome which could absorb emissions and rainfall run off. With each passing year, more and more private vehicles and trucks are acquired and cause longer and longer lines of congested traffic and smog. Any solution suggested to reduce this environmental nightmare always points to planting more trees in rural areas of the Atlantic Forest. One such study duly noted that by 2010 the number of registered vehicles in Brazil had reached 64,817,000 cars and trucks (for a population of 190,732,694 inhabitants), which (naturally) demanded planting eleven times more forest in the biome (Moreira, A., 2011). Urban exploitation of the rural could not be clearer. One could even call this **domestic carbon colonialism**.

However, state-promoted green grabbing in the Atlantic Forest that increased the size of existing conservation units and created new ones to connect ecological mosaics was met with resistance in some places. Some affected small farmers banded together and simply refused to leave. Alternatively, they sought to be declared legally constituted traditional populations in which case they came under the jurisdiction of other federal ministries that did not bring an antagonistic bio-centric view to conservation (see cases treated in Hoefle, 2020, 2021). An important current case before the Federal Supreme Court pits indigenous groups against a bio-centric State Park in Santa Catarina State. The final verdict will decide the fate using ethnic territories as a viable strategy for resisting state-promoted green grabbing.

Neo-liberal green grabbing and green washing in the case of Ibitipoca, Minas Gerais

Our case study is located in what was once the robust Minas Gerais Atlantic Forest zone. Juiz de Fora is an important medium-size city which had 540,756 inhabitants in 2022 (IBGE, 2025) and is located in an industrial corridor mid-way between Rio de Janeiro on the coast and the state capital of Belo Horizonte to the north. The city is a theater of accumulation for mining activities, some remaining steel activity and real estate speculation. It once had a notable past in textile production. Today Juiz de Fora is a regional center for providing financial, health care, some upscale commerce and educational services. Ibitipoca is located in the neighboring municipality of Lima Duarte and since the 1980s has been Juiz de Fora's rural playground where second-home and hobby ranch owners could imbibe in earthly delights far from the prying eyes of prudish neighbors in town.

This area also has the Ibitipoca State Park which is one of the most visited nature reserves in Minas Gerais state and indeed in Brazil. In 2023, there were more than 80,000 visitors. The Park covers 1,500 hectares and visiting services were recently farmed out to the private sector. The IbitiProject Reserve is a private undertaking that was created around the Park, allegedly as a buffer, that now covers 6,000 hectares and is four times the size of the State Park.

The Ibitipoca countryside is a depressed rural area. A documentary film on this subject **Mogol is dying** is said to have motivated a mining and construction magnate to set up the Ibitipoca Private Reserve as a way of reverting rural decline in the locality. The main rural activity practiced by surrounding landowners is dairy farming but today this activity is in decline. Many small dairy farms have gone out of business, mainly because the young out-migrate to Juiz de Fora and to destinations beyond. With the exception of a village that caters to the State Park, hamlets have become largely ghost towns and the area is a classic demographic empty zone. As such, the case treated here is off the radar of organized landless rural labor resistance groups.

In fact, the reserve owner is trying to green wash his involvement in environmental degradation in the same way that the pioneer of culture washing, Andrew Carnegie, used this tactic to erase

his responsibility for violent union busting tactics employing Pinkertons to shoot strikers during the Homestead Steel Mill Strike of 1892 in Pittsburgh (Library of Congress, 2024). Today his name is remembered for Carnegie Hall in New York City, where premium fine arts performances are enacted. Similarly, other robber barons, past and present, invest in art museums and concert halls to cover their notorious pasts. The Ibitipoca Reserve owner also tries to green wash his dubious reputation involved in strip mining and clear-cut construction projects which have made Minas Gerais the most ecologically blighted of Brazilian states. Bursting slag pools in particular have been responsible for the worst environmental disasters in Brazilian history, in Mariana and in Brumadinho, which poisoned entire river basins (Figure 1). There is no way in ecological hell that 6,000 hectares of (re-)preserved High Mountain land cover can compensate thousands of kilometers of lifeless rivers elsewhere in the biome and beyond.

