

Opiniones y ensayos

The hidden face of the Patagonia Argentina

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Introduction

The Patagonia is well-known in the world mainly through the tourist promotion. This promotion emphasizes its natural beauty and foments/promotes the idea that it is a place sheltered from the predatory action of (the) man where “nature undresses its secrets and shows its magnificence in their entire splendor” (www.patagoniaturisticar.org.ar/). In relation to this concept of the Patagonia, the tourism agencies offer to the visitors activities of adventure, eco-tourism, rural tourism, etc. and some cultural attractiveness such as those related to the paleontological findings, with their extinct native population or with the Welsh colonization and its craft productions (Forte, 2007). The main geographical locations visited are some coastal areas such as Port Madryn and Punta Tombo, where it is possible to know the rich fauna of the area, and the Mountain range of los Andes, where it is feasible to enjoy beautiful landscapes and to practice some activities as skiing and fishing, mainly. For its part, the cultural attractions are in museums, tea houses and places in the cities or close to them that have been adapted for the tourist visits, as well as in some natural sites with cave paintings near the main routes.

This notion of Patagonia and its tourist

organization seems to be supported by the profuse information and bibliography on these topics and the disclosure of the same in the media aimed at a broad audience. Result numerous the publications which in diverse media provide information on the natural characteristics and the prehistory of Patagonia. Also, in the last twenty years has considerably increased the literature pertaining to its rich history. But many issues related to the culture of its inhabitants have not yet been addressed despite its great importance. One of them is the one that refers to the current existence of the indigenous peoples of Patagonia and their way of life. The majority of the inhabitants of the Republic of Argentina (and, of course, the rest of the world) ignores that in the present, much of the rural areas of Patagonia are populated by aboriginal people, belonging to the peoples tehuelche y mapuche. Perhaps this ignorance is related to the lack of research into the matter and also with the enactment of an idea throughout the twenty century (through school books and different media) according to which the Indians in Patagonia Argentina were exterminated in the late nineteenth century.

The fact is that today, those who visit and even those who live in coastal and cordilleran areas of Patagonia, ignore the existence of these people who inhabit the rural and inhospitable areas of the region, notwith-

tanding that they were born in these places, and that their ancestors have resided in Patagonia since prehistoric times. This article will show some cultural and economic aspects of some of these residents, living in north-central region of the Province of Chubut. It also describes the main features of this largely unknown territory



Image 1. Provinces of Patagonia Argentina.

which lies at the heart of Patagonia, intended to publicize this reality and contribute to its valuation.

The north-central plateau of Chubut Province

From the physiographic point of view, the north-central Province of Chubut inclu-

des the high plain of the plateau of the Somún Curá and also its near perimeter. This plateau is located between the meridians 66 and 68 West and the parallels 41 and 43 South, covering 25,000 km² its high surface, of which 15,000 km² are in the Province of Black River and 10,000 km² in the Province of Chubut (Capua, 2007). The prevailing climate is arid desert marked by sharp temperature variations and constant daily dry environment. Winds are frequent and intense predominating from the western quadrant. Rainfalls are low (less than 200 mm annually) and descend from west to east along the topographic profile, which in turn varies from 700 meters above sea level up to 40 meters below it. The soil is barren, rocky and fosters the development of a shrubby steppe (Caminos, 1999).



Image 2. The north-central plateau of Chubut Province.

Due to the characteristics of this geographical area and also by its limited infrastructure, the exploitation of natural resources is restricted, almost exclusively, to the sheep exploitation and to lesser extent goats, with an extensive production system. This production is carried out by two sectors clearly differentiated: the middle - large producers and small farmers or smallholders producers. The medium - large producers do not live in their economic units. They offer as the main product the fine wool type obtained mainly from the Australian Merino breed. The small producers, on the contrary, reside in the area and their livestock inventories are much lower than the previous ones, being the number of its livestock less than three hundred animals (Acebal, 2007).

