

Introduction: Boundaries of Nature

Every year, the Iguazu Falls attract millions of tourists to the Argentine–Brazilian border. They arrive eager to see the complex system of cataracts that occupies a massive bend of the Iguazu River. Their magnitude makes the falls a unique geological feature. In its final stretch toward the Paraná River, the Iguazu abruptly turns backward into a gorge, plunging off an 80-meter-high plateau and crashing into a myriad of boulders, rocky ledges, and islets. The sight and sound of hundreds of powerful waterfalls spilling 1,750,000 liters of water per second into a narrow, steep canyon bewilder visitors. It is easy for newcomers to find themselves overwhelmed by the excesses of Iguazu Falls: it is too much water, too much noise, and too many different cascades. Networks of concrete and wooden pathways on the river’s banks help visitors to make sense of their experience. They offer a vantage point from which tourists can assimilate the falls as a coherent landscape at different scales: as a massive, distant panorama formed by a 2.7-kilometer-wide staircase of water and rock; or through a series of close encounters with individual waterfalls. Visitors can get close enough to massive columns of falling water to be soaked in their dense spray, deafened by their constant roar, and saturated by their thick, earthy smell. A lush subtropical rainforest, complete with flying toucans, frolicking coatis, and colorful butterflies, encroaches on the walls of water and mist, providing for an Edenic backdrop. The experience of witnessing firsthand the sheer force of Iguazu Falls leaves a lasting impression on most people.

To fully experience Iguazu, visitors have to traverse a series of borders, as the cascades that form the falls are divided by the international boundary between Brazil and Argentina. Most tourists choose to see the falls



FIGURE 0.1 Iguazu Falls, as seen from Brazil. Photo by Frederico Freitas, 2014

from both sides, believing they complement each other. From the Brazilian banks of the Iguazu, they can witness the falls as a massive, wide-angle spectacle (see Figure 0.1). In Argentina, they walk to see dozens of individual cataracts close at hand. National parks protect each side of the falls, introducing another set of boundaries to be crossed. The Brazilian side of Iguazu Falls is guarded by *Iguaçu National Park* (*Parque Nacional do Iguaçu* in Portuguese). Across the border, *Iguazú National Park* (*Parque Nacional Iguazú* in Spanish) harbors the Argentine side of the falls. Seeing Iguazu Falls in its entirety requires shuttling back and forth through a series of checkpoints. There are the gates and fences controlling the entry and movement of tourists inside each national park. Outside the parks, immigration and customs control offices for Brazil and Argentina regulate border crossings on the highway connecting the two countries. Depending on their nationalities, tourists may have to obtain a visa before entering or reentering either country.

Outside visitors expecting to encounter an unencumbered wilderness adventure at the falls may be surprised by the conspicuous nature of the borders encompassing Iguazu. In place of the unclaimed waterfalls lost in the jungle depicted in countless media, tourists find at Iguazu a landscape bisected by ever-present human-made boundaries, an intricate waterscape

disputed between Brazil and Argentina. Barriers to the unobstructed circulation of people are expected at most international borders. At Iguazu Falls, however, they are even more salient, revealing the countries' attempts to assert rights over the forests, rivers, and waterfalls at the borderland. The national parks encompassing the falls on each side, Iguazú in Argentina and Iguaçu in Brazil, are the instruments each country wielded to nationalize nature at the border. This book examines how Argentina and Brazil utilized national parks to stake a claim to a piece of nature straddling their shared border, from the 1930s, when the parks were first created, until the 1980s, when they took their present shape.

As a unique geological feature, Iguazu Falls offered plenty of justification for establishing national parks at this particular spot on the international border separating Argentina and Brazil. The magnificent falls were a magnet for a few moneyed adventurers in the early 1900s. By the late twentieth century, Iguazu had evolved into a mass tourist attraction. For years, Iguazu Falls topped the lists of South America's most visited destinations.¹ The cataracts made Iguazú and Iguaçu the crown jewels of the national park systems in Argentina and Brazil.²

Iguazu Falls attracted so many because, among other things, they avoided the level of engineering intervention of their famous transnational North American counterpart, the Canadian–American Niagara Falls.³ There are no nearby hydroelectric power plants, adjacent urban developments, or other types of heavy-handed interventions to spoil Iguazu's scenery.⁴ Listing Iguazu Falls and their banks as national parks in the

¹ In 2018 alone, 1,520,743 tourists visited the Argentine side of the falls. Another 1,895,628 visitors saw the falls from across the river in Brazil. These numbers make Iguazu Falls one of the top destinations for tourists in the two countries. Source: Administración de Parques Nacionales and Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade.

