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Wild and trapped: a history of Colombian zoos and its revelations of animal fortunes and State entanglements, 1930s-1990s

Selvagens e confinados: uma história dos zoológicos colombianos e suas revelações sobre os destinos de animais e entrelaçamentos do Estado, décadas de 1930 a 1990

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Abstract

This article presents the first history of Colombian zoos and one of the few contributions to the history of these institutions in Latin America. It proposes that in this region's zoos native animals tended to predominate, signaling the increasing transformation of forests and other native ecosystems into croplands and pasturelands, as well as the growing distance between people and natural environments. Colombian zoos additionally underscore the limitations of the State in its period of most rapid expansion. They reveal how private interests overshadowed the State by providing public amenities, but also how they offered unconventional solutions to certain hurdles of State formation.

Keywords: Colombia; animals; State; history.

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta a primeira história dos zoológicos colombianos e é uma das poucas contribuições à história dessas instituições na América Latina. Nele, propõe-se que nos zoológicos dessa região predominavam animais nativos, indício da crescente transformação de florestas e outros ecossistemas nativos em terrenos agrícolas e pastos, assim como do gradativo distanciamento entre pessoas e natureza. Os zoológicos colombianos também evidenciam as limitações do Estado no período de sua mais rápida expansão. Eles revelam como os interesses privados eclipsaram o Estado fornecendo comodidades públicas, mas também como ofereceram soluções não convencionais a algumas das dificuldades na formação do Estado.

Palavras-chave: Colômbia; animais; Estado; história.

A few years ago, when I started teaching a course on animals in history, I took my students and kids to visit the Santa Cruz Zoo, the place where as a child I got to know tapirs and became fascinated with them. We crossed Bogotá, which sits at 2,600m in altitude, and then travelled an hour southwest, descending 800m to a more amenable climate for jungle creatures than that of the cold and cloudy capital city. Once there, we walked through winding paths that slope down and then up the mountain, amidst lush vegetation, observing the animals in their small cages. With their looks, movements, and interactions, they were captivating, but the spectacle was sad. Since opening in 1975, the zoo has almost miraculously survived with meager resources. Nonetheless, we learned from the director and staff about the efforts they make to give animals as decent a life experience as they can.

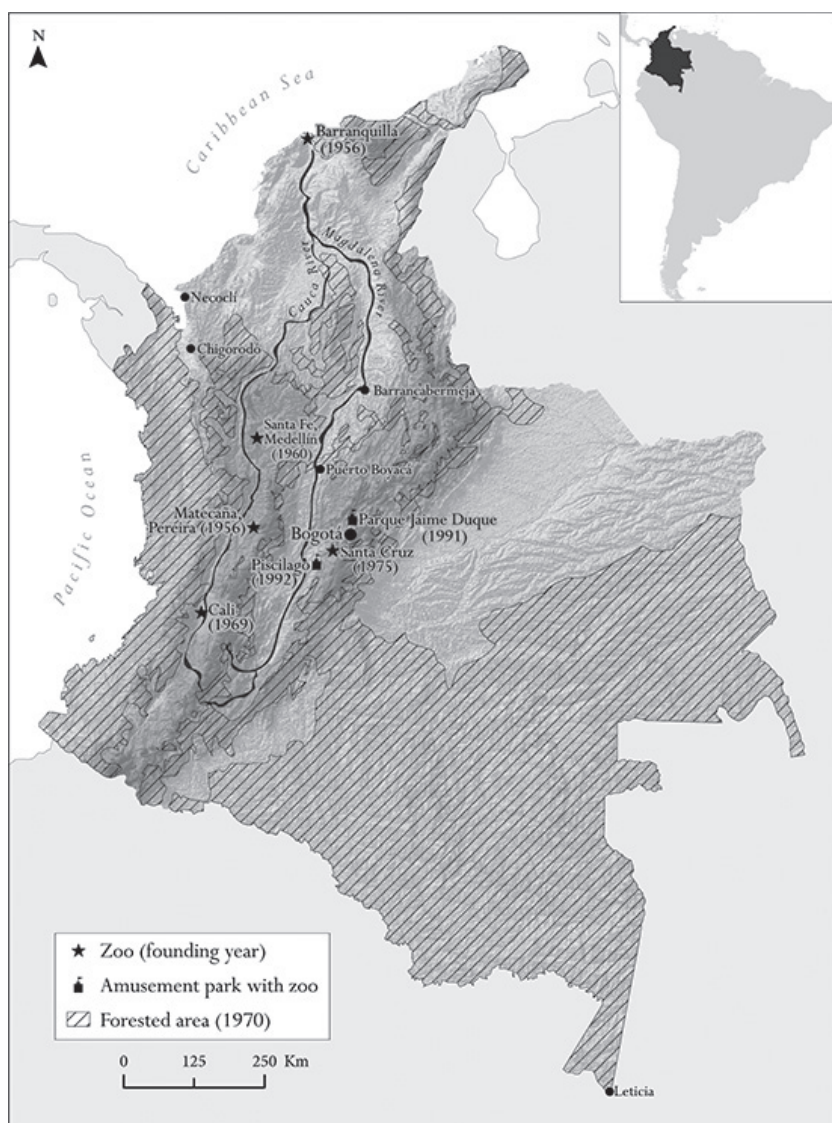


Figure 1: Colombian zoos and forest cover; map by Christian Medina Fandiño; forest cover information based on Etter, McAlpine, Possingham (2008) and Betancourth (2007)

