Title
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Contentious Hotspots: Ecotourism and the Restructuring of Place at the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun (Yucatan, Mexico)

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Abstract
Tourism mobilities, conservation, and development planning are central social processes in the restructuring of places. This paper will argue that this is especially manifest in Biosphere Reserves where global agendas are spatially articulated through the creation of ‘contentious hotspots’ or ‘heated spots’, that is, sites within the local in which global mobilities are condensed and constantly at play through the performance of disruptive practices. The paper draws evidence from the ethnographical account of two disputes at the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun (Yucatan, Mexico) where tourism mobilities and conservation planning have established the ria and the beach as those contentious hotspots where mobilities are concentrated, space and resources are appropriated, and locals and institutions fight to stay still.

Keywords
biosphere reserve; contentious hotspots; conservation; development; ecotourism; globalization; (im)mobilities; Yucatan

Introduction
Tourism mobilities, nature conservation practices, and development plans are major forces in the restructuring of places. They have become not only central processes in the global articulation of different flows of people, work, capital, and ideas (Baerenholdt et al., 2004; Bergmann and Sager, 2008; Crouch, 2003; Larsen et al., 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2004), but they also display ‘particular tensions around the interface between
space and experience’ that reach, as Robinson and Smith (2006: 2) put it, ‘into the conceptual heart of globalization’.

This is especially evident in Biosphere Reserves located in developing countries where ecotourism is implemented as a development strategy and where ‘local’ natural resources are both preserved and mobilized to fit promotable images and to attract ‘global’ fluxes of capital, work, and tourists (Harris et al., 2003; Weaver, 2001).

The mobilization of local nature for conservation and tourist purposes takes place within a global framework of an increasing awareness about environmental degradation and an intense thematization and commodification of tourist spaces (Duffy and Moore, 2009; Edensor, 2001; Harvey, 1996). A good example of such a scenario is the proliferation of natural protected areas and their problematic identification with single animal species for tourism consumption purposes (Smith and Duffy, 2003). Scholars have shown how universal conservation principles and tourism planning have been generally inscribed in places through intrusive management strategies that have resulted in an increased vulnerability of local communities and traditional livelihoods (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). Within this context, a call has been made to reconsider the role of communities as crucial agents in setting viable conservation and ecotourism development agendas (Krüger, 2005). However, much of the literature has focused on measuring the impacts or on evaluating the potentials of such community involvement and experiences (Lindberg et al., 1996). With notable exceptions (Duffy, 2006; Escobar, 1998; Jamal et al., 2003; Hannam, 2004; Hill and Gale, 2009; Smith and Robinson, 2006; Weaver and Lowton, 2007), the complex processes of space production and contestation within these areas has been overlooked and little attention has been paid to the study of how conservation, development, and tourism work together in practice. That is, to the active role of everyday practices and spatial transformations of those communities experiencing and living under some sort of conservationist and/or tourist development plans. This article advances the concept of ‘contentious hotspots’ as a way of thinking these practices and spatial transformations.

The concept of hotspots is not a new one. It has been widely used in several academic disciplines such as biology, human ecology, geography, sociology, or communication studies, where it is commonly used to define particular spaces where a number of elements, resources, or practices are concentrated in a more than usual way. Specific terms such as ‘biodiversity hotspot’ or ‘tourist hotspot’ have become common currency in mainstream conservation and tourism policy-planning. For example, biosphere reserves are considered to be major biodiversity hotspots due to the terrestrial concentration of species richness, threat, and endemism (Myers, 2001) and tourist places are conceived of as major tourist hotspots when they can offer ‘must see’ natural or cultural attractions and therefore receive large numbers of visitors (for instance, as at one of the New Seven Wonders of the World). Some biodiversity hotspots, as in the case of the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun (Yucatan, Mexico) where this paper is centered, are also considered global tourist hotspots.

This mainstream use of the notion of hotspot is, however, highly problematic. First, this use presupposes space as a container; second, it does not pay attention to the performative nature of hotspots; and third, the concept is densely associated with ameliorative connotations. Tourist or biodiversity hotspots, it follows, are considered as spaces existing already there, as fixed entities, ‘pre-existing and immoveable grids amenable to
standardization measurement and open to calculation … cadastral mapping and engineering practices’ (Harvey, 2006: 121). They are taken as self-contained loci where tourist attractions and natural resources are to be found, to be consumed and enjoyed, to be preserved and taken care of. Such a conception of space severely restricts both the understanding of the socio-cultural aspects of tourism and conservation, as well as the uneven consequences of development (Smith, 2008). This acceptance also neglects the active role that tourists and local populations have in the production of tourist and conservation experiences and places (see Edensor, 1998, 2009) and it disregards the constitutive role that the dialectic and asymmetric relations of mobility and immobility have in globalization processes (Mavric and Urry, 2009; Sheller and Urry, 2006).

