

# INVESTIGATING IMPERMANENCE



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I awoke in the darkness, gear packed. I joined my companions for the day, both avid birders, and prepared — but not to watch birds. Instead, we set out on a mission to visit a contested landscape in a remote corner of Peru. We drove for hours, passing rice and lime fields, watching the roads get more rugged and the dwellings more humble. We then hiked for two hours, wading down the Puyango-Tumbes River, which straddles the border with Ecuador. Early in the afternoon, we reached our destination: the spot where protections for the *Cerros de Amotape National Park* were cut back — reduced by more than 200-hectares — to authorize the construction of a dam for irrigation. In isolation, the small loss of protected land may seem insignificant, but this case is a microcosm. Protected lands and waters around the world face myriad legal, ecological, social, and political pressures. Their futures remain uncertain. Through site visits, as well as interviews with experts and archival research, I embarked on a journey to understand the history of Cerros de Amotape.

**THE CASE  
OF PARQUE  
NACIONAL  
CERROS DE  
AMOTAPE,  
PERU**



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**“Despite the intentions to establish them ‘in perpetuity,’ it’s clear that that protected areas are subject to political bargaining, shifting and disappearing with the political and economic winds.”**

The story of the downsizing of Cerros de Amotape National Park starts decades ago, following a long history of conflict between Peru and Ecuador over territorial control. As part of post-war peace agreements, a Binational Accord between the countries was initiated in 1971, developed further in 1985, and approved in 1998. This accord prioritized the development of irrigation dam and reservoir projects in the Puyango-Tumbes region on the border of Ecuador and Peru. As context, lands slated for dam development were located, at the time, inside the Tumbes National Forest, which was established in 1975. Also in 1975, Cerros de Amotape National Park was established to protect rare and threatened dry forest ecosystems that are typically underrepresented in protected areas (1). It did not overlap with the Tumbes National Forest at the time. Later in 1994, the Tumbes National Forest was replaced with the Tumbes Reserved Zone, albeit with slightly different boundaries; the new reserve was implemented to help control and reduce logging (in Peru, Reserved Zones are a transitory category – sort of “pre-protected areas” – they are not yet fully protected but are usually intended to be officially designated as protected areas later).

In the remote corner of Peru, park boundaries remained in flux: the Cerros de Amotape National Park was expanded in 2006, replacing the lands that were previously part of the Tumbes Reserved Zone. In other words, part of the newly expanded portion of the National Park included lands on the border of Peru and Ecuador that were on the table for an irrigation dam project. The park’s expansion became a source of conflict, as lands previously promised for a dam and reservoir were now locked up. From 2009 to 2014, the governments of Peru and Ecuador conducted feasibility studies to



Left: Sign at guard house outside Cerros de Amotape National Park. Middle: sign supporting the dam project, “Binational Project Puyango-Tumbes – Now or never!”. Right: sign supporting the dam project, “The future of Tumbes is the binational Puyango-Tumbes project”.



consider alternatives for the dam project siting, until 2014, when both governments moved to stop feasibility studies and confirm development of the project. The presence of the National Park on the Peruvian side is likely to have held up implementation, but with pressure from the Ecuadorian government, the government of Peru passed a law reducing the Cerros de Amotape National Park in 2015. The park was “re-dimensioned” – reduced by 277.6344 hectares at

the site where the dam would be built and forests flooded. As compensation, and perhaps due to backlash from researchers and environmental organizations, 483.87 hectares were added to offset the reduction. An unusual condition was added to the law: if the dam is not built by 2020, the downsized piece will be returned to the National Park. As of summer 2018 when I visited the site, dam construction had not started.

The ecological and social context of Cerros de Amotape National Park provide an important backdrop to understanding its fate. The park was established to safeguard its endangered dry forest ecosystem, which harbors high plant and bird diversity and endemism (2,3); the region is understudied, with two mammal species documented for the first time only three years ago (4). Despite the park’s remoteness, threats persist, including habitat loss, fragmentation, cattle grazing, and hunting – all of which we observed on our journey (5).

Lands deforested decades ago – even deep within the park – remain bare; tree growth in dry forests is extremely slow, as water scarcity limits natural regeneration and restoration (6). Conservation is a challenge, as the Tumbes region is one of the poorest in Peru, and the arid climate makes the need for water to support local irrigation palpable. Locally, the dam project is supported, perceived as



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**“As the global community comes together in the next year to discuss conservation targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity for 2020-2030, guardrails should be implemented to safeguard protected areas, ensuring that they can sustain nature and the people who depend on it.”**



## CONSERVATION IMPERATIVE

“If protected places are not safeguarded, **we risk losing them, despite years of work to fight for their establishment.**”

a welcome source of water. However – and this throws a wrench into the dam project plans – the waters in the region are contaminated by mercury pollution from mining upstream. Building a dam would not only inundate forests but would also fail to serve as an adequate source of water for crops or local use. This reality – compounded with the region’s remote character, lack of passable roads, and inadequate funding for construction – have most likely prevented the dam project from moving forward. The dam would not only change the ecosystem and its hydrology, but would also lead to road improvements, expanding access to the region on the Peruvian side and enabling further deforestation.

What does this story mean for the future of protected areas in Peru and around the world? The downsizing of Cerros de Amotape is an example of protected area downgrading, downsizing, and degazettement (PADDD; (7)). Governments in more than 70 countries have enacted more than 3,000 cases of PADDD around the world (8,9). In Peru, this case represents the first time that a National Park – the protected area with the highest status – has been reduced (9,10) Because of this, conservationists have warned that the downsizing of Cerros de Amotape will set a precedent for other protected areas in the country; but notably, the law of 2015 states that the boundary adjustment would not constitute a prece-



dent. This case is unique because the reduction was compensated with an offset, which is a rare occurrence (9). However, the ecological character of the land downsized from Cerros de Amotape is quite different from the offset lands – dry forest vs. riparian moist forest. This raises questions about the nature of offsets to adequately compensate for lost protection. How much land is enough for an offset, and should it have the same ecological characteristics as where the protections were removed? How can we measure and verify this? With the lack of progress on dam construction, the downsize to Cerros de Amotape is likely to be reversed. However, this case reminds us of the impermanence of protected areas – and the importance of safeguarding them.

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Left: site removed from the Cerros de Amotape National Park to authorize construction of a dam. Right: the author at the site removed from the National Park. The boulder marks the spot within PNCA (Parque Nacional Cerros de Amotape).



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