This tardy zoo was the best Colombia's capital achieved after it began, in the 1930s, aspiring to erect a zoological garden that would enhance the city's status and provide its dwellers with a form of educational entertainment. It was part of a wave of zoo establishment in Latin America that took place after the mid-twentieth century – a period that has come to be called the Great Acceleration, due to the unprecedented escalation of the human imprint on the planet (McNeill, Engelke, 2014). Preceding Santa Cruz, and embarrassing Bogotá, were the zoos of Medellín, Barranquilla, and Pereira, set up in the late 1950s, as well as the one in Cali, which opened its doors a decade later. The atypical Hacienda Nápoles, which had a short-lived existence, is also part of this wave. Located mid-way between Medellín and Bogotá, in the hot Magdalena River Valley, it exhibited, roaming free, exotic herbivores that drug lord Pablo Escobar smuggled into the country in the 1980s. São Paulo (1958) and Belo Horizonte (1959) in Brazil, Lima (1964) in Peru, and Córdoba (1967) in Argentina also established their zoos during these decades, when Latin America became more urban than rural and the destruction of habitats – particularly forests – picked up pace. As animal populations diminished, a few displaced individuals ended up living in the zoos that sprang up in the burgeoning cities that marked people's increasing distance with native ecosystems.

Unlike those countries that underwent their urban transitions earlier, Colombia completely missed the first wave of zoo creation in Latin America (Duarte, 26 Sept. 2017). The capitals of Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile were the first to establish zoos, in 1875, 1894, and 1925, respectively. Relatively prominent capital cities, such as Havana (1943) and Caracas (1945), also preceded, albeit much less markedly, the wave of zoo creation of which Colombia was a part. As Latin American cities gained prominence, their elites began to advocate for setting up zoos that would seal the standing of both the urban centers and the countries they presided over. In 1883, Carlos Pellegrini, senator and future vice-president of Argentina, called for the zoological section of Buenos Aires' Parque Tres de Febrero to be upgraded to a proper zoological garden. As he toured Europe, he wrote to the mayor of Buenos Aires asserting that "in all of Europe, there is no middling city without a zoo," after which he offered to order the purchase of Indian elephants, hippos, camels, zebras, and various big cats from "Carlos" Hagenbeck, the renowned wild animal trader (cited in Del Pino, 1979, p.40). The approval of his offer enlisted captive immigrant mammals to confirm his city's world status. A couple of decades later, as the twentieth century commenced, Jesús Sánchez, a Mexican entomologist, lamented in a letter to Justo Sierra, minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts of the Porfirio Díaz government, that "it is startling and embarrassing that in the nation's capital we lack a zoological-botanical garden commensurate with the undeniable culture and progress achieved by its inhabitants" (Sánchez, 1911, p.XXXIII). Mexico City waited until 1923, after the revolution, for the great Chapultepec Park to inaugurate its zoo.

As these examples show, Latin America's zoos followed a European model that took shape in the nineteenth century. However, the similarities that stem from imitation do not account for some of the most crucial aspects that define and explain Latin American zoos. While on both sides of the Atlantic zoos signaled the rise of urban lifestyles and were thought to express the degree of civilization of cities and countries, partly anchored on scientific allure, Latin America's predominantly native animals reveal that the historical significance of these institutions stems from their societies' own environmental and political

trajectories. Unlike their predecessors in Europe and also Japan, Latin American zoos were not associated with their polities' imperial expansion (Ritvo, 1989; Miller, 2013; Cowie, 2014; Bruce, 2017). European zoological gardens followed a tradition, which was started by menageries, of displaying exotic animals, mainly Asian and African, but also a few from the Americas. Species imported from distant lands at great pains, as well as extravagant architecture mimicking pagodas or Egyptian temples, served as powerful imperial symbols. London Zoo, for instance, which opened its doors in 1828, "functioned ... as a microcosm of the British Empire, in which ordinary Britons could get a tangible sense of British power and enterprise overseas" (Cowie, 2014, p.26; Ritvo, 1989; Rothfels, 2008). Foreign animals, such as hippos and Bengal tigers, were not only rare and impressive, but they also marked a sharp contrast with European fauna, cornered and annihilated well before the nineteenth century as Western Europe did away with its forests (Kaplan, Krumhardt, Zimmermann, 2009). Ibises, bears, wolves, and deer could be attractive, but also hard to come by, and in any case they were no match for giraffes and elephants.

In contrast, Latin American zoos benefitted from a prolific source of wild animals: extensive forests and natural savannas that, when converted into crops and pastures, deprived their dwellers of shelter and sustenance. The Buenos Aires Zoo, which came closest to Old World standards for its importation of African mammals with the proceeds of the port's booming exports, began its collection with native fauna. As the city extended its grip over the adjacent pampas by establishing *estancias* (ranches), its owners, who presided over the city, donated a ferret, a maned wolf, a guanaco, a pair of foxes, a couple of agoutis, a rhea, a capybara, a puma, and various birds, along with three (domestic) alpacas, to start the city's animal collection (Del Pino, 1979). More recent zoos, such as those that opened in Colombia in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, shared with their older counterparts the fact that they were a product of the growing distance separating people from wild animals brought about by urbanization and landscape transformation. Throughout the twentieth century and across the region, visits to zoos, where indigenous animals outnumbered exotic specimens, came to replace human encounters with wild fauna in the countryside.