Contrary to this conception, contentious hotspots will be defined here as highly contested sites articulated by uneven (im)mobilities in which global flows (of people, capital, work, and ideas) are condensed and in which locals fight to stay still. These hotspots can be considered as privileged sites to study the paradoxical nature of global processes (such as tourism and conservation) that depend for their success on the immobilization of people, the concentration of resources and the appropriation of space. These contentious hotspots can be metaphorically considered as ‘heated’ spaces where social temperature rises.

As I shall argue, by thinking through the dialectic relationship between mobilities and immobilities that take place at these sites, and by paying ethnographical attention to the struggles and tensions that configure them, we can scrutinize the emergent properties of globalization processes and also explore how global forces, such as conservation and tourism, are sometimes appropriated to meet local interests. In this understanding of hotspots, space is not taken for granted; instead it is approached from a dynamic and performative lens, which pays attention to the dialectics of (im)mobilities and the practices of contestation constitutive of it.

The paper draws evidence from the case of the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun in the north-west side of Yucatan Peninsula (Mexico) where ecotourism was promoted as a development strategy in the late 1990s. The Biosphere Reserve covers a protected area of more than 80,000 hectares encompassing the states of Yucatan and Campeche and the municipalities of Celestun and Maxcanu (Yucatan) and Calkini (Campeche) (Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, 2000). Although the history of conservation of the Biosphere Reserve dates back to 1979, it was not until the year 2000 that it was declared a Biosphere Reserve and that ecotourism was systematically promoted as an alternative to fishing for local populations. The Reserve appears listed as a Wetland of International Importance in the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar List, 2010) and it also forms part of the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves where it is defined as ‘an area of outstanding universal value as a conservation site’ (UNESCO, 2009). The pink flamingo, which nests and breeds at the Reserve has become the main tourist attraction and one of the most globally distributed promotional images of Mexico in the tourism international market.

In practice, the implementation of ecotourism and conservation practices has brought about severe disruptions within the largest human community inside the Biosphere Reserve, Celestun. Poor human management, due to a lack of communication between community members and the Reserve, minimal community participation in regulation
processes, an absence of alternative productive activities, and a tight restriction on the use of natural resources have been identified as major problems regarding the conservation of the area (Mendez-Contreras et al., 2008). By the same token, the ‘spectacularization’ of the pink flamingo and its conversion into the main ecotourist attraction has generated new social dynamics and controversies over particular power-holders within the community. In fact, Celestun has been colloquially defined as the Afghanistan of the Mayan coast precisely to stress the difficult nature of its social relations since ecotourism has been implemented as a development strategy. It is to these relations that I want to draw attention by analyzing from an ethnographic perspective two disputes that took place at the ria and at the beach of Celestun. As I will argue, these two sites have become contentious hotspots as a result of the inclusion of the community into the Biosphere Reserve and the promotion of ecotourism as a development strategy. As I show, fighting for a place within these sites has become a crucial practice among Celestun’s inhabitants. Their struggles over space and resources have shaped regional and global flows of work, capital, and tourists, thus challenging the imagination of the local as the passive recipient of global policies (Meethan, 2001).

The empirical data used in this article are part of a bigger anthropological fieldwork project conducted in the community of Celestun between 2005 and 2009. During this time, I conducted extensive participant observation and semi-directive interviews with local and tourist populations. This research was deeply informed by the multi-sited and global ethnography approach developed by Marcus (1995) and Burawoy (2000, 2001). The paper is organized as follows. First, it will offer a brief critical contextualization of the implementation of conservation and ecotourism development at the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun in order to offer a panoramic view of the community of Celestun and to help to locate, both geographically and historically, the disputes described in subsequent sections. Second, the article describes and analyzes a well known dispute at the ria of Celestun in which members of the local population attempted to seize this space along with its traditional and new resources: fish, the pink flamingo, and ecotourists. Third, the article presents and analyzes a particular dispute of a generalized nature at the community’s beach. This dispute exemplifies the competition between local crafts-women and outsiders to control the space of the beach and its proximity to tourists. Finally, the conclusions summarize the major arguments made in the paper regarding the conceptualization of the ria and the beach as contentious hotspots.