² Argentina and Brazil have other important border national parks adjacent to parks in other nations. In Patagonia, Argentina established several national parks bordering Chilean ones: Lanin, Nahuel Huapi, and Los Glaciares. Further north, in the Amazon rainforest, Brazil created the Pico da Neblina National Park, adjacent to a Venezuelan park, to protect its highest mountain. However, none of these parks houses an internationally famous binational landmark such as Iguazu Falls.

³ Daniel Macfarlane, "Saving Niagara from Itself: The Campaign to Preserve and Enhance the American Falls, 1965–1975," *Environment and History* 25 (2019): 489–520; Daniel Macfarlane, "'A Completely Man-Made and Artificial Cataract': The Transnational Manipulation of Niagara Falls," *Environmental History* 18, no. 4 (2013): 759–84.

⁴ Outside the parks, other sections of the Iguazu River were not lucky enough to avoid large engineering works. By 2020, the river flowed through six hydroelectric dams, all inside Brazilian territory, before arriving at Iguaçu National Park's eastern limits. The closest and last dam, built in 2019, was located just 160 kilometers upriver from the falls.

1930s prevented such developments. The area under protection, however, was not limited to the falls. Argentina's Iguazú National Park, for its part, encompasses over 56,000 hectares of protected, mostly forested, territory. The Brazilian Iguazu National Park is even larger, expanding eastward and northward, protecting over 162,000 hectares (see Map 0.1). The area open to tourists is rather small in these two national parks: only about 0.2 percent of the total territory of Iguazu, Brazil, and not more than 1 percent in Iguazú, Argentina.⁵ Anyone who is not a scientist with a research permit or a park employee will be barred from setting foot beyond the falls area. Putting the two parks together, a vast territory of over 200,000 hectares is off-limits to ordinary visitors. This expanded area of preserved forest was established in the 1940s, but it has gained particular importance since the 1970s as much of the borderland area outside the parks became farmland. Why did the Iguazu and Iguazú national parks end up protecting not only the waterfalls, but also expanses of forests along the Argentine–Brazilian border? How did the parks withstand the advance of settlement in this border area? To answer these questions, one needs to examine the role of geopolitics and nationalism in conservation. At the Argentine–Brazilian border, competing visions for the national parks ended up preserving the forest.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF NATURE PROTECTION

Official documents and the discourse of park administrators on the two sides of the border justify their policy of excluding visitors from most of the territory of the two parks based on the need to preserve biodiversity. The 2018 management plan of Brazil's Iguazu National Park, for example, uses the word *biodiversidade* (biodiversity) eighteen times in fifty pages in the context of justifying its existence as a protected area. The plan argues the park is necessary as one of the few remaining continuous stretches of Atlantic forest in Brazil, and is a crucial instrument in preserving the

⁵ In 2018 the administration of Iguazu National Park opened new areas of “extensive use” for visitation by local communities at the park boundaries. These amount to about 7 percent of the area of the Brazilian park. Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade [ICMBio], “Plano de manejo do Parque Nacional do Iguazu” (Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade, 2018), www.icmbio.gov.br/portal/images/stories/plano-de-manejo/plano_de_manejo_do_parna_do_iguazu_fevereiro_2018.pdf; Intendencia Parque Nacional Iguazú, “Plan de gestión – Parque Nacional Iguazú, período 2017–2023” (Administración de Parques Nacionales, 2017), https://sib.gob.ar/archivos/ANEXO_I_PGiguazu.pdf.

biodiversity of this threatened biome.⁶ The two Iguazu parks are not alone in using the language of biodiversity conservation to justify their existence and territorial policies – most nature preserves today adopt the same language. The use of this rationale, however, conceals a glaring anachronism. The exclusion of visitors from most areas of the two parks preceded their adoption of biodiversity conservation as a guiding principle.

