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VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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"Can I steal it?" Affective involvement with images of alerce trees in Chilean Patagonia

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Abstract

The paper is inspired by a photographic record of the culture surrounding the alerce (*Fitzroya cupressoides*), a long-lived tree endemic to the Valdivian rainforest, whose wood is used as a building material for houses in the border region between Chilean and Argentine Patagonia. The photographs were exhibited at several locations in southern Chile and Argentina, including universities, rural schools, and community festivals, among others. Paradoxically, the audiences seemed more interested in purchasing the photographs than in the actual history they depicted. We attribute this to the evocative power of the images of old alerce houses, ancient forests, and tools—without human presence—which triggered memories of an archetypal place tied to peasant roots and childhood. These memories were expressed through sudden emotional reactions, accompanied by a sense of nostalgia for the loss of communal bonds. These reactions resemble the ambivalent nature of the alerce tree itself, which emerges throughout the region's history: its wood is both a valuable commodity and a use value central to practices of reciprocity. Drawing on the history of alerce culture and the audience's reactions to the photographic exhibitions, this paper aims to reflect on the possibilities of communicating subaltern stories through photography.

Keywords

Fitzroya cupressoides; alerce; Chilean Patagonia; value; peasant economy; community; photographic record.

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Introduction

"When you've finished, you will go home, but I'll still be here. So, watch out! Some photos might suddenly disappear." A cleaning assistant jokes about stealing the photographs that we are hanging on the walls of a central corridor at the University of Los Lagos in Osorno, in the Los Lagos Region of Chile. These images were taken during our ethnographic research in the municipality of Cochamó, a border area of Chilean Norpatagonia that belongs to the same region. The photographs mainly depict houses made of alerce wood (*fitzroya cupressoides*), a thousand-year-old tree that grows only in this part of the southern Andes. The photographs were intended as a tool for disseminating the scientific results of the research. Through them, we aim to explore the transformation of environmental values in the Valdivian rainforest among rural populations living in isolated mountain communities, using an accessible record to reach audiences beyond restricted academic circles. The cleaning assistant's comment showed us that the dissemination strategy was working, albeit perhaps not in the way we had expected.

"They're so beautiful! Can I steal them?" adds another university official mockingly. Alongside the houses, the photos depict rural mountain landscapes, ancient forests, winding fjords and snow-capped volcanoes. There are no human beings in any of the photos, the skies are often cloudy, and the houses show signs of deterioration and neglect. "I know this house. It's in the San Pablo area, right?", a student asks us. We have to tell her that it is actually in the Las Hualas area, in the lower part of the Puelo River valley. She looks at us disappointedly as she was sure it was a country house in the village where she had spent her childhood summers. Another elderly gentleman thinks he recognises an old barn from San Juan de La Costa, where he grew up.

Although the photographs' aesthetic qualities and evocative power capture the audience's attention, this does not necessarily lead to dialogue with the public about the history and social issues of the portrayed border territory. The images are familiar and do not inspire a desire for further information. The photos trigger people's desire to possess what they perceive as valuable, hidden behind jokes about theft. At the same time, they convey nostalgia for a primal space and time. The houses and their landscapes embody memories and projections of an idealised past linked to rural life: an unquestioned, stable society, deeply rooted and proud of its natural landmarks. Domestic wooden spaces and lichens covering shingles that have been exposed to the harsh Patagonian climate for decades give shape to what Vincent Crapanzano (2004), quoting the poet Yves Bonnefoy, has termed the *arrière pays*. This is an imagined construction of an irrecoverable time, an ideal of social bonding and a sensory and emotional hinterland that casts its shadow over the present, highlighting the absences and fractures of the society that imagines it. The *arrière pays* is partly what José Bengoa (1996) evokes when he speaks of the 'lost community': the nostalgic memory of a time before the damage caused by the dictatorship, which permeates Chilean society with a sense of insecurity due to broken bonds and the impossibility of recovering a collective horizon. The desire to possess the photographs indicates their immediate intelligibility as a valued *arrière pays*.