**Conservation, development, and ecotourism at the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun: The emergence of a new cartography of (im)mobilities.**

Nature conservation and ecotourism practices at Celestun are primarily linked to the declaration of the area as a Natural Protected Area, and specifically, as a Biosphere Reserve (1979/2000). According to *The Man and the Biosphere Programme* (UNESCO, 1979), Biosphere Reserves are terrestrial and coastal ecosystems that aim to promote solutions for reconciling the conservation of biodiversity with its sustainable uses. As legal entities, Biosphere Reserves serve three main global functions: first, a *conservation function* that aims to contribute to the preservation of landscapes, ecosystems, species and genetic variation; second, a *development function* that fosters socio-culturally and
ecologically sustainable economic and human development; and third, a *logistical function* that aims to provide support for research, monitoring, education, and information exchange related to local, national, and global issues of conservation and development (UNESCO, 2009). These functions are articulated in practice through *Management Plans* that, although specific for each Biosphere Reserve, follow the same global philosophy and always act through zoning the protected areas. This zoning process generally implies a reorganization of land and its uses in order to better preserve both land and species with global biodiversity significance (UNESCO, 2009).

According to the Management Plan of the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun (Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, 2000) protected land covers an area of 81,482,33 hectares that are distributed between: (1) a *nuclear zone* that represents the 37.2% of the protected area, and mainly coincides with the space of the Ria Celestun where the unique ecological habitat is found; and (2) a *buffer zone* that represents 62.8% of the protected area and that is organized in heterogeneous units with various uses. Among these units, the unit for the sustainable use of natural resources represents 82.3% of the buffer zone and it is also mainly circumscribed to the ria and some parts of Celestun’s beach; the rest of the land in this buffer zone is divided among a unit of restricted use, a unit of public use, a recuperation unit and a human settlement unit where the community of Celestun is located (Secretaria de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, 2000).

This zoning process, although clear on paper, is not well known to the majority of Celestun’s population. In 2004 and according to an enquiry made by the Centre of Research and Advanced Studies of Merida, 90% of the community’s population did not know that they lived in a protected area. The 10% of the population that was aware of this fact identified the protected area with the space of the ria and with the pink flamingo (Méndez Contreras et al., 2008). This lack of knowledge can be partly explained by the way ecotourism has been implemented as a development strategy in the area.

Although ecotourism in Biosphere Reserves has been broadly defined as responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people; even when it is generally encouraged as a small-scale, low-density, place-based, environmentally sensitive, and socially responsible development strategy (Wheeler, 1997), its practical implementation as a development strategy rarely takes place in the aforementioned terms (Jamal and Stronza, 2008; McAfee, 1999; Mowforth and Munt, 2008; Reed, 2007; Weaver, 2001). Celestun is not an exception. At the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun, ecotourism was promoted in the late 1990s as part of the global urge to convert natural protected areas into more economically profitable spaces for the Mexican economy as a developing country (Córdoba et al., 2004). As a result, and as I will describe shortly, Celestun has become an internationally competitive ecotourist resort. It has gained prominence in the Mexican tourist industry, especially since the pink flamingo has now become a key promotional icon of Mexico in the world. At a local level, ecotourism practices have been exclusively centered upon the conservation and promotion of the pink flamingo that breeds and nests at the community’s ria. These practices have established a well-delineated system of movements of people, capital, work, and resources within the community. These movements operate unevenly between the ria and the beach, leaving the rest of the community and its practices totally obscure to developers and tourists alike (Fig.1).
Outside the hotspots of the ria and the beach, Celestun emerges as a community in which after more than 20 years of nature conservation practices and more than 10 years of the implementation of ecotourism, tourism still fails to be a real development alternative for most. More than 40% of the economically active population earns less than the minimum wage (US$3.5 per day); 45% of the houses still use wood or charcoal to cook, only 32.6% have a refrigerator, just 5.2% of the population have access to medical care and only 7.2% have secondary or higher education (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática, 2005).

