

Visit to a Potato Park

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High in the Peruvian Andes, a unique initiative in indigenous-run conservation aims to preserve the huge variety of domesticated potatoes that are one of the most significant elements of the region's biodiversity. The *Parque de la Papa* (Potato Park) is the brainchild of an indigenous-run organization called *Asociacion Andes* (Quechua-Aymara Association for Sustainable Livelihoods - ANDES) and it is being implemented by an association of six Quechua villages in the mountains south of Pisac in the Sacred Valley of the Incas. Under this initiative, the 8,000 villagers of the six communities of Amaru, Pampallacta, Quyo Grande, Sacaca, Paruparu and Chahuaytire have agreed to bring together the 8,661 hectares in their six communal land titles and manage them jointly for their collective benefit. Their aim is to conserve their landscape, livelihoods and ways of life, and to revitalize their customary laws and institutions.

Rainfed agriculture remains the mainstay of the local farming system, which is dominated at this high altitude (the land is between 3,600 and 4,600 meters above sea level) by potatoes. The wealth of the area is based on the astounding 1,200 different varieties of potato that are named, known and managed by the local people. The area is thought to be within the 'centre of origin' of the potato and the great majority of the potatoes - a typical farm plot may contain 250-300 varieties - are for local consumption and the regional barter trade. This trade has important nutritional and economic value, allowing the highlanders to exchange the carbohydrates and meat that they produce (in the form of potatoes, guinea pigs, llama and alpaca), for vegetable protein from the grains and Andean pseudo-grains produced at middle altitudes, as well as for vitamins and essential fatty acids from the fruits and vegetables grown in subtropical gardens down towards the Amazon. Vertical trade of this kind has been an integral part of the economy of the region since pre-Inca times.

The high peaks around the edge of the valley also enclose other important assets: wetlands and high lakes, Inca ruins, the rare condor and other wildlife. The Potato Park is holistic, and its major goal is to establish a functioning management regime based on customary law and traditional knowledge, in a way that brings together all the land under a single system but allows for maximum flexibility for individual farmers' initiatives and the choices of the six distinct villages.

Authority for the Park is shared among the villages, each of which elects one chairman to coordinate the work of the Association, and concerted efforts are made to integrate traditional religious beliefs and understanding into park management. At all communal events, libations in the form of *chicha*, the local beer, are poured to the local gods, which are present in the surrounding mountains, springs and rocks. Mother Earth, *Pachamama*, is still deeply revered and recognized in syncretic worship of the Virgin Mary, reflecting the strong role that women play in the traditional social order. The custom of one-year trial marriages, which women may dissolve if they choose, is retained in the villages.

International support for the project has come from a number of NGOs, including the Sustaining Local Food Systems Agrobiodiversity and Livelihoods Programme of IIED and the Rockefeller Foundation. The initiative is also backed by an International Support Committee that includes Hamdallah Zedan, Executive Secretary of the CBD, and Juan Mayr Maldonado, ex-Minister for the Environment in Colombia, along with movie artists, human rights activists and others. Recently the Potato Park negotiated an agreement with the International Potato Institute, a Lima-based member of the CGIAR group, which has led to 206 additional potato varieties being repatriated. Currently these varieties are being cultivated by the villages of Pampallacta and Chahuaytire with the aim of eventually sharing them among all the other villages once viable stocks have been established. A long-term goal of the Association is to re-establish all the world's 4,000 known potato varieties in the valley.

Yet this is not a backward-looking project. New technologies are being applied alongside the old. Greenhouses have been established in the villages to provide vegetables in school meals, and members of the women's cooperative are being trained in making and digitally editing videos, using the local language, Quechua, in order to record and share knowledge of potato varieties and how to manage them. Although the Association opposes the patenting of indigenous knowledge, traditional medicines are being produced by the cooperative for local sale and benefit sharing. A database of traditional medicinal knowledge is being established to protect against biopiracy.

The communities are also re-establishing forests on critical lands. Nurseries for growing thousands of seedlings of native species have been set up. The aim is to regenerate the native forests, most of which were cut down in the 18th century to provide timber for Spanish silver mines. Currently the main tree species on the hillsides is Eucalyptus, which was planted in the '40s and '50s. Though fast growing and valued as the main source of fuel wood in the region, Eucalyptus is otherwise of limited use. "We find Eucalyptus dries the land. The native species don't and they also fertilize the soil. The native species are useful for medicines, fertilizers, fuel and fodder... Trees are very important to us and maybe they also protect us from pollution from other places," notes Paulina Gihuaña of the women's cooperative.

By regenerating native forests, the villagers hope to promote wild bird and animal species and make the area still more attractive to tourists, who already come regularly to their villages. With the aim of developing 'agro-ecotourism', the Potato Park is already in discussions with the National Institute of Culture to forge a system for co-management of archaeological sites and sacred areas. The Park is also developing an autonomous programme for controlling tourism and ensuring local people benefit equitably. A new research and visitors centre is being established to help with administration, marketing and coordination. The new sense of unity that has been established among the communities has already brought other benefits too. A history of (occasionally violent) land conflicts between communities has been largely overcome, in part through the revival of the customary village boundary festival, in which each village annually celebrates its links with the land by walking the village boundaries. As the Association Chairman, Wilbert Quispe, observes, "Before this project we were divided and were losing our diversity, native potatoes, wildlife and many other things. . . We were also forgetting how to manage this variety. Our aim is to reunite our villages in order to restore our traditional ways of managing our landscape."

The Potato Park can be seen as one expression of a powerful social movement, the currents of which can be felt throughout the Andes, of indigenous peoples recovering control of their lands and heritage. In large part, this cultural revival can be traced back to the land reforms of the 1960s and early 1970s, which dismantled the old *hacienda* system and redistributed lands as communal holdings to Andean villages. In the first years after the reforms, many observers claimed that they had led to failure. Even though many peasants regained control of their lands, agricultural production fell, incomes declined and exports stagnated.

However, these disappointing beginnings are now explained in terms of a lack of continuity in government agrarian policies. When General Velasco, who had pushed through the Agrarian Reform, fell from power, the policies, credit systems and agricultural extension packages needed to promote restituted farmers were dropped. Moreover, the previous four centuries of domination by the *hacenderos* (landowners) had imposed obedience and blunted peasant initiative. Paradoxically, by purposefully keeping their serfs (*peones*) isolated from education and even from learning Spanish, *hacenderos* had also helped to preserve the indigenous traditions, crops, customary institutions and language.

Now a more experienced and psychologically liberated generation is rediscovering its power: customary institutions of water and land management are being revived, traditional forms of dance, song and music are being re-taught, traditional curing systems and medicines are regaining their currency, and political coalitions invoking the names of 14th century Incas like Pachacutec have taken control of numerous local councils and municipalities.

Not all government agencies view these reassertions of indigenous culture and identity with equal enthusiasm. The indigenous proponents of the Potato Park have yet to persuade the Peruvian National Parks agency, INRENA, that the Park should be recognized as part of Peru's protected area system. Although the IUCN's revised protected area category system could readily recognize an indigenous-owned and controlled park of this kind as a Category V protected landscape (managed mainly for landscape conservation, where the interaction of people has produced a distinct landscape which requires protection), Peru's current conservation laws do not provide for such an area to be under local control. These anomalies will have to change as they are a legacy of the old colonial model of conservation that no longer conforms to international human rights and conservation laws ratified by Peru, such as ILO Convention 169 and Articles 8j and 10c of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

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