The Colombian zoos of the second half of the twentieth century do not only signal momentous changes in Latin Americans' relationship with the natural environment; they also provide an unconventional view of State formation, performance, and entanglements with private enterprise. Zoos have tended to be state undertakings for some compelling reasons: they need considerable clout behind them to procure, exhibit, and keep the animals alive; they provide a public service; and they bring (or at least brought) prestige to cities and their authorities. The apparent exception to Latin America's pioneers confirms the rule: Alejo Rossel y Rius, the entrepreneur who created Montevideo's zoo in 1894, donated it to the municipality in 1913. However, it was the Public Improvement Societies – private institutions created to provide services for their cities – that created the first three Colombian zoos, while Santa Cruz and Nápoles were the product of lone, albeit very different, businessmen. Only the zoo in Cali was a municipal endeavor. The stories of the failed Bogotá animal collections, the Santa Fe Zoo of Medellin, plus Santa Cruz and Nápoles – recounted here – reveal the shortcomings of State performance and some of the despairing or ingenious strategies state institutions used to overcome their limitations. They also expose the rivalries and collaborations between the

State and the elites that controlled it (or wished to do so) in their quest to gain recognition by providing public amenities. More importantly, they speak of the past and the prospects of the wild creatures that we humans are annihilating.¹

Fiasco

From the 1930s through the 1970s, at least three state efforts failed to endow Bogotá, the capital of Latin America's third biggest country in terms of population, with an institution that would allow its human population to amuse itself by observing fellow animals in captivity. In 1933, when the country was reaping the benefits of the economic expansion spearheaded by coffee exports and Bogotá had about 300,000 inhabitants, politicians could finally entertain the dream of having a zoo. Congress passed Law 34, which created the Academy of Sciences, and entrusted it with erecting a natural science museum, plus botanical and zoological gardens, in the nation's capital. As the Academy started operations, its secretary, Alberto Borda, reiterated the need for "the capital city to have ... botanical and zoological gardens, just as most South American capitals do" (cited by Ospina Pérez, 2020, p.30). The moment was propitious for Bogotá to catch up: the city was starting to build its National Park, a vast recreation area spanning about fifty hectares that would include animal exhibits (De la Cruz, 1934). While not essential as clean water, sewage, or electricity, zoos greatly enhanced the stature of large urban parks and the experience of city dwellers who visited them. However, the joint forces of two of the most prominent state institutions in the country – Congress and the capital's municipal authorities – were only able to put in place a single cage housing a pair of monkeys.

The idea of creating a zoo in Bogotá reemerged in the 1950s as an offshoot of biologists' travels to collect botanical and zoological specimens. This time, the unsuccessful agency behind the efforts was the premier public education institution in the country. In 1940, the Department of Botany of the National University (created in 1936) was elevated to the Institute of Natural Sciences, and became the country's leading biological research center. Given that natural science in Colombia revolved around a quixotic effort to build an inventory of species, it should not surprise that the drive to accumulate animal skins for identification led to the gradual formation of a rather neglected collection of living animals behind the institute's premises. In early 1959, the institute's administration tried to improve and expand it. New cages were erected for housing "Colombian animals as well as some species from other continents, hoping that in this manner a real zoological park will be built little by little" (Se reorganiza..., 19 Mar. 1959, p.9). Despite the efforts to boost the aspiring zoo, in 1960 it was dismantled for lack of funds, frustrating the achievement of "an old aspiration: the great zoo of the capital city, which has been devised, planned and announced many times" (Un zoológico..., 12 Apr. 1960).

Hope was not abandoned and, towards the end of the 1960s, plans for exhibiting animals in the National Park were revived and 23 cages were set up. Like the Institute of Natural Sciences collection, this rudimentary assemblage could not be considered a proper zoo either. My father, a Bogotano who instilled in me love for animals by having dogs and visiting zoos, never took me to this one, even though, as a child not yet 10 years old, I was at the perfect

age for such an outing. He does not even remember that the National Park had animals. The unremarkable display faded away from the city's collective memory, to the point that recently, graphic artist Gustavo Villa rescued what remains of the bases of the cages for an exhibit appropriately called "Ephemeral Museum of Oblivion." The exhibit included excerpts from an official report from the early 1980s, when the animals were no longer there, which labeled the undertaking as "unfortunate" and the place as "a mockery of a zoo."²

While the limits of the State were confirmed in Bogotá after the city failed to announce its coming of age by welcoming wild fauna in a subjugated fashion, Medellín set up a zoo that served to enhance the reputation of its business class, rather than underscore the municipality's legitimacy.

Native fauna on display

After having a zooless childhood in Bogotá, my dad compensated, for a few months, by forming his own menagerie while living in the region of Urabá, in the Colombian Caribbean. In 1960, he was stationed in the village of Chigorodó while serving as an army officer for the National Geographic Institute. Key measurements for drafting the map of the country were still needed, so the military were enlisted to do the job in areas deemed difficult. Chigorodó was a product of the late-nineteenth-century vegetable-ivory extraction economy, which consisted in collecting and exporting the seeds of a palm-tree used to make buttons. When my dad lived there, Chigorodó was still just a street with a few houses that lived off procuring resources from the surrounding forest – no longer seeds, but tropical hardwoods. The forest also provided firewood, construction materials, and meat. Local people would occasionally walk into town with live animals they had caught. Enthralled by his casual encounters with these creatures, my dad ended up purchasing a capuchin monkey, a boa, a little spotted cat, a sloth, and a macaw. Hunting displaced them from the forest and banana monoculture would soon do away with their habitat. After eight months of working in Chigorodó, my dad was transferred to Medellín, where he donated the animals to the zoo that had opened recently (Leal Buitrago, 2019).