As I shall argue, to be outside the ria and the beach means to be disconnected from global flows and their benefits, whereas to be amidst these flows provides the power to benefit from, and sometimes also reorder, the global resources that circulate within the community. Development and conservation institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments and, above all, the local population fight vigorously to appropriate the ria and the beach as spaces of mobility by means of staying still or immobilizing themselves within them. The following disputes exemplify how the ria

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**Figure 1.** Itinerary of tourism mobilities within the community of Celestun (Yucatan, Mexico). Courtesy of Prof. Juan Córdoba Ordóñez.
and the beach emerge as contentious hotspots that are shaped by the dialectical and asymmetrical interplay between mobilities and immobilities.

**Dispute 1: ‘Sent to jail for fishing to survive’**

This dispute took place at the ria in 2002 but it had a profound effect in Celestun where it is still much talked about. It echoed for a long time in the national and regional press and it is known by locals with the phrase ‘sent to jail for fishing to survive’ (Fig. 2). I deal with this dispute through a combination of several ethnographic sources, including semi-directive interviews, media news, and my own fieldwork notes.

23 May 2002. Celestun appears on TV as ‘one of the most conflictive places in Mexico’. A group of fishermen at the ria have been arrested by the Armada de Mexico and taken to the prison of Cobén. They are accused of ‘illegally fishing pink shrimps inside a natural protected area’.

29 May 2002. A big concentration of fishermen led by the men in charge of showing the pink flamingo to tourists, the lancheros, gathers at the main plaza in the community demanding the liberation of the detained fishermen. Lancheros claim that fishing pink shrimps is part of the community’s ‘practices and customs’ and they hold the directors of the Biosphere Reserve to be responsible for the incident. As there is no response to their demands, demonstrators block the entrance to the Biosphere Reserve to personnel, conservation and development institutions, NGOs, and tourists. Lancheros argue that ‘if the ria is closed for fishing it is closed for tourism too’. After long negotiations tourism activities are restored on the same day but fishing is still closely surveyed in the name of nature preservation.
The conflict explodes when lancheros, in connivance with fishermen, storm the boat of the Armada and kidnap its three occupants. Lancheros and fishermen accuse soldiers of ‘an irresponsible behavior regarding the pink flamingo conservation’. According to lancheros, soldiers sailed very close to the animals, frightening them, and prompting them to fly away which would consequently, ‘decrease the number of tourists coming to the ria’. In order to free the soldiers, lancheros, and fishermen demand the liberation of the nine fishermen still detained at Cobén. The response of the federal government is to besiege Celestun, sending more than 500 federal and state policemen, and mobilizing three sections of the Marine Corps and several helicopters (La Revista Peninsular, 2002). After heated discussions the federal government frees the captive men on the same day, and tourist activities return to normal the day after. The fishing of pink shrimps, illegal on paper, is practiced again at the ria and a few days later Celestun’s fishermen are also freed. Soon after, the boat from the Armada disappears from the ria and fishing since then is hardly monitored.

The scale and militarization of the federal response that followed a seemingly local fishing conflict indicates the global importance of the space of the ria and its resources: fish, flamingos, and tourists. The dispute unveils a series of agents (lancheros, fishermen, soldiers, NGOs, scientific institutions, tourists) and their struggle to appropriate and use the ria as a fishing site, as a conservation site or as an ecotourist resort.

To understand the roots of this dispute it is necessary to know that Celestun is an urban conglomerate of more than 6000 inhabitants, 80% of whom make a living from fishing (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática, 2008). This community has traditionally been, and still is, one of the largest fishing communities in Yucatan as well as the home of the second biggest fishing port of the Peninsula (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática, 2008). However, massive prohibitions on fishing practices closely followed the protection of the area as a Biosphere Reserve and the global preoccupation to preserve ‘scarce’ natural resources. In Celestun these prohibitions were specifically introduced as a response to the alleged over-exploitation of fishing resources, mainly octopus and pink shrimps, caused by massive, irresponsible and unsustainable captures in a protected area (Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, 2000). As a result of these prohibitions, seasonality in fishing practices was established for the first time in the community: fishing octopus became restricted to the period between August and December, and the fishing of pink shrimps at the ria was, as the dispute shows, totally forbidden. One of the main reasons behind this prohibition is that pink shrimps constitute the basic diet of pink flamingos, the local raison d’être of both the global protection and promotion of the Biosphere Reserve as a conservationist sanctuary and as an ecotourist resort.