The audience's reaction to the photo exhibition has enabled us to refine our perspective on the relationship between humans and alerce trees in the border region of the North Patagonian mountain range. The apparent contradiction between nostalgia for a bygone era and the desire for ownership is, in fact, a historical dialectic unfolding in a region on the periphery of nation-state formation processes, cut off from the country's economic centres. This illustrates the relationship between humans and non-humans, shaped by colonisation and failed modernisation processes. In this context, the alerce tree has played a pivotal role, serving as a highly prized commodity and forming the basis of peasant cultures. Lacking state services and isolated, these communities have developed a way of inhabiting the Andean environment based on coexisting with the vital forces of the Valdivian forest. Alerce wood embodies the ethos of settlers creating a human order in the face of wild nature and the multispecies reciprocities of life on the margins¹. Through photographs and the words of people living in Cochamó's mountainous regions, we aim to reveal the ambivalent narratives surrounding alerce wood.



Figure 1 Alerce Trees in Las Hualas, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

¹ It is important to emphasize that, in the Chilean context, many peasants have both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestry. They have also been relegated to peripheral economic positions, often associated with stigmatized identities, and possess ecological knowledge that transcends the rigid dichotomies frequently attributed to Western colonists. For this reason, when we use the term "settler," we do so in reference to the specific Chilean context that we have described in previous work as colonos ("settlers"), a term that many families themselves employ as an emic category.

"Can I steal it?"

The alerce (*Fitzroya cupressoides*), known as *lahuan* or *lahual* in Mapudungún (Mapuche language), is a conifer endemic to the temperate rainforest in southern Chile and Argentina. This area currently comprises parts of the Andes and the Coastal Range, spanning approximately 40 to 43 degrees of southern latitude. This species can live for over 4,000 years and grow to heights of more than 50 metres. Its wood is highly valued for the manufacture of shingles, boards, and other everyday objects thanks to its workability, light weight, and extraordinary resistance to moisture. Over the centuries, this has resulted in a variety of relationships between the species and human groups, leading to the development of an 'alerce culture'. Due to the exceptional longevity of its specimens and the durability of its wood, the alerce tree can be considered a guardian of ecosystems and social memories.



Figure 2 Renewal of alerce in Las Hualas, Coochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

Intense commercial exploitation, fires and habitat degradation have reduced the range of alerce forests to only about half of its original size, and the species is now considered endangered. Since the 1970s, the felling of living trees has been prohibited and the species has been legally protected. Most of the remaining alerces are now located in the upper parts of the mountain range, which are often difficult to access. This has enabled secondary forest growth, as one inhabitant of Las Hualas explained to us while we were observing a small alerce: “Today, I saw five alerces between one and two metres tall. Everything is green now compared to years ago when there was no regeneration.”



Figure 3 Alerce forest in Contao, Hualaihué. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The isolation, low population density, and lack of infrastructure in Cochamó might conceal the complex and rich economic history of this region of Chile. Cochamó was initially settled by “woodcutters” or “boarders” from Chiloé archipelago, whose livelihoods depended on the extraction and export of alerce wood. During the 17th and 18th centuries, alerce wood became highly valuable, both as a building material and as a form of currency, thanks to its durability and the difficulty of transporting silver from the Viceroyalty of Peru (Urbina 2011). From that period until the 20th century, alerce wood remained a key component of the regional economy. This is exemplified by the construction in the 1950s of what was then the largest sawmill in Latin America, built in the neighboring district of Contao by the North American company Simpson Timber Co., in partnership with Bosques e Industrias Madereras S.A. (BIMA). Logging operations employed highly destructive methods to exploit the alerce, including the use of bulldozers, clear-cutting, and logging towers (Veblen et al. 1976).