The private park owner took advantage of a situation of rural decline in Ibitipoca to buy up large quantities of cheap land for his reserve, generating a situation of landownership concentration around the State Park in a zone largely noted for extensive land fragmentation in minifundias. The owner has already identified the land he still intends to buy and is pressuring the owners to sell it. Given his interest, land prices have increased. One of his neighbors who is an ex-urban with a small ecolodge and as such is not so gullible demanded the equivalent of US\$580,000 for 29 hectares of land.

Figure 1. From strip mining and tree-less housing construction to the Ibitprojeto Nature Reserve in a depressed dairy farming landscape.



Source of photographs: BBC (2019), Tribuna de Minas (2024), Field research (2023).

In the IbitiProjeto Visitor's Center a banner prominently displays a giant satellite image of the reserve on the wall which shows the **land within the reserve** and **land in acquisition or not yet acquired**. This differs from the same image published in the glossy *Ibiti Magazine* in 2017 in which the latter is listed as **not part of the reserve** (Figure 2). This is an important difference because **land in acquisition or not yet acquired** expresses on-going green grabbing still in process.

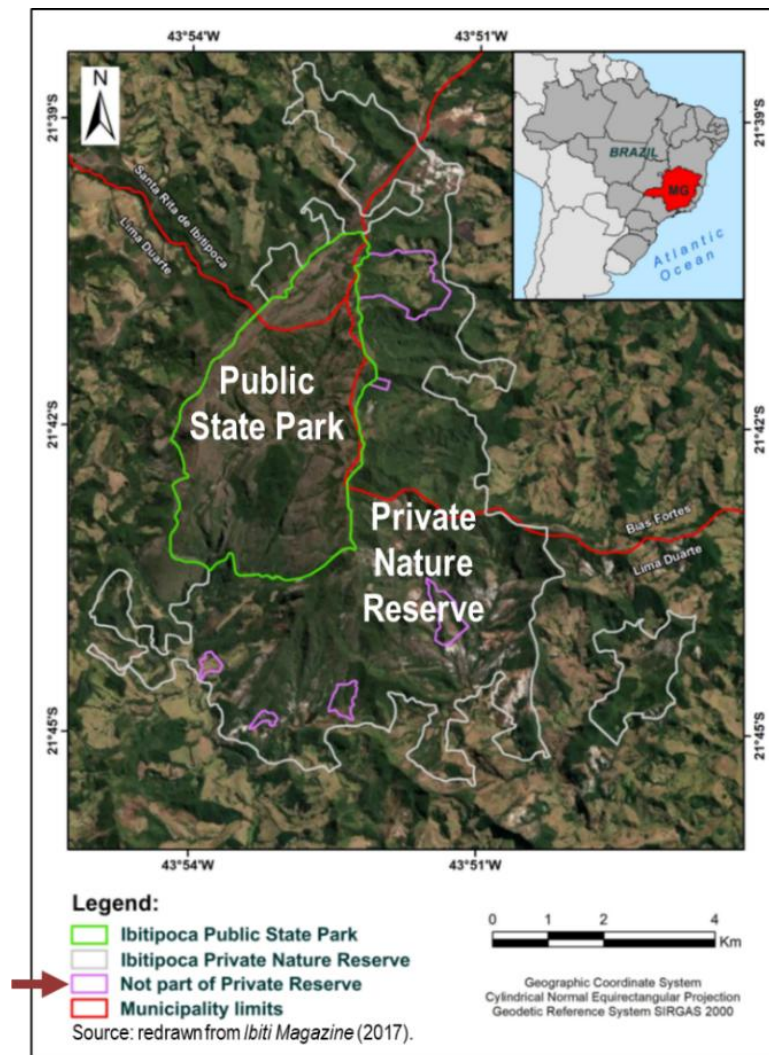
The reserve owner told us that to date he has invested over US\$60,000,000 in the reserve because he "wanted to create a green belt around the Park". He also said, "I hope that more people like me can take care of this little planet by doing the same", i.e. buying up land for private nature reserves. While some of the funds may have been invested in lieu of paying environmental compensation for his business activities a part came out of his personal fortune. This led the son from a first marriage to complain that his father was squandering what would be his inheritance.