As mentioned above, the Santa Fe Zoo started operations around the same time as other Colombian zoos, which also exhibited mainly native fauna procured in the country's peripheries. Like the ones in Barranquilla and Pereira, Santa Fe was the product of the city's Public Improvement Society, which had thought of such an endeavor years before. In its meeting of October 13, 1933, at the same time as Congress pushed for the erection of a national zoo, Gabriel Echavarría "suggested the idea ... of starting to form an animal collection in the Independence Forest" (Acta n.1.177, 16 Oct. 1933, p.454). Since its inception in 1910, the Society had played a key role in creating green spaces within the city. Prime among them was the planted forest with a lake that began to be formed in 1913 (García Estrada, 1999). As one of Colombia's leading businessmen, Echavarría (who founded prominent textile and aluminum utensil factories) expressed the aspirations of a class whose members had travelled abroad and yearned to live in a modern city. His proposal came to fruition a quarter of a century later, when the city had grown to house about 650.000 people and the Society inherited from Mercedes Sierra de Pérez the Santa Fe hacienda. Located on the

southern edge of the city, this property had belonged to her father, the famous Pepe Sierra, a mule-driver who moved on to amass a huge fortune. The Society enlisted the city's best men to turn the premises into a zoo. Elías Zapata, a young architect who at the time also worked in the modernization of the city's airport, drafted the design, while Brother Daniel, a renowned naturalist from the La Salle Roman Catholic congregation, chaired the commission in charge of developing the zoo (Labores de la Sociedad, 1960).

This zoo exemplifies the way in which local elites decisively contributed to the provision of urban amenities in their role as philanthropists rather than committed civil servants. Although the projects of Medellín's Society were often executed in collaboration with the city council, they remained private undertakings that exalted the city's elite rather than the local state. Instead of channeling resources through the municipality, in whose administration they partook, businessmen preferred to exercise more discretion and be more effective in their contributions to urban enhancement. Their strategy of forming "a private company entity carrying out ... public functions" was most clear in the National Federation of Coffee Growers, whose duties were considered "essential [for] the national interest," and included buying and exporting coffee as well as providing technical assistance to growers (Palacios, 1980, p.217). Building a zoo was not crucial for the national economy, but served to modernize Colombia's second largest city and endow its citizens with an "emblem of civic pride" (Hanson, 2002, p.3).

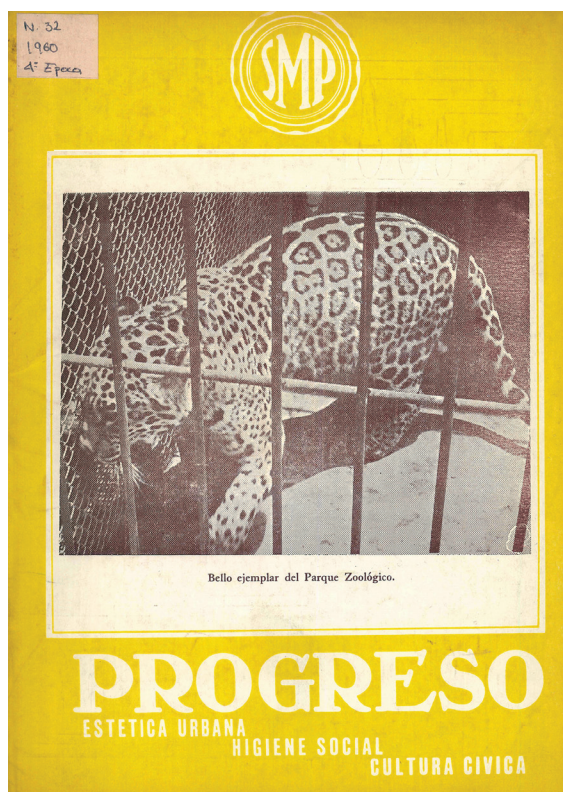


Figure 2: Cover of *Progreso* (n.32, 1960), a publication from Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas

Forging such an urban symbol ultimately depended upon the procurement of animals. Although donations such as that made by my dad were welcome, the new institution required a more reliable source of inmates. In the 1960 issue of its magazine, which was devoted to promoting the zoo, the Society explained that “the animals have been obtained in various parts of the country, especially Amazonia” (Labores de la Sociedad, 1960, p.23). Like Urabá at the time, Leticia, Colombia’s port on the Amazon River, lived off extracting a few of the endless forms of life that make up tropical jungles. In the 1950s, after it secured regular air transportation, this port specialized in supplying animals for zoos, research centers, and even households, mostly in the United States (Pantevis, draft). One of those unfortunate creatures, a squirrel monkey, ended up going to mass in Bogotá hidden in my paternal grandmother’s hair. In 1952, my aunt’s suitor visited Leticia as part of his job in the Agrarian Bank and tried to charm his future mother-in-law with this original present. Other Amazonian animals were taken to Medellín and displayed in cages.

