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Environmental governance in the paraguayan humid chaco and pantanal: state and indigenous narratives on grassland and savannah conservation, 2000–2025

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Abstract

The Paraguayan Humid Chaco and the Pantanal are ecologically significant regions that are facing escalating threats due to agricultural expansion, livestock ranching, and infrastructure development. Despite their biodiversity value and the presence of active indigenous and community-based territorial claims, grassland and savannah ecosystems in these areas remain understudied compared to forest-centric conservation research. Drawing on political ecology, this article examines how indigenous and community-based organisations articulate narratives of conservation and territoriality and how state policy discourses have shaped grassland and savannah conservation in Paraguay from 2000 to 2025. Rooted in post-war land dispossession and consolidated through decades of elite capture of state institutions, Paraguay's highly concentrated land ownership and agro-industrial expansion have systematically undermined indigenous and campesino territorial rights and community-based land management. Using Blaser's ontology of environmental politics and notions of territory and territoriality from Latin American studies, the research analyses how these two sets of discourses challenge, complement, or exclude one another within broader environmental governance dynamics. Methodologically, the study employs narrative analysis as its primary interpretative approach and uses content analysis to identify thematic patterns across primary and secondary sources. These sources include declarations and reports from indigenous and community-based organisations, as well as state policy documents. These sources are triangulated with NGO reports and national and local news coverage. Results suggest that the conservation-versus-production dichotomy oversimplifies a complex field of competing worldviews, interests, and power relations, and that dominant conservation approaches commonly fail to incorporate indigenous territorial rights. The findings contribute to understanding how conservation is politically constructed and negotiated across state, indigenous, and agro-industrial actors in one of South America's most dynamic socio-ecological frontiers.

Keywords: Environmental governance, indigenous territorial rights, narrative analysis, political ecology, rural livelihoods

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