The owner was told by a biologist that it will take 200 years to achieve pristine reforestation on the reserve so he must guarantee economic viability for that long. Despite being a private reserve, which would fall into the group of sustainable conservation units, it is no longer officially a Private Natural Heritage Reserve (RPPN) that would have to adhere to the consolidated system of Brazilian conservation (SNUC). To avoid hassling with government all together, the owner reclassified his reserve as a nature preservation **project**. In our interview, he was adamantly anti-State in his view all of its rules and regulations stymied innovation. On this count, he may be partially right. Any

action which involves the environment in Brazil involves considerable bureaucratic red tape and long delays. Indeed, the Ministry of the Environment has long manipulated the bureaucracy to achieve its aims. This strategy, however, has now backfired with the right-wing dominated Congress trying to reverse many of the environmental and social gains achieved since the progressive 1988 Constitution came into effect (Hoefle, 2020b).

The reserve owner's long-term objective is to **rewild** 98% of his land and so return it to some imaginary state of Nature before it was deforested in the past. About 2% of the reserve is used for tourist activities and some limited organic cropping is undertaken to provide guests and the owner with quality food. No stock-raising is permitted within the reserve. The Visitor's Center also has a number of other wall banners exalting meditation, yoga, Zen and vegan living.

Figure 2. Green grabbing in Ibitipoca, Minas Gerais



Source: redrawn from *Ibiti Magazine* (2017)

Without doubt the IbitiProjeto has created considerable employment where little existed previously. In 2023, there were about 350 full-time workers, but most were manual laborers, who received on average one to one and a half minimum wages per month (US\$267 to US\$400). Many were engaged in construction and road work which when completed will no longer be needed.

The reserve has an internationally acclaimed project for protecting northern Muriqui monkeys from extinction which plays into the green/conservationist marketing of the reserve. There are six

biologists employed to take care of eight monkeys. As qualified labor these workers earn a higher salary but none of them are local people, which is a common problem in ecotourism (Hoefle, S., 2016).

The strategy for making the reserve self-sustaining is based on luxury eco-tourism, which would require foreign language abilities that the local population does not have. Food served is locally-grown organic and vegan produce, but to avoid unduly restricting the number of potential clients even more, guests can request meat if they really want it. There are twenty-two eco-lodge rooms which charge from US\$360-500 per night per person. With an eye to long-term continuity operating the different lodges has been turned over to five selected employees who are encouraged to become ecotourism entrepreneurs. This room price may not be expensive for the luxury tourism market, but it is the equivalent of 1½ to 2 minimum monthly wages, which is more than the monthly salary of the chamber maids and grounds keepers. In other words, by relying on up-scale eco-tourism the reserve increases local social inequality, which is hardly a sustainable outcome.

Eco-tourism in itself may not be economically self-sustaining. Yes, the IbitiProjeto was voted the 27th best luxury hotel in the world by the Robb Report magazine but Brazil is far from rich regions from where wealthy tourists hail. It is located 7,750 km from New York City, 9,160 km from Paris, 18,225 km from Shanghai and 13,500 km from Sidney. As a result, Brazil ranks 33th among tourist destinations and so receives relatively few foreign tourists, rich or not, about 5,900,000 tourists annually versus 100,000,000 for number one France (WP Travel, 2024). There are other tropical countries located much closer to wealthy countries of the North. The carbon footprint involved with getting to Brazil is enormous. Indeed, as Durham (2008) noted, because of the great distance to tropical nature tourist destinations, eco-tourism often starts out owing a considerable amount of emissions that can be greater than the emissions captured by the nature reserves visited.

As tourist flow is small to the Ibitipoca Reserve, the owner created a strategy to invite celebrities for free to get the word out about the place. They had to be flown in on flights varying from 10 to 23 hours and then over a hundred kilometers by helicopter. Few foreign celebrities took up the offer, only some Brazilian celebrities who work for the GLOBO TV and a few noted Brazilian artists.

Conclusion

In this article we showed how a large private nature reserve is used by a regional magnate to green wash his tarnished image involved in clear-cut housing estates, mining activities, road construction and land leveling. Similarly, Büshner and Davidov (2014) published a collected volume treating even more blatant cases of green washing undertaken by mining and oil extraction firms through financial support given to conservation units and ecotourism located practically next door.