Ironically, unsustainable fishing practices were historically facilitated by the development policies that the Yucatan government implemented in response to the henequen (sisal) crisis of the late 1970s. Official policies such as ‘La Marcha al Mar’ brought thousands of peasants from inland Yucatan to a new life on the more profitable coast by promoting fishing as an economic alternative (Cervera and Fraga, 2003). In the 1980s and the 1990s, these policies generated the massive migratory movements of inland populations to coastal municipalities as Celestun, where natives and manual labor immigrants depend on fishing, mostly at the ria, for daily sustenance. As a result of these state-led policies, and precisely during the period 1970–1990 when the conservation of
the area was being implemented, Celestun nearly quadrupled its population reaching an average annual population growth rate of 5.5% (Córdoba et al., 2004). Besides this, about 1000 illegal migrant workers along with their extended families still come to the community during the fishing season (August–March) to make use of the ria for fishing pink shrimps and other species for sustenance. In the year 2003 the fishing of pink shrimps at the ria still affected 90% of families at the community (Batllori, 2003), a number that helps to contextualize the phrase ‘sent to jail for fishing to survive’. However, the fishing reality of the community is totally veiled in the imaginary of the global tourism industry where Celestun emerges as a small picturesque community, a peaceful ecotourist resort and as a unique conservationist sanctuary for pink flamingos (Yucatan Today, 2009). The imagination of such small, picturesque, and unique places becomes performed and maintained through a series of (im)mobility practices at the community that find in ecotourism a common ground.

Paradoxically, the tourist promotion of the place as an ecotourist resort has deeply inflamed the social relations at the ria by bringing new agents with competing interests to this space. Since its inception, ecotourism has been a practice primarily centered on showing the pink flamingo and hence is highly dependent on the presence of this species during the winter season (October–February) at Celestun’s ria. The ria receives more than 20,000 tourists per year (Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, 2000), 95% of whom said the pink flamingo was the only reason for visiting the community (Pronatura, 1999). Most of these tourists are day-trippers taking part in organized tours originating in Merida and all-inclusive resorts in the Riviera Maya. Once at the community, big, glossy, air-conditioned buses drive them non-stop from the ria to the beach and back to their hotels again. These tourists have been locally named the ‘pink-packaged tourists’.

As an activity entirely practiced at the ria, ecotourism attracts and concentrates flows of tourists at this space precisely when pink flamingos are making use of it. In so doing, ecotourism activities have put even more pressure upon the ria, upon its natural resources, and upon those who, like the fishermen, have traditionally worked in this space. Ironically, ecotourism has not only contributed to immobilize tourist flows at the ria in order to contemplate the pink flamingo, but it has been a fundamental activity in tying local fishermen to this space more strongly than before. This is primarily because since the promotion of the community as an alternative ecotourist resort on the Caribbean coast, pink shrimps have become one of the favorite species for tourism consumption in the locale. The sustained tourist demand for pink shrimps served in ceviche (a seafood dish) and shrimp cocktails at Celestun’s restaurants and cantinas, constitutes a major incentive for inland labor immigration to the community, which has increased by 88.7% between 1990 and 2000 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática, 2005). Through the creation of this sustained demand, ecotourism has not only indirectly encouraged the illegal local fishing of pink shrimps but it has become a major force behind the increase of non-regularized immigration flows in an already over-populated natural protected area.

Moreover, ecotourism, as a development strategy implemented within a protected area, has also attracted to the ria a large number of international, national and regional conservationist NGOs and scientific institutions. Among them, we can list the World
Wildlife Fund (WWF), the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Ducks Unlimited Mexico AC (DUMAC), Pronatura Yucatan (PPY), the Center of Research and Advanced Studies (CINVESTAV), the Yucatan Scientific Research Center (CICY), and the Yucatan Autonomous University (UADY). For these institutions the ria and its natural resources are a privileged laboratory to conduct conservation and development research projects. These institutions make a strategic use of the conservationist function of Biosphere Reserves mentioned earlier and manage to capture and channel large flows of economic resources to the ria. These flows of resources become locally articulated through activities generally devoted to monitor the sustainable use of fishing resources and the wellbeing of endangered species such as the pink flamingo. For this purpose, experts, students, and volunteers monitor the space of the ria, controlling the alleged environmentally unaware uses that fishermen make of the ria’s resources. Following the development function of Biosphere Reserves, the federal government has delegated responsibility for making ecotourism a sustainable development strategy for Celestun’s population to some of these institutions and conservationist NGOs, especially PPY. With this purpose, PPY, but also JICA, have been working exclusively in courses addressed to lancheros, a collective that has become crucial in the articulation of the ria as a heated spot.