The Society’s 1960 magazine also mentions that it received “the animals that were exhibited in the Bogotá Fair, which were donated by Pablo Leyva from the National University” (Labores de la Sociedad, 1960, p.23). Leyva, the head of the Institute of Natural Sciences, apparently lent the institution’s animals for exhibition in Bogotá’s Livestock Fair, held in August of 1959 (Hoy a las 2pm..., 5 Ago. 1959). A few months later, when the would-be zoo was closed, the Bogotá newspaper *El Espectador* informed that “the finest and most expensive animals were entrusted to an entity ... in Medellín,” which could be no other than the Santa Fe Zoo (Un Zoológico..., 12 Apr. 1960). Some of these animals also came from Amazonia, stolen from their habitats in the name of science. Georg Dahl (8 Mar. 1959), the ichthyologist of the most important national biological expedition to date, which explored La Macarena Mountain Biological Reserve, wrote that its members hunted animals to bring back alive in order to carry out “biological studies and also to improve Bogotá’s zoological garden, which is under construction.” He referred to the attempt to make a zoo from the Institute’s collection, which was comprised of “three Colombian tigers [jaguars], two tapirs brought from the Eastern Plains, three peccaries, six foxes, a raccoon, fifteen monkeys ..., 30 types of birds, two condors, a harpy eagle and a black-and-chestnut eagle, as well as 15 snakes and some turtles and tortoises” (Se reorganiza..., 19 Mar. 1959, p.9). Instead of serving to fulfil the capital’s yearning, some of these animals traded Bogotá’s cold for Medellín’s warmer’s climate.

Via Bogotá, but more often directly, animals imprisoned in zoos came from the country’s forested frontiers, which attracted natural scientists, engineers building roads or doing surveys, entrepreneurs extracting timber or planting grass to fatten cattle, along with landless peasants seeking opportunities to make a living. Most of these people came from the Andean mountains, where the vast majority of Colombians have historically lived. They ventured into the forests that still covered 60% of the country’s territory; mostly hot and humid jungles located in Amazonia, the Pacific coast, and the Magdalena River Valley (Etter, McAlpine, Possingham, 2008). When the Santa Fe Zoo began operating, the transformation of these ecosystems into croplands and pastures was accelerating, increasing human-animal encounters. Some of the creatures that came perilously close to people ended up behind bars. The 1960 magazine promoting the Santa Fe Zoo listed with

pride the species that readers would see when visiting. All those that my dad donated were included, along with impressive birds such as curassows, toucans, eagles, and condors, as well as caimans, tapirs, capybaras, deer, and pumas (Labores de la Sociedad, 1960).



Figure 3: Spectacled caiman, Santa Fe Zoo, Medellín (Courtesy of the Archivo de la Sociedad de Mejoras Públicas de Medellín)

Almost two decades later, Bogotanos like myself could visit similar animals in the Santa Cruz Zoo. Like a menagerie, this collection belonged to a man, not to a Public Improvement Society. However, this venture reveals more than private initiative; in its own way it was a product of the State, or rather, the nature state: the set of institutions, regulations, and relations that developed along with the responsibility to care for – and not just use or overcome – nature (Kelly et al., 2017).

Filling the gaps

The Santa Cruz Zoo illustrates an approach to State formation characterized by enlisting citizens' initiatives and potential, be it private enterprises or communal efforts, to make up for institutional shortcomings. This approach underscored the limitations of the State in its period of most rapid expansion (Uricoechea, 1986; Orjuela, 2010), which coincided with zoo building during the Great Acceleration. Communal action boards, established after 1958, constitute a prominent example; elected by communities among their members, they helped build schools, roads, and water and sewage systems throughout the country, making public investments more efficient (Bagley, Edel, 1980). A similar strategy contributed to the emergence of the Colombian nature state, which achieved its first milestone in 1968 with the creation of the National Institute for Natural Resources and the Environment (Inderena).

Wild fauna fell within the purview of this novel institution, whose many responsibilities included regulating commercial and sport hunting, and also occasionally confiscating wild creatures that people possessed, but shouldn't (Colombia, 18 Dec. 1974, 31 July 1978). These animals could not be returned to the wild, for they had lost the ability to survive

on their own. Forced to find a solution for what to do with them, officials resorted to a method that we can refer to as *rebusque*, following Colombian slang. Although the word is generally employed to refer to the multiple kinds of informal work done mostly by poor people to make ends meet, it serves well to designate unconventional solutions to the hurdles faced when building state institutions. Inderena officials and Chacón agreed that he would receive and tend to confiscated fauna. Displaying animals became the way to finance the operation (Monsalve, 16 Apr. 2016).³ While communal action boards enhanced communal autonomy, Chacón's dealings with the State allowed him set up an unusual business of his liking.

This man had limited credentials for being entrusted with such a responsibility: he studied a profession related to animals, but only to domestic ones and geared to production; most importantly he loved them (Ortiz, 24 May 2015). With the help of laborers brought from his homeland – San Gil, a large town in the province of Santander – he developed the zoo. They worked with enthusiasm and relatively few resources to tend to the animals supplied mostly by the state. What must have been the largest lot came in 1980 from the infamous National Park collection. Aside from 30 guinea pigs, the zoo received 58 animals, among them various birds (including pheasants, parrots, macaws, cuckoos, a hawk, and an eagle), some monkeys, llamas, and spotted cats (Capturado..., 23 Mar. 1982).