Biodiversity as a concept was coined in the mid-1980s and was only adopted in conservation policy in the 1990s.⁷ In Latin America, a pivotal moment in the popularization of biodiversity was the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, which opened the Convention on Biological Diversity for signature.⁸ The establishment of the two national parks, however, occurred fifty years before the adoption of biodiversity as a subject of conservation policy. Argentina first created Iguazú National Park on its banks of Iguazu Falls in 1934, as part of a legislative push that included another national park, Nahuel Huapi in Patagonia, as well as a dedicated national park agency – the first in Latin America. Brazil followed suit in 1939, establishing Iguaçú National Park across the border – the second national park gazetted in the country after the creation of Itatiaia in 1937. Throughout the years, different concepts were invoked by the government agencies running the parks to justify their conservationist mission: preserving the natural scenery around the falls; preventing deforestation and conserving natural resources; protecting keystone animal species and their habitats; preserving “national” phytogeographic regions. Biodiversity appeared in park documents only in the 2000s. Had the 1930s-era parks been created with biodiversity in mind, they would have different boundaries today (see Map 0.1). Instead, they were the result of political, social, and

⁶ ICMBio, “Plano de manejo do Parque Nacional do Iguaçú,” 2018. In the case of Iguazú National Park in Argentina, its 2017 management plan is even more skewed toward using “biodiversity” (*biodiversidad*) as a justification, with over fifty occurrences of the word throughout almost 300 pages. Intendencia Parque Nacional Iguazú, “Plan de gestión,” 2017.

⁷ Timothy Farnham, *Saving Nature's Legacy: Origins of the Idea of Biological Diversity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Libby Robin, “The Rise of the Idea of Biodiversity: Crises, Responses and Expertise,” *Quaderni* 76 (Fall 2011): 25–37; José Luiz de Andrade Franco and José Augusto Drummond, “História das preocupações com o mundo natural no Brasil: Da proteção à natureza à conservação da biodiversidade,” in *História ambiental: Fronteira, recursos naturais e conservação da natureza*, ed. José Luiz de Andrade Franco, et al. (Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, 2012); José Luiz de Andrade Franco, “The Concept of Biodiversity and the History of Conservation Biology: From Wilderness Preservation to Biodiversity Conservation,” *História (São Paulo)* 32, no. 2 (2013): 21–47.

⁸ Argentina and Brazil ratified the convention in 1994.

technical processes that produced oddly shaped territories that cannot be easily justified by modern conservation criteria.⁹

What explains, then, the creation of these two parks? What are the origins of their restrictive territorial policies? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to understand the unique position of Iguazú and Iguacu as boundary parks in a disputed borderland. Argentina and Brazil each established their own national park in the 1930s in the area known today as the “Triple Frontier,” the strategic tri-border region they shared with Paraguay.¹⁰ The Spanish and Portuguese crowns competed for dominance in the region during colonial times, and Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay inherited the dispute in the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–70), Argentina and Brazil emerged as the two regional powers of South America and the Triple Frontier regained importance as a locus of geopolitical contention. It is in the context of this competition between Argentina and Brazil that the creation of the national parks at Iguazu Falls must be understood.

Geopolitics provided the initial reasoning underlying the creation of the two parks in the 1930s. Policymakers on either side of the border deemed the nationalization of their respective sections of Iguazu Falls to be a matter of national interest. By establishing a federally controlled protected area at the falls, they planted a flag at a border seen as suspiciously porous to foreign influences. A national park is, after all, national. By 1940, both Argentina and Brazil had a gazetted national park in the area. They proved, at least on paper, that a piece of the magnificent falls, and of the border on which they stood, belonged in the body of each nation. To gazette is to make an ordinance official through its publication in a government journal. Gazetting nature reserves is low-hanging fruit – it requires only the passage of a law or the enactment of a decree.¹¹

⁹ Iguacu National Park in Brazil, for example, is shaped like the letter “L” turned 90 degrees sideways. It has a narrow southwest band squeezed between the meanders of the Iguazu River and an abandoned highway. In this area, the park has sections as narrow as 2.5 kilometers wide. This section of the park was never conceived of as a wildlife corridor as per modern biodiversity conservation design.

¹⁰ *Triple Frontera* in Spanish, or *Triplíce Fronteira* in Portuguese. For a deeper discussion on the importance of the Triple Frontier area for the three countries, see the anthology I coedited with Jacob Blanc, *Big Water: The Making of the Borderland Between Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018). Of particular importance is the conclusion, by Graciela Silvestri, on the uniqueness of this tri-border area for each of the three countries. See “Space, National, and Frontier in the Rioplatense Discourse,” in that same volume.