Figure 4 "The oldest house in Cochamó". Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The house in the photo was built in the early 20th century. In local memory, it represents the founding of the town. It was constructed by Sociedad Agrícola y Frigorífica de Cochamó, a company that was granted large tracts of land in the Chile-Argentina border region. The company established its headquarters in the coastal area and began managing a lucrative cattle trade from the Argentine steppe to the Pacific. Thus, the Chilean state colonised the Patagonian territories using a strategy of 'delegated sovereignty' (Harambour 2019), whereby land was granted to companies capable of exercising territorial control. However, the company went bankrupt in 1916, leaving the farmers who had settled in the area, attracted by the prospect of cattle trading, isolated and without basic services. Local historical memory identifies several cases of frustrated modernisation processes. In the 1950s, the same house became the headquarters of Mosso, a forestry company interested in exploiting the alerce forests. This ultimately failed due to the difficulty of transporting the wood downstream because of the rugged geography of the Cochamó river valley.



Figure 5 Alerce shingles on the Binational House, Paso El León. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2023.

The shingles shown in this image are made of cypress (*Austrocedrus chilensis*). The wall belongs to the Binational House, a building that symbolises the border status of the territory. There is a border marker in the house's courtyard indicating the international boundary, meaning the property occupies both Chilean and Argentinian soil. The house is located near the El León/El Manso international crossing. This territory was settled by peasant families from southern Chile at the end of the 19th century, before the boundaries between the two countries were defined. The border has divided a territory where family and social ties continue to this day. The prevalence of cypress trees in this area is emblematic of this liminal condition. Moving away from the influence of the Pacific Ocean, the ecosystem transitions from dense, exuberant rainforest vegetation to sparse, orderly forest. Alerce trees become scarce and cypress trees become the preferred building material on the eastern slope of the Andes due to their abundance.



Figure 6 Alerce trees in Las Hualas, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The isolation and rugged geography of the Cochamó foothills made it difficult for commercial enterprises to establish themselves there in the early 20th century. Consequently, settlement in Cochamó remained highly limited. Those who overcame these challenges by using their own physical strength to tame what was then perceived as untamed nature are often celebrated by our interlocutors as having performed an epic feat. One example is the settlers who cleared the forest by felling large trees to make way for cropland. As one interviewee told us, 'There was a man who was very small, but he had a strong will to survive. He tried to make a home up there all by himself. He wasn't skilled, but he was determined. In the past, it was normal and prestigious for a person to clear a field.'



Figure 7 Alerce barn in Llanada Grande, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The photo shows an old barn that once housed livestock belonging to one of the first pioneer families in the Llanada Grande area of the Puelo River valley. Although the construction of this building and the surrounding landscape required strenuous manual labour from the pioneers, this work was highly valued and respected. However, what might appear to be a Promethean and masculine form of subjecting nature to human domination deserves a more nuanced interpretation. “Clearing fields” or “creating pampas” (burning parts of the forest and sawing grass to allow cattle to graze) was not seen as a triumph over nature, but rather as a means of establishing a home and a sense of domesticity amidst the forest, offering shelter to those who had been dispossessed. Many of Cochamó’s first settlers were poor peasant families continually displaced from lands recently incorporated into the nascent Chilean republic in favour of the agricultural production of European colonisers. Therefore, clearing the forest was a way of asserting their contribution to ‘making a homeland’, thereby integrating the nation as an imagined community (Anderson 2006).



Figure 8 Alerce house in Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

Thus, individual and epic deeds merely scratch the surface of a much more complex network referring to the unique conditions of 'alerce culture'. Personal effort formed part of broader networks of sociability involving a far more permeable relationship between human and non-human activity. According to Ingold (2000), landscapes are shaped by the dynamic interplay between ecological conditions and human activity, in harmony with their respective temporalities. Thus, expeditions in search of alerce wood were typically carried out in summer, ideally very early in the morning, to avoid mosquitoes. The alerce woodworkers often viewed their efforts and sacrifices as opportunities for camaraderie and fellowship, drawing on their profound knowledge of the forest and its climatic conditions to their advantage. When asked about the construction techniques involved, the owner of the house depicted in this image recalls the journeys associated with alerce logging. 'Friends and brothers from here would get together and go up into the mountains to collect alerce wood. They would leave for two weeks to work up there because the route is long and steep, which helped them move faster. It's easier to go downhill quickly anyway. They cleared their paths and pulled the logs with ropes.'