The precariousness of Inderena's strategy became all too apparent on a Sunday evening in March, 1982, when Chacón approached his Renault 4 in order to leave the zoo and two men killed him as they tried to steal the weekend's admissions revenues (Capturado..., 23 Mar. 1982). He was 56, unmarried, and childless; his mother sent a relative to manage the zoo, but he could not prevent it from falling into decline for several years. Hugo Bernal, a young cousin of Chacón's who learned about animals by working in the zoo, eventually inherited it and followed Chacón's sad fate (Monsalve, 16 Apr. 2016; Ortiz, 24 May 2015). But that is another story. As the Santa Cruz Zoo entered dire straits, Bogotanos who owned a car and wanted to see wild fauna could enjoy the much more exciting experience of observing free exotic beasts in Hacienda Nápoles.

Forced immigrants and a native alien

Latin American zoos coveted the immense and majestic African and Asian mammals that easily overshadowed native fauna, despite the latter's diversity and abundance. Such disparity dates back to the end of the last Ice Age (between 18,000 and 11,000 years ago), when the majority of the great American mammals became extinct. According to one estimate, in North America 72% of megafaunal genera disappeared, while South America was harder hit with 83% wiped out, totaling an astonishing 52 genera. In contrast, Africa lost "only" 21% of its large mammals. Given that many of these American animals had survived previous glaciations but had not been exposed to *Homo sapiens'* spears, the debate on the causes of extinction tends to place the blame on human hunters over climate change. Thus, it seems that our ancestors deprived our continent of giant sloths, armored glyptodonts and litopterns, those herbivores that resemble camels with trunk-like noses (Koch, Barnosky, 2006; Stuart, 2015; Vergara, 24 May 2018). In their absence, Latin

American zoos took advantage of the smaller fauna living in native ecosystems. So too did inward-looking China, which helped turn the panda into a national icon (Songster, 2018). American zoos also tapped into their own animal riches, including the vanishing bison, but – in keeping with their status as institutions from an emerging empire – they soon competed with European zoos for the rarest and most impressive of the planet's creatures (Hanson, 2002).

Latin American zoos accommodated more or fewer foreign animals depending on their means and connections. In its initial years, the Santa Fe Zoo of Medellín made use of its ingenuity to obtain immigrants, with a modest outcome. Thanks to mediation granted on its request from the United States Office of Technical Assistance, “the zoos from Washington and New York donated two African lions, a buffalo and a chimpanzee” (Labores de la Sociedad, 1960, p.23). Because it was conceived as an institution to display and study Amazonian fauna, the pioneering Brazilian zoo that opened in 1895 at Pará, in the lower Amazon, was an exception and had no exotic animals (Sanjad et al., 2012). With their powerful symbolism and their capacity to reproduce “readily in captivity” (Hanson, 2002, p.168), large Asian and African felines were some of the most popular residents of local zoos, as the story of Monaguillo, the star resident of Santa Cruz, attests.

Shortly before this African lion cub was born in the Matecaña Zoo of the city of Pereira, in 1975, upcoming journalist Daniel Samper Pizano requested it for purchase. The board of Independiente Santa Fe, one of Bogotá's soccer teams, had commissioned him to find an incarnation of the new team's mascot, a lion, which would “attract children and represent strength and power” (Samper Pizano, 13 May 2010). The team acquired Monaguillo “for the price of a boxer,” set him up in the backyard of the house that served as headquarters, and exhibited him on several occasions in front of thousands of soccer enthusiasts (Samper Pizano, 13 May 2010). That Monaguillo's neighbors were primary school kids probably influenced more the belated state action than his public appearances. When he was almost one year old, the authorities confiscated the animal and, just as they did with pet peccaries before him, sent him to Santa Cruz (Samper Pizano, 16 July 2012). He became the main attraction of the zoo until he died, a few years later, due to a careless procedure.

This prominent native alien makes up part of the backdrop against which the forced immigrants to Hacienda Nápoles stood out. The first ones to arrive, probably in 1981, boarded a boat somewhere in Texas, in the southern United States, and disembarked in Necoclí, a small town in the gulf of Urabá, not far from Chigorodó, where my dad lived a couple of decades earlier. Like the cigarettes with which Pablo Escobar started his criminal life, the animals did not pass through customs and continued for almost 400km to Medellín by truck, along the “disgusting trail known as the road to the sea” (Castro Caycedo, 1996, p.285). They arrived in Nápoles, located almost 200km further, by taking the new road that connected Antioquia's capital to Bogotá, which was officially inaugurated shortly afterwards. The animals that came later enjoyed an upgrade: they travelled in Hercules planes that landed at dusk in Medellín's Olaya Herrera airport, where drug lords owned hangars for their planes. The rhinos, which came last, landed directly in Nápoles in a DC-3. That is at least what Pablo Escobar's son, Juan Pablo, relates in the book he wrote about his father (Escobar, 2015).

Pablo Escobar himself told a different, more flamboyant story to journalist Germán Castro Caycedo. His animals came all together in his personal Noah's Ark, a cargo jet that landed in Olaya Herrera airport, attracting representatives from several state institutions, starting with Inderena. Unable to bribe them all, Escobar ordered that the "steamrollers" (Castro Caycedo, 1996, p.248) – giraffes, elephants, rhinos – be sent together in several trucks to Nápoles, while the authorities were distracted by a second dispatch carrying the smallish animals to the nearby Santa Fe Zoo, where Inderena requested the entire shipment be delivered. That same night, Escobar's men bought

every duck, every specked hen, every parrot, and every turkey there was to be found. They purchased goats, kids, and sheep, and around three o'clock in the morning arrived at the zoo and retrieved the antelopes, the black cockatoos from Indonesia, the fowl from New Guinea, the European white swans, the cassowaries, the pheasants, the Chinese duck, the crowned cranes, some kangaroos, and left behind the national merchandise (Castro Caycedo, 1996, p.249).