The reserve also has the function of providing a cordoned-off, private green lifestyle and maybe even a bunker in times of climatic or nuclear apocalypse, today a behavior also displayed by other global billionaires who are wary of the fallout from Ukraine-Russia and US-Israel-Iran wars. After all, the owner distinctly stated that his intellectual guru was Jared Diamond. However, one does not have to ponder the end of the world to want an exclusive green lifestyle far from the noise, traffic, pollution and violence of Brazilian metro areas in the aftermath of COVID (more private transport) and deindustrialization (less formal unionized employment, more instable low-paying service work and greater social inequality).

An elite network of wealthy individuals associated with this man has emerged who set up private reserves in order to appear to be ecologically fashionable. These urban-based actors also take advantage of rural decline and out-migration of the young to buy land cheaply. Some small dairy

farmers in our case study were able to resist being bought out through the everyday strategy of carrying on as always (cf. Griffin, C. et. al, 2019). However, the farmers are elderly and their children now live in urban areas and will probably sell out when their parents die. One old rancher acknowledged as much but said that he preferred to stay active on the farm than idle doing nothing in town. The reserves constitute green grabbing but methods are subtler, passing through the neo-liberal carbon market and urban aesthetics of idyllic nature. The process may not involve blatant paramilitary violence visited on peasants and indigenes like that observed in the Pantanal wetlands of western Brazil (cf. Bicalho, A. & Hoefle, S., 2022) but it is still green grabbing all the same.

Green grabbing is a specific kind of land grabbing. The latter is very common in Brazil. Indeed, land grabbing is synonymous with European colonization since 1500. Land grabbing and landless worker-small holder resistance movements have been thoroughly studied (for an overview see Fernandes, F. M., 2000, and the webpage of Dataluta). As Pádua (2002) argued that, in addition to causing social polarization, Brazilian export commodity production destroyed biomes. Today, land grabbing and environmental destruction is most intense in the northeastern corner of the Cerrado savanna biome in the Center-West region. In 2025 this part of the Cerrado was responsible for one half of all Brazilian deforestation (IBGE, 2026). We have shown here that green grabbing is not directly so environmentally destructive but it is indirectly so when bio-centric conservation is used to “compensate” large-scale degradation caused elsewhere by mining and urban areas.

This study also took a critical look at environmental conservation and green rural living from a rural perspective and so cautions against the enthusiasm of the literature on counter-urbanization, migration into the countryside and rural multifunctionality of the turn of the century (cf. Boyle, P. & Halfacre, K., 1998, Murdoch, J., 2006, Wilson, G., 2007). Even Fielding (1990) wondered if the process was a blessing or a threat to local people. He identified only five in a total of sixteen positive changes that benefited rural families as opposed to thirteen negative changes, many of which cancelled out the positive ones. Seen within this overall process, at best, setting up a private nature reserve is act which is oblivious to social rural-urban inequality, or at worse, involves cynically bad faith, typical of an out-of-this world mentality, by creating a private green bunker while the rest of the planet goes to ecological hell (cf. Latour, B., 2018, p.34-36).

We would prefer a more balanced socio-ecological approach to conservation and rural development in the Atlantic Forest in the direction of Latour’s terrestrial/planetary pole in consonance with what Environmental History called homo-ecocentric environmental ethics. Instead of removing farmers to make way for bio-centric nature areas, make the farmers socio-ecological and economically viable in a way that holds young people in the countryside. Organic perishable vegetables and fruit planted close to metro areas have access to an expanding market and distant areas of the biome can produce organic quality coffee, can practice agroecological dairy farming or even organic cattle ranching with bushes and trees present in pastures like organic ranchers of the Pantanal (Bicalho, A. & Araujo, A., 2021)(Figure 3).

Figure 3. Organics near metro areas and agroecological dairy farming in distant rural areas

Source: Field research Petropolis municipality, RJ (2008), Cardoso Moreira municipality, RJ (2024).

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico (CNPq – Brazil) and the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES-Brazil).