These small producers are mainly aborigines, who work next to their families and reside in the lands that were granted by the Argentine National State to their ancestors after the "Conquest of the Desert"² (Finkelstein, Gavirati y

Novella, 2005). They are villagers of scarce resources whose farming operations are considered 'subsistence' because their areas of land and the quality of them are inadequate to develop productive practices. For this reason men usually are the labor supply for large farmers of that area mainly serving as farmhand, which will increase their family income.

Some of these families inhabit rural areas in a dispersed way; others live in locations, towns, villages, schools, agricultural pastoral colonies, municipalities or rural communes. Their trade, political, civil and sanitary relations take place in small towns and rural communities that constitute the administrative and service office there. These centers are Gualjaina, Paso de Indios, Aldea Epulef, Cushamen, Colan Conhué, Dique Florentino Ameghino, Gan Gan, Gastre, Lagunita Salada, Las Plumas, Los Altares, and Paso del Sapó y Telsen. All these settlements are linked together by numerous tracks, dirt roads, some consolidated gravel roads and a single paved road -the national number 25 road - which crosses the region from west to east. Many of these roads remain since prehistoric times, when they were passing through by the ancient inhabitants of Patagonia. At present, the characteristics of some of them make difficult or even impossible the traffic during the winter, causing many villagers are isolated. These situations often become critical if we take into account the humble living conditions in these families, most of who lack of a basic service telephone and do not have health services that may give them emergency relief.

Land ownership in this region presents strong differences: the large and middle producers are owners of properties clearly differentiated one from another, each constitute a single exploitation that functions on a land area of exclusive use. Smallholder producers, by contrast, are mostly occupants of public land with precarious occupancy permits and many of their lots lack a clear division: in some localities, such as Epulef Village, the tenure is communal and therefore indivisible; while each producer maintains a delimitate area of pasture, the properties are not fenced. In other locations, such as Cushamen, land tenure is not communal, however many grazing lands are not wire fenced. These features of the smallholdings make impossible the individual use of its surfaces, that is to say, that they may or may not be used simultaneously by more than one small producer. This contributes to the inadequate use of natural resources

leading to overgrazing and a progressive degradation of soil.

In addition, smallholder producers are not organized into associative systems which favour the marketing of their products. This implies that the only possibility of market access is almost always via the 'bolicheros' or owners of small stores of general goods, where the commercial relationship is always detrimental to small producers. Therefore, to the low profitability and gradual degradation of natural resources of small economic units are added to unfavorable conditions for marketing their products, characterized by usury, and the absence of public policies that allow to improve the situation.

All these factors lead to the gradual impoverishment of the indigenous families and to the transference of his economic units to hands of estate owners and merchants. Due to it, the economic and population panorama that can be observed at present in the plateau center - north of the Province of Chubut is a rural migration of these families to the big cities of the Province and an increase in the quantity of population in the strata defined as poor and indigent (INDEC 2001).

The ancestral knowledge: an alternative for the survival

In the context described, the women who integrate the families of the small producers develop their activities: carry out household chores (carrying water from nearby streams to their homes, gather firewood in the countryside, caring for sheep, cook, make cheeses from milk of sheep and goats, clean their homes, wash by hand the clothes of the whole family, etc.) care for their children and make weaves with the raw material they obtain from their animals or their neighbors.

These fabrics (commonly referred to as native or "mapuche" crafts) are made from the knowledge and practices that have more than four years old and have been transmitted through many generations of Indian women. For centuries, they used the wool and hair of the guanaco to make garments for the personal warm clothes of their husbands and sons, for the saddlecloth of their horses and for their homes, and also to be exchanged for products that their belonging groups did not manufacture. Also, through this activity, women have transmitted values and beliefs that are part of their cultural heritage and of adaptations to different natural and social contexts (Méndez, 2008).

Today, these fabrics are still produced

for the same purpose: the domestic use, the exchange and for the transmission of values and beliefs. From the economic viewpoint, the sales of its textiles allow them to obtain income required to supplement the limited profits of smallholder production and thus meet their basic needs and their families'. In the best cases, these additional revenues allow their children to attend school to receive a formal education, which lacked most of these people.