With his rhinos and cockatoos, Escobar inadvertently followed a very long tradition dating back to ancient times of royalty who collected wild animals to ratify their status. In the eighteenth century, for instance, Carlos III of Spain built up a menagerie from presents sent by officials working in the colonies and by rulers of other domains. American creatures, such as a giant anteater immortalized by painter Anton Rafael Mengs, figured prominently (Gómez-Centurión Jiménez, 2011). The list of royal menagerie owners is long and included Kublai Kahn from the Mongol Empire, Moctezuma from the Aztec Empire, and Louis XIV from France (Hoage, Roskell, Mansour, 1996). Even Juan Manuel de Rosas, in his more modest role as Argentine dictator (1835-1852), assembled his own collection of wild animals (Del Pino, 1979). Latin American drug lords, such as Chapo Guzmán from Mexico, also asserted their position and displayed their wealth by collecting animals, while cartel members further down the ladder have posed with felines (as well as cars and arms) in social media to exhibit their power. It was from these quarters, rather than from history, that Escobar got the idea: he copied the Ochoa brothers, his partners from the Medellín Cartel, who had exotic animals in Veracruz, their Caribbean hacienda.

Escobar put his own seal on this form of ostentation: he shied away from predators, because he wanted his animals to be "free" in the pastures of his hacienda, where he and his guests could visit them using jeeps and buggies. He did not design elaborate gardens with enclosures like dukes and princes before him (although he did have cages for the birds), but rather rode the latest tide in animal display by creating a sort of safari park. Uniqueness, not scale, immortalized Nápoles. His high-class mistress, Virginia Vallejo, opined that the premises were outsized rather than stylish: "The huge [house] lacks all the refinement that characterize large traditional haciendas ... [but] the dimensions of the social space – the same of any country club – leave no doubt that the premises were planned to ... receive hundreds of people" (Vallejo, 2017, p.26-27). Size alone was an uninspiring marker of distinction, and offering bathing suits and sandals to the guests was tacky. However, having elephants in the property, along with zebras, camels, hippos, and rhinos, provoked Vallejo's and everybody else's admiration. Hippos and rhinos, not

tapirs or even giant anteaters: like European zoos, Escobar's could only fulfill its social function with exotic fauna.

Railroads and roads

The ranchers who came to dominate the mid-Magdalena river valley where Nápoles stood also used non-native animals to anchor their status. They raised a mix of recently imported Asian cattle (*Bos indicus*) with the creole descendants of European cattle (*Bos taurus*) that arrived in the sixteenth century (Crosby, 1972; Van Ausdal, 2016). But first they developed pastures by destroying the forests that comprised the habitat of the native fauna that ended up exhibited in zoos. Those pastures, made from imported African grasses that coevolved with large herbivores, allowed Escobar to fancy his hacienda as an African savanna embellished with giraffes, antelopes, and hippos.

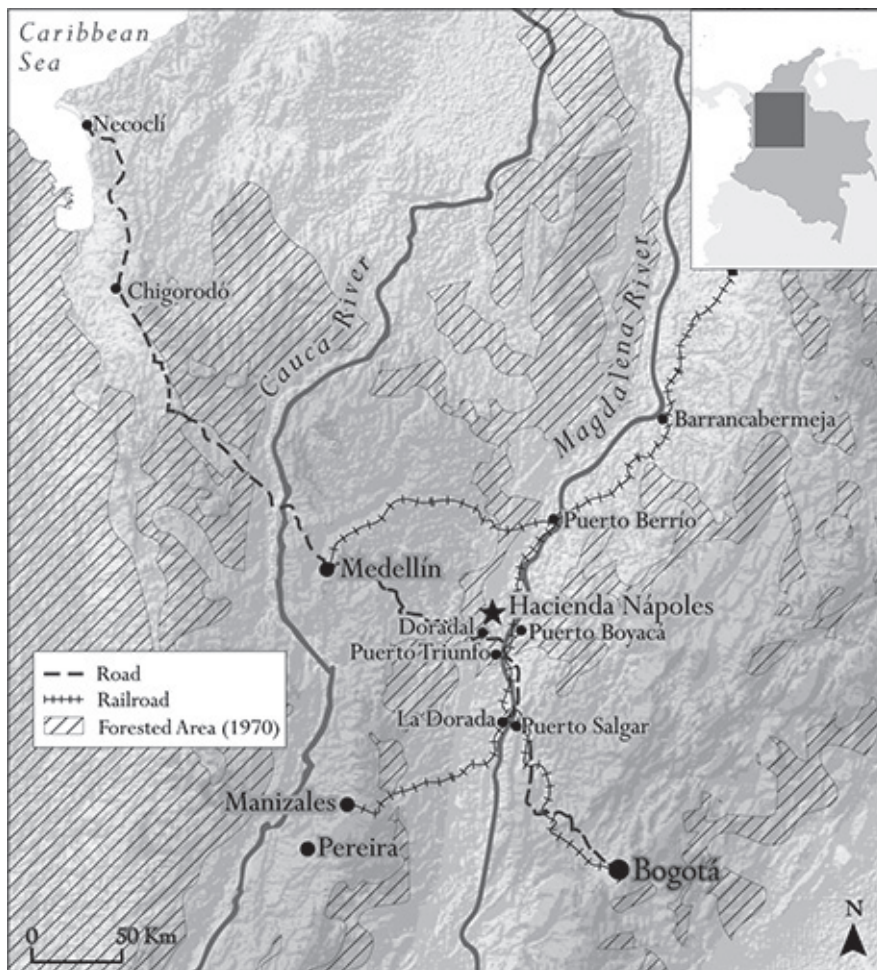


Figure 4: Hacienda Nápoles, mid-Magdalena river valley, and transportation infrastructure; map by Christian Medina Fandiño; forest cover information based on Etter, McAlpine, Possingham (2008), and Betancourt (2007)