¹¹ As Kelly et al. have discussed, national parks are a low-stakes form of modern state-building accessible to even small and poor states. Matthew Kelly et al., “Introduction,” in

Implementation, on the other hand, demands the engagement of the state and the investment of its resources in transforming a nondescript piece of national territory into a special zone reserved for the seemingly opposed uses of preservation and tourism. The central state must, at a minimum, nationalize the land, hire employees, create a national park bureaucracy to manage the reserve, carry out surveys and scientific studies, and develop infrastructure such as roads and trails to allow visitation by tourists and surveillance by park wardens. In many instances throughout Latin America, national governments stopped at the first stage – gazetting the parks – and for decades the region was littered with “paper parks” with little implementation. Establishing protected areas only on paper made sense, as national governments could reap the benefits of a token of twentieth-century modernity – the national park – without incurring the political and economic costs of implementing it.

Iguazú National Park in Argentina and Iguaçu National Park in Brazil, however, were never paper parks. From the beginning, the two countries’ governments have secured resources to make the two preserves functioning national parks. They invested public funds in building infrastructure and hiring personnel for the two parks at a scale rarely seen elsewhere in Latin America before the 1970s.¹² As national parks located at the border between South America’s leading competing powers, Iguazú and Iguaçu were too important not to be implemented. Argentines and Brazilians saw them as bridgeheads for border nationalization. Moreover, policymakers at the federal and local levels seized on the establishment of the parks as an opportunity to bring development to the borderland. They used park funds to build roads, airfields, hydroelectric plants, schools, hospitals, and even urban settlements. In their first decades, the national parks at Iguazu Falls functioned as vectors of territorial development, funneling federal investment into creating an infrastructure designed to not only serve outside tourists

The Nature State: Rethinking the History of Conservation, Routledge Environmental Humanities (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), 9.

¹² The Mexican national parks established in the 1940s provide another example of early public investment in nature preserves in the region. Emily Wakild, *Revolutionary Parks: Conservation, Social Justice, and Mexico’s National Parks, 1910–1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011). For a brief discussion of conservation in Latin America, see John Soluri, Claudia Leal, and José Augusto Pádua, “Introduction: Finding the ‘Latin American’ in Latin American Environmental History,” in *A Living Past: Environmental Histories of Modern Latin America*, ed. John Soluri, Claudia Leal, and José Augusto Pádua (Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 1–22.

but also attract settlers to the border's main urban centers – Foz do Iguaçu in Brazil and Puerto Iguazú in Argentina.¹³

Competition between Argentina and Brazil led the two countries to use the parks as instruments for border nationalization.¹⁴ National parks, which are rhetorically conceived as checks on development, were used in Iguazu to promote the development of the borderland. And yet, the tension between preservation and development was evident for most people working on implementing these two national parks. While some reasoned the ultimate goal of the parks was to bring progress to the border, others contended that the parks' *raison d'être* was to protect nature from the incoming waves of migrants moving to the area. Initially, the champions of development had the upper hand – after all, they counted among their ranks those who had proposed creating the parks in the first place. But soon a cadre of agricultural and life scientists, working inside and outside state agencies, managed to steer the narrative around the two parks toward a stricter vision of forest protection. It was a parallel movement, happening at the same time on the two sides of the border and influenced by transboundary exchanges and the growing international importance of nature conservation. As a result, vast expanses of subtropical forests adjacent to Iguazu Falls were incorporated into the territories of the two parks. Eighty years later, they stand as islands of continuous Atlantic forest surrounded by a sea of small farms.

When Iguaçu and Iguazú were created in the 1930s, the Triple Frontier was still sparsely populated and covered by forests. The parks withstood the colonization of their surrounding areas as waves of migrants arrived in the borderland in subsequent years. The coming of settlers and the establishment of farms outside the parks represented a radical transformation in the landscape of this border region, especially on the Brazilian side. What was a carpet of forested expanses in the 1930s became one of

¹³ Viewing national parks as vectors of economic development was nothing new. Railroad companies in North America had facilitated the creation of the first US national parks. What was new in Iguazú and Iguaçu was the commitment to attract not only tourists but settlers to the frontier. Richard West Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 8–11.

¹⁴ Throughout the Americas, however, local officials could as well reject proposals to establish border parks. That was the case of Mexico, whose officials refused to establish a transboundary park with the United States in the 1930s because many saw the proposal as an imposition of US ideas. The asymmetry between Mexico and the United States defined the former's refusal to create border parks. Emily Wakild, "Border Chasm: International Boundary Parks and Mexican Conservation 1935–1945," *Environmental History* 14, no. 3 (July 2009): 453–475.