Figure 9 Alerce shingles with yellow and red lichens in Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.



Figure 10 Bark of an alerce tree in Las Hualas, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

As Ingold (2000) points out, this knowledge was not mechanically transmitted, but rather acquired through daily practice. During expeditions in search of alerce, novices closely observed their surroundings and the techniques used by more experienced woodworkers, receiving a genuine 'education of attention' (Ingold 2000) and learning to recognise the 'affordances' of materials through sensory experience and practical knowledge of the forest. The fibrous bark, grain and moisture content of the trees are among the attributes identified by alerceros to determine which trees would produce the best results while allowing the forest to regenerate. 'You can achieve great things with alerce, but you need a good eye for it.' The elders were experts in this respect. They would arrive, examine the tree, remove some of the bark from the base with a machete, and then cut from the bottom up. Once they had cut two or three metres up, they would say, 'Yes, this is the ideal alerce.' They didn't just arrive and cut indiscriminately."



Figure 11 Old 'chelleve' shingles with a knife in El Valle, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2023.



Figure 12 'Huichacón' shingle in Paso El León, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2023.

Alerce workers were recognised as artists. Producing shingles required a specific technique and delicate handling to ensure the wood was of the highest quality. This traditional knowledge formed a technical language that referred to the different phases and types of shingle that had been identified since at least the 19th century (Gunkel, 1979; Urbina, 2011). This language is still used by our interlocutors today. Once the tree had been felled with a saw, the trunk was cut into rectangular sections known as 'metanes' to facilitate subsequent handling with a 'macheta' and axes. The alerceros then made two types of shingle from these sections. One of these is the 'huichacón', which is used for roofing houses due to its great durability. To produce this type of shingle, the machete was positioned perpendicular to the grain of the alerce, enabling the shingle to be extracted with a single blow of the mallet. Another type of shingle, the 'chelleve', was frequently used for cladding houses; however, it was distinctive in that it was extracted from the 'metanes' according to the radial orientation of the alerce grain. "We called them 'metanes'; they lined them up carefully, looking for the grain so that they wouldn't split. These men were artists. They positioned the metán correctly and made the shingle. It was so easy... with one blow of the mallet, it would come off like a page from a book. But that man could make 100 or 200 shingles in no time at all."



Figure 13 Alerce constructions in Llanada Grande, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The shingles later became part of people's homes, being used for roofing and cladding as well as for making household items such as barrels for alcoholic beverages, kneading troughs and other tools. This all took place in the context of a marginal region with no industries or stable sources of employment, where subsistence activities were fundamental to the peasant economy. Consequently, exchanges were largely based on bartering and reciprocity. While some people cut down alerce trees, others slaughtered their cows or sheep in order to trade goods and services. One of our interviewees described it as follows: 'If you asked someone to make you a shingle, you had to provide them with food for three or four days in return. They earned no money because everything was based on bartering. They would work the fields one day here and another day there, and the oxen would move back and forth from one property to another.'



Figure 14 Alerce logs in Contao, Hualaihué. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

Despite its everyday use and value in Cochamó, the alerce species was declared a natural monument in 1976 due to large-scale exploitation, which imposed serious restrictions on logging activities. Since then, its commercialisation has largely been confined to the restoration of heritage sites, such as the churches of Chiloé. Thus, alerce wood, traditionally associated with manual labour and the peasant economy, has gradually become a commodity identified by its high price and export by large commercial companies. 'They deliver to Puerto Montt; suddenly, Chiloé needs shingles.' But more shingles are going to Chiloé. For churches and all that stuff. However, the biggest source of shingle sales today is between Hornopirén and Contao."