Lancheros are a group of 85 ex-fishermen organized by the federal government in the Federación Turística de Lancheros Unidos de Celestun since 1998 and who, due to the preservationist frame within which ecotourism is developed in the community, are the only persons legally authorized to show the pink flamingo to tourists. This practice has strongly empowered the lancheros at the expense of the rest of the community: lancheros have not only become the main beneficiaries of ecotourism but also the main repositories of development resources channeled to the community by the different NGOs by, for example, financial help for maintaining boats in good condition, safety equipment for tourists, uniforms, and materials and educational courses to learn English or to learn about the biological features of the ria and its species. These men have become active agents in the global maintenance or disturbance of Celestun as an ecotourist resort. They have strategically appropriated not only the space of the ria but also those global discourses regarding conservation and ecotourism to promote or defend local interests, normally those related to fishing practices. This appropriation is evident, for example, when lancheros justified expelling the Armada from the ria by accusing them of ‘irresponsible behavior regarding the conservation of pink flamingo’ or when despite recognizing the global tourist importance of the ria they decided to close the space thereby suspending therefore tourism flows to the Biosphere Reserve.²

The ‘fishing to survive’ dispute illustrates how all these different local and global actors are mobilized around the specific site of the ria. The dispute not only serves to highlight how global conservation imperatives and ecotourist practices clash with local interests but it also reveals the dialectics of (im)mobility inherent to globalization dynamics. As we have seen, the inclusion of the ria into a Biosphere Reserve altered a local fishing place into an obligatory point of passage for different global flows of capital, agents, and resources. The globalization of the ria transformed it into a highly inflated space, a contentious hotspot, populated by local and global actors – formal
institutions, NGOs, fishermen, lancheros, and tourists – with competing interests regarding fishing, conservation, and tourism. The struggle for a place in the ria becomes crucial not only to benefit from the global resources that circulate in this space but also to control local hierarchies of power. This is what is at stake in the ‘fishing to survive’ dispute when lancheros and fishermen fight against conservation regulations and even the army to become the gatekeepers of the ria, controlling the local distribution of its global benefits. The dispute therefore emphasizes how global mobilities are accompanied by the struggle of different agents to immobilize themselves in highly localized spaces where these global flows are concentrated. It also serves as a corrective to those theories that conceive the local as a passive container of global processes. As this case illustrates, local collectives, such as lancheros and fishermen, are key in the articulation of the local–global nexus by acquiring control of the ria as a hotspot and, in so doing, shaping the way global forces as tourism and conservation are articulated at the Biosphere Reserve. This process is also evident in the following dispute, in which a group of craftswomen fight to control a space of just over 1 km in the beach of Celestun.

**Dispute 2: ‘The beach is not a private space, you can not drive them out’**

This dispute took place at the beach in 2005 and I personally witnessed it during fieldwork in the community. I have chosen it precisely for its ubiquitous nature and because even a few hours spent in the community are generally enough to be able to witness a similar event. It describes the struggle of different craftswomen over the use of the beach as a workspace and it illustrates the condensation of global mobilities of tourists, capital, and work through the dynamics of place appropriation. This dispute is also helpful to visualize the transformation of the beach into a highly vivid, dynamic, and contentious space where locals fight to stay. Evidence is gathered here from my own field notes and ethnographic diary (Fig. 3).

24 March 2005. 10 am. Waiting at the City Council of Celestun since 8 am for an interview with the municipality’s president, I witness a conflict. In the middle of the tourist season, a group of three women from Chiapas and their small children carrying some textile crafts to sell arrive at the city council. They are escorted by two women from the community who sell handmade shell crafts (pink flamingos and frogs, small shell key rings and shell-adorned Barbies) at the beach. Among them I can recognize Adela, with whom I sit and chat nearly every other day at her beach stall.

The following is a literal reconstruction of part of the dialogue maintained as it was registered in my field notes:

**Adela:** Chiapanecas cannot sell their stuff here ... they have to go somewhere else ... they take away the pesos that we earn and it is always the same story.