The main places where women sell their weaves are the 'boliches' (small stores of general goods) which are in the fields and villages around their homes. By swapping their elaborations they obtain flour, yerba mate, oil, and several elements necessary for the survival of their families, but this exchange is almost always shylock and is only beneficial to the owners of the stores.

The best conditions for sale are at fairs in the nearby cities, where women can deliver their handicrafts directly to final consumers and thus to avoid middlemen. However, very few have that option. Most of them lack the resources to do so or are unable to do it on a regular basis by the inclement weather conditions and consequent road conditions. For these reasons they barter their handicrafts at the 'boliches', or offer them for sale to traders traveling to the plateau, who have their businesses in major tourist cities of Patagonia, such as Esquel, Puerto Madryn, Bariloche, San Martin de los Andes, etc.

These traders tend to exhibit such handicrafts in its shops together with labels and brochures that highlight the traditional and spiritual value of these garments, its complex design made according to ancestral indigenous knowledge and its excellent quality related to the use of natural raw materials. They emphasize their connection and respect for the natural environment and its origin in the depth of past. However, do not provide more information about the people who produced them or their context production. Sometimes they add the name of the woman who made the crafts and their place of residence, which almost always is elusive to tourists and also to many people of Patagonia. But perhaps most serious is that many of these merchants pay ridiculous prices to women who made the goods and then sell them in their shops to values twice, thrice and in many cases four times the price paid.

As a result, have emerged in recent years several proposals from some of the Argentine State agencies that have been implemented with resources, continuity and dissimilar results. These projects have as main objectives to promote the sale of

native crafts of the region at a fair price in the major cities shops throughout the Province, create jobs for women in the plateau and to avoid depopulation of rural areas of Patagonia. However, the favorable results obtained so far are scarce due to the many bureaucratic requirements arising from the state and to the discontinuity in the allocation of resources announced from government agencies.

Summary and conclusions

In spite of the fact that tourism in Patagonia Argentina at present is mixed, it still does not include the indigenous communities that exist in that area. For existing tourist enterprises, the aborigines of Patagonia are part only of the past, so any dealing with the issues associated with them is through museums and other regional cultural centers.

The current existence of cultural practices typical of indigenous groups that are kept alive inside the homes of aboriginal families, constitute significant resources to take into account for the improvement of tourism offer in Patagonia. Similarly, tourism is an important alternative to improve the living conditions of these Patagonian people: the national and international tourism that develops in the area can contribute greatly to the economic development of the communities of the plateau. Moreover, this would allow the dissemination of spiritual values and ancient knowledge of these inhabitants of Patagonia until now poorly known. A paradigmatic case is established by the indigenous production of textiles, a practice that has over four hundred years old and now, as in the past, allows the survival of many indigenous families.

If this tourist potential is developed with an integral awareness and not only as a commodity, can improve the satisfaction of the tourist experience in the area at the same time enriching the history and cultural diversity of humanity. This would also sustain and preserve the environment, which is the basis of the activity in the region and from which its inhabitants depend.

But these possibilities will exist to the extent that it is disseminated the history, the cultural heritage and social capital which in part is described here. Just knowing this different face and hitherto undisclosed on Patagonia, it will exist the prospect of developing alternative and sustainable actions that give a more equal range of opportunities for all who inhabit this world.

Notes

The 'Conquista del Desierto' ('The Desert's Conquest') was a combat operation carried out by the government of the Argentine Republic between the years 1879 and 1886 that had like main objective to expand the national borders to the Patagonian territories until that moment occupied by the natives mapuches and tehuelches. Their main results were the incorporation of these territories to the Argentine State and almost the extermination of the native population.

Nevertheless, the indigenous population did not disappear. The survivors - marginalized, ignored and uncivilized by a state policy that affirmed its complete destruction - looked for places where to settle and rebuild their lives, adapting themselves to the demands imposed to them by the new political order. Some of those places are those that are described in this article.

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