Figure 15 Abandoned alerce house in Llanada Grande, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The growing popularity of this heritage-driven vision has sparked a surge of interest in promoting houses in Cochamó as Patagonian tourist attractions. Consequently, several outsiders have purchased land and properties with the intention of converting them into tourist lodges. Local residents view this development with great ambivalence. This is due not only to the influx of strangers into the community, but also because the community's materiality, domestic life and history seem to have been reduced to aesthetic aspects. Only the architecture of the houses is valued, not the effort and sacrifice of those who built them. Conversely, some tourism entrepreneurs question the alleged negligence of local residents towards the area's architectural heritage, despite the region experiencing high levels of poverty and limited employment opportunities. "That house next door wasn't restored and it collapsed. They are losing heritage that is important for the area, the region and tourism. We bought this property. It was a lodge. An Italian bought it in the nineties. He kept the façade and restored the interior."



Figure 16 Alerce house in Las Hualas, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

Despite the commercialisation of their culture, tourism can provide local people with a source of income and a way to honour the work of their ancestors. Rather than migrating from Cochamó in search of salaried employment, some families are optimistic about generating income through tourism activities. This enables them to remain in the district while retaining the freedom associated with their connection to the forest. The story of a young man from Las Hualas illustrates this. He lives in the 90-year-old house shown in the photograph and returned to his homeland after studying and working in Puerto Montt for many years. While trekking, he realised the value of both tourism and nature, as well as his ancestors' efforts to inhabit Cochamó. Inspired by the majestic alerce trees in the upper part of the valley, he decided to start a tourism activity based around these trees that would value the local environment, history and cultural heritage. "I did my first trek in the Cochamó Council three years ago. That was like my first reunion with my land. The alerces are amazing. I came to this immense field in search of freedom. I heard the story of how my grandfather arrived, and that's when I knew I had to retrace his steps.'



Figure 17 Abandoned alerce house in Factoría, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2022.

The ambivalence surrounding tourism is similar to our experience with the photographic exhibition. It forces us to reflect on the material resources we use as researchers to communicate our findings and the effects they have on the relationship between our study participants and a wider audience. The interest and value attributed to photographs partly stems from nostalgia for a 'lost community' and rests on an idealisation and mythologisation of the rural past (Bengoa 1996). However, this idealisation is challenged by the material culture depicted in the photographs. Contrary to the bucolic image of the countryside that our audience perceives, the photographs actually depict stories of transhumance and marginalisation with specific historical significance in Chile. Their frontier condition excluded them from economic integration, resulting in life stories characterised by an itinerant existence across Patagonia, on both the Chilean and Argentinian sides, as they searched for work as peasants or labourers that might provide some stability.



Figure 18 Inhabited house in El León Alto, Cochamó. Photo by Pablo Fernández, 2023.

In this context, the artisanal exploitation of alerce wood is particularly significant. References to 'making a homeland' and calling the alerce woodworkers 'artists' recognise the value of the people who have shaped their landscapes. However, the aura surrounding alerce shingles and the cult-like nature of their creation as part of community rituals and rites of passage within local society (Benjamin 1968) seems somewhat perverted by the viewers of our photographic exhibition. As Walter Benjamin suggests, one of the dilemmas of the mechanical reproduction of art, particularly through cinema and photography, is that: "The contemporary masses desire to bring things closer spatially and humanly is just as ardent as their tendency to overcome the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day, the urge to possess an object at close range through its likeness or reproduction grows stronger" (Benjamin 1968: 222). The loss of the aura and uniqueness of alerce shingles may be a consequence of the increasing influence of mass society and the commercialisation of art and heritage. This is made evident by people's obsession with possessing photographs that resemble their idealized memories of the past, images of landscapes or houses that hold meaning only for their aesthetic enjoyment, yet are completely disconnected from their lives and from the traces of the artisan who produced them. Precisely, these are the elements that define the singularity of alerce works of art. Nevertheless, this loss also opens up new possibilities for our study participants. Just as tourism offers the hope of improving their economic future while reducing local history to a commercialised aesthetic aspect of architecture, the photographs present a similar conundrum. Despite the transient nature

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of all material things, including alerce shingles, perhaps our exhibition can provide historical evidence of these Northern Patagonian societies, even if it means sacrificing the significance they once held for local people, as they are detached from the traditions that gave birth to them.

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