References

- Adams, W. M., & Mulligan, M. (2003). *Decolonizing nature: Strategies for conservation in a post-colonial era*. Earthscan.
- BBC. (2019). *Brazil's Barão de Cocais waits as dam nearby at risk of collapse*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-48391767>
- Bicalho, A. M. S. M., & Araujo, A. P. C. (2021). Alternative agro-ecological stock-raising in the Pantanal wetlands of western Brazil. *Belgeo*, 2021(2), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.4000/belgeo.48485>
- Bicalho, A. M., & Hoefle, S. W. (2022). Conservation and dispossession in the Pantanal wetland of western Brazil. En H. Pina, F. Martins, & A. Rocha (Eds.), *The overarching issues of the European area* (pp. 202–221). Universidade do Porto.
- Boyle, P., & Halfacree, K. (Eds.). (1998). *Migration into rural areas*. Wiley.
- Bumpus, A. G., & Liverman, D. M. (2011). Carbon colonialism? En R. Peet, P. Robbins, & M. Watts (Eds.), *Global political ecology* (pp. 203–224). Routledge.
- Büscher, B., & Davidov, V. (Eds.). (2014). *The ecotourism-extraction nexus*. Routledge.
- Büscher, B., & Fletcher, R. (2014). Accumulation by conservation. *New Political Economy*, 20(2), 273–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2014.923824>
- Büscher, B., & Fletcher, R. (2018). Under pressure: Conceptualising political ecologies of green wars. *Conservation and Society*, 16(2), 105–113. https://doi.org/10.4103/cs.cs_18_1
- DATALUTA. (2026). *Base de dados da luta pela terra*. <https://basedosdados.org/dataset/7f67f9bf-7a6b-4268-acb7-7c677c50c232>
- Dean, W. (1995). *With broadaxe and firebrand*. University of California Press.
- Diegues, A. C. (1996). *O mito moderno da natureza intocada*. São Paulo: NUPAUB-USP
- Dowie, M. (2009). *Conservation refugees*. MIT Press.
- Durham, W. H. (2008). The challenge ahead. En A. Stronza & W. H. Durham (Eds.), *Ecotourism and conservation in the Americas* (pp. 265–271). CABI.

- Fernandes, B. M. (2000). *A formação do MST no Brasil*. Editora Vozes.
- Fielding, A. J. (1990). Counterurbanisation: Threat or blessing? En D. Pinder (Ed.), *Western Europe* (pp. 226–239). Wiley. (Trabajo original publicado en 1980)
- Forsyth, T. (2003). *Critical political ecology*. Routledge.
- Griffin, C. J., Jones, R., & Robertson, I. J. M. (Eds.). (2019). *Moral ecologies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hoefle, S. W. (1992). Fishing, tourism and industrial development in Southeast Brazil. En M. Agüero (Ed.), *Contribuciones al estudio de la pesca en América Latina* (pp. 70–91). ICLARM.
- Hoefle, S. W. (2013). Beyond carbon colonialism. *Critique of Anthropology*, 33(2), 193–213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X13478224>
- Hoefle, S. W. (2014). Fishing livelihoods, seashore tourism and industrial development in coastal Rio de Janeiro. *Geographical Research*, 52(2), 198–211. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12061>
- Hoefle, S. W. (2016). Multi-functionality, juxtaposition and conflict in the Central Amazon. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 44, 24–36. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.12.009>
- Hoefle, S. W. (2019). Ghosts in the forest: The moral ecology of environmental governance toward poor farmers. En C. J. Griffin, R. Jones, & I. J. M. Robertson (Eds.), *Moral ecologies* (pp. 99–125). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-06112-8_5
- Hoefle, S. W. (2020a). Conservation refugees and environmental dispossession in 21st century critical geography. *Boletín de la Asociación de Geógrafos Españoles*, (84), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.21138/bage.2895>
- Hoefle, S. W. (2020b). The uncertain future of identity politics and conservation policy in the Brazilian Amazon. En J. Daniels (Ed.), *Advances in environmental research* (Vol. 70, pp. 55–101). Nova Science.
- Hoefle, S. W. (2021). Is the land half empty or half full of forest? En H. Pina, F. Martins, & L. D. Oliveira (Eds.), *The overarching issues in the European area* (Vol. 15, pp. 369–389). Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto.
- Holifield, R. (2015). Environmental justice and political ecology. En T. Perreault, G. Bridge, & J. McCarthy (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of political ecology* (pp. 585–597). Routledge.
- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE). (2025). *Juiz de Fora*. <https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/brasil/mg/juiz-de-fora/panorama>
- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE). (2026). *Biomass brasileiros*. <https://educa.ibge.gov.br/jovens/conheca-o-brasil/territorio/18307-biomass-brasileiros.html>
- Huber, M. (2017). Industrializing political ecology. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 107(1), 151–166.
- Jacoby, K. (2014). *Crimes against nature: Squatters, poachers, thieves*. University of California Press.
- Jones, J. P., Marston, S. A., & Woodward, K. (2011). Scales and networks Part II. En J. A. Agnew & J. S. Duncan (Eds.), *The Blackwell companion to human geography* (pp. 404–414). Blackwell.
- Kelly-Reif, K., & Wing, S. (2016). Urban-rural exploitation. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 47, 350–358. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2016.03.010>
- Latour, B. (2018). *Down to earth* (C. Porter, Trad.). Polity Press. (Trabajo original publicado en 2017)
- Library of Congress. (2024). *Homestead Strike: Topics in chronicling America*. <https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-homestead-strike>
- Marston, S. A., Woodward, K., & Jones, J. P. (2005). Human geography without scale. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30(4), 416–432. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2005.00180.x>
- Merchant, C. (2004). *Radical ecology*. Routledge.