**Ecology and Women’s councilor:** They are women as you are and they have the same rights as you have. The beach has no owners it is not a private space. You cannot drive them out. It is an abuse and they are not even selling the same things that you sell.
Adela and her companion move inside the city council to speak directly with the president. After 10 minutes they come back exclaiming, ‘We are going back to work’, and they return to the beach. Three quarters of an hour later, the president comes out from his office and puts an end to the dispute. He says to the Ecology and Women’s councilor: ‘I prefer to have people from Celestun happy, tell the foreigners to leave.’ I observe how the woman comes with the news to the Chiapanecas and how they slowly leave the city council with their children and crafts. Less than an hour after, they are on a bus to Merida. (extract from ethnographic diary, Celestun, March 2005)

Although the beaches of the Gulf of Mexico, like the one in which Celestun is located, are not as attractive as those of the Caribbean Sea, they still constitute a major international, national, and regional tourist attraction. They are relatively unfrequented and high-quality fresh fish is served at still affordable prices in sea front restaurants and cantinas (see Córdoba Azcárate, 2006). Since Celestun was declared a natural protected area and ecotourism was implemented, together with the ria the beach has become an inevitable node articulating global flows of tourists, capital, and work at the community. These flows have radically transformed the beach and its uses. More than 10 km long, the beach is the focus for the concentration of the scant tourist infrastructure of the community, which amounts to a few local hotels and restaurants. This tourist infrastructure is not
only very small considering the amount of tourism that the community hosts but it also
has the peculiarity of being concentrated in a very limited space covering less than 1 km
of the whole beach. To the east side of this 1 km, the beach has become part of the buffer
zone as delineated in the management plan of the Biosphere Reserve. This area has been
classified as a coastal dune in which no human activities can take place (Secretaría de
Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales, 2000). Together with the ria, this area is highly
controlled and monitored by the direction of the Biosphere Reserve, NGOs, and scient-
ic institutions working at the community since it is the place where the protected sea
turtles lay their eggs. To its west side, the beach contains old and abandoned warehouses
and fish factories that were once linked to the processing of fish flour, an important part
of the municipality’s economy during the 1980s. This side of the beach also concentrates
most of the irregular settlements of the immigrant population in the community. These
settlements are built upon rubbish-filled areas and disperse strong smells that keep
away tourists, locals, and, paradoxically, development institutions.

The area of the beach stretching between the buffer zone and the illegal settlements,
just over 1 km, is the space where global, regional, and local flows of tourists, workers,
and capital are dramatically concentrated and contentiously articulated at Celestun. The
restaurants here have shifted from attending to local and regional populations, to work
with national and international tourist agencies that manage and control the pink-package
tours to Celestun. These agencies mostly work with three restaurants from Celestun’s
beach where they drop tourists to have lunch after their boat rides at the ria. This practice
has created the well-defined and highly structured itinerary of tourism mobilities inside the
community to which I referred earlier. In this itinerary tourists and capital move directly,
and non-stop, from the ria to the restaurants and hotels at the beach (see Fig. 1).

This well-established pattern of tourism mobilities at the community, together with
the protection of the coastal dune and the strong smells emerging from abandoned
buildings and irregular settlements of population, have also resulted in the spatial con-
centration of informal collectives that attempt to control and benefit from this globalized
space. These collectives include a group of lancheros offering irregular boat rides to see
the flamingo, local craftswomen selling hand-made shell crafts, and different local street
vendors selling hammocks or homemade desserts. Recently, Celestun’s beach has also
become a major stop for Chiapanecas to sell their textile crafts to tourists. These women
and their families have been displaced by the armed conflict in Chiapas and it is now
common to find them in many tourist destinations around the Peninsula. As the dispute
shows, Chiapanecas are often forced out by craftswomen who have became the gate-
keepers of tourism activities at the beach.

Craftswomen constitute a collective of 24 women from Celestun tied by kinship with
the lancheros. Over the last few years, these women have gradually appropriated the
beach by erecting 20 precarious and illegal stalls to sell handmade souvenirs. This appro-
priation helps them to control the access of other collectives to the beach as well as their
own proximity to tourists. In order to do so, they have placed their rudimentary stalls in
a privileged location next to the main entrance to the beach, between the 11th and 12th
streets, which is also the main access for tourist buses to the beach restaurants. During
the main tourist seasons, such as Easter or during the summer holidays, these women
spend the whole day at the beach. Every morning at about 5 am they ride their bicycles
packed with all their handmade crafts, the table on which they are to be displayed, and sometimes a sunshade. Once on the beach, they carefully pin all the crafts to the board to avoid the wind blowing them away. While they wait for tourists, they thoroughly survey the beach in search of any unwelcome vendors. If any are detected, the women, with the help of the lancheros, expel them from the beach. This surveillance is exercised throughout the working day at the beach. After the tourists leave, at about 6 or 7 pm, the craftswomen dismantle their stalls and ride home again where they spend the night making more goods to sell.