Brazil's breadbaskets in the 1970s. The parks, however, were already in place when these transformations occurred. Created in the 1930s to promote the development and colonization of the borderland, Iguazú and Iguaçu National Parks ended up becoming the last contiguous expanse of old-growth forest in a landscape dominated by agriculture, forestry, and energy production. Even as development arrived at the borderland at last, it was accompanied by increasingly restrictive land use policies inside the parks that sought to insulate whole sections from human interference.

How did Iguaçu National Park, for example, a park that is among the top five tourist destinations in Brazil, end up with extremely restrictive tourism policies? Such changes in policy and enforcement occurred mostly during the military dictatorships in Argentina and Brazil between the 1960s and 1970s. They benefited from a series of tools – legal, institutional, military, and even extrajudicial – developed by the two countries' military regimes to deal with internal dissent and reshape their countrysides. Reconstructing the historical evolution of national park policy in Argentina and Brazil offers a window into changes in the two countries' territorial policies. It shows how the rise of authoritarian regimes informed the conditions for implementing forceful territorial interventions, including shielding the space of the two parks from human interference.¹⁵

The creation and implementation of Iguazú and Iguaçu national parks (1930s–80s) coincided with a period in which both Argentina and Brazil were consolidating their capacity to exert power in the Triple Frontier borderland. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the political and military classes of Argentina and Brazil saw the other country as a potential rival. In establishing national parks at their shared international border, the two countries strove to demonstrate territorial control in areas where state power had chronically displayed its weaknesses to its international rivals. In subsequent decades, the two countries invested in creating transportation and energy infrastructure at the borderland and jockeyed to bring Paraguay into their spheres of influence. The two

¹⁵ Ironically, for parks that started as projects to attract settlers to the borderland, Iguazú and Iguaçu evolved throughout the years into a transboundary zone emptied of people, acting as a buffer between the two competing powers of South America. On parks as buffers between warring nations see Greg Bankoff, "Making Parks out of Making Wars: Transnational Nature Conservation and Environmental Diplomacy in the Twenty-First Century," in *Nation-States and the Global Environment: New Approaches to International Environmental History*, ed. Erika Marie Bsumek, David Kinkela, and Mark Atwood Lawrence (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 76–96.

national parks played essential roles as initial steps in projecting state territorial power over the borderland. They reproduced the legal and administrative structures, economic processes, and ideological mindsets found in programs of frontier occupation put forward in the two countries. By putting together projects of border development and nature conservation, the two parks became powerful instruments for nationalizing the border for both Argentina and Brazil.¹⁶

CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

In the Americas, national park creation has relied on a myth of pristine nature. According to this mythology, in the beginning there was nature, replete with impressive forests, charismatic animal species, and magnificent mountains (or, in our case, waterfalls).¹⁷ *Homo sapiens* was nowhere to be found in this primeval state of nature – it was the Garden of Eden without Adam and Eve. As the myth goes on, humans appeared in the story as disruptors, bringing civilization and progress, which spoils and destroys nature. Luckily, national park visionaries stepped up to turn civilization on its head. They used the tools of the modern nation-state to propose and implement protected areas. They aimed to preserve what was left of nature and, when possible, to revert landscapes to a pristine state.¹⁸ As a myth, the trope of pristine nature

¹⁶ Like other national parks, Iguazú and Iguazu exemplify the kind of territorial power wielded by modern nation-states. They reproduce the processes of “mapping, bounding and containing nature and citizenry” that “make a state a state” (as argued by Neumann), and demonstrate how a “nature state” claims the right to protect nature from its very citizens (according to Kelly et al.). Roderick P. Neumann, “Nature-State-Territory: Toward a Critical Theorization of Conservation Enclosures,” in *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements*, ed. Richard Peet and Michael Watts (London: Routledge, 2004), 195–217; Kelly et al., “Introduction,” 5. See also Bernhard Gißibl, Sabine Höhler, and Patrick Kupper, “Introduction: Towards a Global History of National Parks,” in *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012), 1–27.

¹⁷ In more recent versions of this origin myth, nature is filled with “biodiversity” – that is, a complex web of life forms and the relationships between them on a range of scales, from ecosystems to species to genes.

¹⁸ The first US national parks such as Yellowstone (1872) aimed to preserve what was seen as “untouched” nature. Early national parks in Europe, on the other hand, recognized that landscapes on the continent had been occupied by humans for millennia, but insisted on recreating a primeval state of nature by banning visitors from their territories. See Patrick Kupper, *Creating Wilderness: A Transnational History of the Swiss National Park*, *The Environment in History: International Perspectives* 4 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).