- Moreira, A. (2011). Frota de veículos cresce 119% em dez anos no Brasil. *G1 Auto Esporte*. <http://g1.globo.com/carros/noticia/2011/02/frota-de-veiculos-cresce-119-3m-dez-anos-no-brasil-aponta-denatran.html>
- Murdoch, J. (2006). Networking rurality. En P. Cloke, T. Marsden, & P. Mooney (Eds.), *Handbook of rural studies* (pp. 171–184). Sage.
- Neumann, R. P. (2009). Political ecology: Theorizing scale. *Progress in Human Geography*, 33(3), 398–406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132508096353>
- Neumann, R. P. (2015). Political ecology of scale. En R. L. Bryant (Ed.), *International handbook of political ecology* (pp. 475–486). Edward Elgar.
- Peet, R., Robbins, P., & Watts, M. (Eds.). (2011). *Global political ecology*. Routledge.
- Pepper, D. (1996). *A history of environmental thought*. Routledge.
- Ritchie, H., & Roser, M. (2024). *CO₂ emissions*. <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-emissions>
- Ritchie, H., Rosado, P., & Roser, M. (2023). *CO₂ and greenhouse gas emissions*. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/annual-share-of-co2-emissions>
- SOS Mata Atlântica. (2025). *A Mata Atlântica é a floresta mais devastada do Brasil*. <https://www.sosma.org.br/causas/mata-atlantica>
- Taylor, M. (2015). *The political ecology of climate change adaptation*. Earthscan.
- Tribuna de Minas. (2024). Governo reduz teto de Minha Casa, Minha Vida. <https://tribunademinas.com.br/noticias/economia/03-07-2017/governo-reduz-teto-do-minha-casa-minha-vida.html>
- Wilson, G. A. (2007). *Multifunctional agriculture*. CABI.
- Wilson, G. A., & Burton, R. J. F. (2015). Neo-productivist agriculture. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 38, 52–64.
- WP Travel. (2024). *Most visited countries in the world in 2023*. <https://wptravel.io/most-visited-countries-in-the-world/#h-most-visited-countries-in-the-world-in-2023>

About the authors

Scott William Hoefle, D.Phil. (University of Oxford, Reino Unido), Profesor Titular del Programa de Posgrado en Geografía, Instituto de Geociencias, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil.

Vicente Paulo dos Santos Pinto, Ph.D. (Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro), Profesor Titular del Departamento de Geociencias, Instituto de Ciencias Humanas, Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, Brasil.