Despite the concentration of global flows of tourists in this circumscribed 1 km of beach craft, sales are normally very poor, rarely exceeding 100 pesos (about US$7) in a good day. This situation has generated among these women a deep sense of ownership of the space of the beach, which drives them to act as if the beach was a ‘private space’. A strong sense of competitiveness and confrontation with possible competitors and the appropriation of space to articulate personal but also political claims are at play here. Local authorities know the close links between craftswomen and lancheros and they are aware of both the international financial support that lancheros receive and the importance of the beach, along with the ria, as an international tourist attraction. This is why they opt to mediate in conflicts such as this by expelling those collectives who are not from the community, contributing, in so doing, to the securing of the control of global flows of tourists and capital by certain segments of local population. By closing down the space of the beach, craftswomen exclude other agents, such as the Chiapanecas, from the benefits associated to the global flows of tourism that arrive in the community. The beach thus becomes a site of struggle for global resources and also a politically charged space at a local level.

Disputes such as this illustrate the paradoxical and contentious articulation of the global–local nexus at the Biosphere Reserve Ria Celestun. Despite receiving large quantities of global tourists, resources, and capital, only a few collectives in the community – lancheros, restaurants, and craftswomen – get direct benefits from them. These benefits are closely related to gaining the physical proximity to tourists that can only occur at the ria and at the beach. The dispute that I have here described illustrates the struggle of Celestun’s inhabitants and other regional impoverished populations to access this highly localized space in which global resources are condensed. The concentration of services in a very small area of beach and the struggle to appropriate and redefine this space are some of the effects of the local articulation of Celestun as a global nature-based ecotourist resort.

**Conclusion**

Nature conservation, development planning, and tourism mobilities at Celestun have restructured this community by transforming the spaces of the ria and the beach into hotspots, that is, into bounded and heated sites where global mobilities of people, work, and capital are articulated through local struggles over space and resources. The notion of hotspots introduced in this article aims to draw into view the uneven, condensed, and site-specific nature of most globalization processes. As we have seen, in a community of more than 6000 inhabitants, inscribed in a Biosphere Reserve of more than 80,000
protected hectares, only two specific sites, the ria and the beach, have benefited from the global flows of capital and resources channeled through ecotourism and conservation. Outside these two sites, Celestun remains at the margins of globalization and its benefits. It is precisely this spatial exclusion that makes the struggle to stay still at these contentious hotspots so crucial. Globalization emerges in Celestun as an uneven and highly localized process articulated through the creation of contentious hotspots in which different agents, such as the lancheros and craftswomen, fight to become the gatekeepers that control access to these sites as well as the local distribution of globalized resources. These struggles for a place reveal the contradictory nature of conservation and tourism development as global processes in which the mobilities of some require the contentious immobilization of others. As the two disputes have shown, the understanding of this specific dialectics of (im)mobilities is crucial to comprehend not only how local hierarchies of power are redefined through the dynamics of space appropriation but also, and more importantly, the agency of the local in the articulation of the global–local nexus through the shaping of regional and global resources, capital, and tourism mobilities. The detailed empirical analysis of hotpots thus constitutes a promising research avenue to fully comprehend the uneven nature of globalizing process and more widely, the asymmetric dialectics of (im)mobility lying at the heart of globalization processes.

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Notes

1. The Yucatan Peninsula was, during the late 19th and second half of the 20th century, dependent on the intensive production of henequen, a sisal fiber rope used in the ship industry. The introduction of nylon and other synthetic fibers during the 1970s onwards generated a devastating crisis in the Peninsula.

2. A similar conflict exploded at the ria while I was writing this paper. Lancheros publicly warned the Biosphere Reserve authorities that they would stop tourist flows to the ria if they were not provided with resources for their boat’s engines and equipment. The argument was made in the name of global conservation discourses: protecting the flamingo from the unsustainable practices derived from the poor conditions of their boats (Revista Opcion, 2009).

References


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