The ecological foundation of Escobar's fantasy was achieved thanks to a series of major public transportation projects through which the state fulfilled one of its main duties and contributed to the development of the southern part of the mid-Magdalena river valley. In 1929 and 1930 (which is rather late from a Latin American perspective) came the railroads that descended from Medellín and Manizales in the central cordillera to the ports of Puerto Berrío and La Dorada, and in 1936 came the one that joined Bogotá (in the eastern cordillera) with Puerto Salgar. These ports drew settlers and ranchers, who claimed lands and planted grass, while oil extraction opened another front for development along the river, in Barrancabermeja (and later an additional one in Puerto Boyacá) (Álvarez, 2015). Trees were felled not just to clear the way for herbaceous vegetation, but also to make sleepers for the railroads, to ship hardwoods to urban centers, and to supply steamers with firewood.

In the 1950s, the transformation of this region picked up pace as the construction of the Ferrocarril del Atlántico, along the valley, progressed. Its first section, from La Dorada to Puerto Berrío (passing through Puerto Triunfo), began to be built in 1953 and opened in 1958 (Currie, 1960). The railroad laid the basis for the eventual development of Hacienda Nápoles: Jorge Tulio Garcés, the man who sold various properties to Escobar, inherited them from his father, who was killed in 1964 and very likely ventured into the area in the 1950s (Escobar, 2015; En busca del..., 30 Nov. 2013). After the entire Ferrocarril del Atlántico was completed in 1960, allowing rail transportation all the way to the Caribbean coast, Colombia's leading naturalist, Enrique Pérez Arbeláez (s.d.), took a ride and was shocked by what he saw: "The forest is ablaze. [The jungles] have been devoured by pastures."

Fire allowed a domestic mammal from the Old World to replace a myriad of wild native species. When jungles burned, so did *morrocos* (red-footed tortoises), too slow to escape, while peccaries, monkeys, and jaguars fled to adjacent forests, which would eventually also succumb to the flames. Death or survival in crowded forest fragments became the fate of neotropical fauna, while "zebu livestock crossed with red native cattle" (Randell, 1953, p.28) slowly occupied the lands, increasing their value. These mongrels are part of a much larger history in which *Homo sapiens* and their vassal species, in particular cattle, have eclipsed wild mammals: the biomass of livestock outweighs that of wild mammals 100 to 7 (Bar-Ona, Phillips, Milo, 2018).

The story of the provision of transportation infrastructure does not end with railroads; it includes a major road, the one connecting Bogotá with Medellín, without which there would have been no hacienda, no zoo, and no visitors (Velásquez Hernández, 2018). Although a route between Colombia's two main cities was included in the 1931 road development plan, for decades its realization was uncertain. In 1960, Lauchlin Currie (1960, p.209), Colombia's premier development adviser, opined that this project "must be postponed indefinitely because it is less needed than other projects." These cities were already connected by other, albeit longer, routes. Yet, in 1969, the government surprisingly announced that it would build the road following a novel route passing through Puerto Triunfo, and thus right by what became Hacienda Nápoles. Works started the following year, so that in 1978, when Escobar paid generously for various properties in the area, which added up to almost 2,000 hectares, the road was fairly advanced. It was concluded just four years later (Barrera Carrasquilla, 1971; Salazar, 2001; Escobar, 2015).

The pompously named Bogotá-Medellín Highway enabled visits to the area, literally paving the way for Escobar's masterstroke. By opening his collection to the public, free of charge, Colombia's number one drug lord outdid the Antioqueño elite, which he imitated in overshadowing the local and regional state. Through the Society of Public Improvement, this elite had stood in for the State by providing Medellín, Escobar's hometown, with parks and boulevards, a fantastic public library, and a zoo. With money from cocaine trafficking, Escobar emulated this tradition: he paid for dozens of soccer fields, equipped them with state-of-the-art lighting, and provided housing for the poorest of the poor, particularly those who scraped a living from the city's garbage dump (Salazar, 2001). Furthermore, he did so alone and directly, not through a society or a foundation, and often visited the works himself. No wonder *Revista Semana* referred to him as Antioquia's Robin Hood (Robin Hood..., 19 Abr. 1983). With his drive-through zoo, which reached to the middle and upper classes, Escobar crowned his previous displays of civic duty.

This triumph rested on state infrastructure, but also on Escobar's capacity to get away with infringing all regulations to smuggle numerous animals, carry them across the country, and exhibit them. However, when mischief turned to a full-blown war against the State, Escobar was defeated. This was a bittersweet victory: not only did drug trafficking and the associated crime continue unabated, but public institutions were unable to keep up Nápoles' magnificent zoo and thus reap the symbolic benefits of its existence.

General defeat

Keeping and importing wild animals required permits. However, the novel and deficient nature state, which relied on a faltering zoo to care for confiscated fauna, could not rein in the animal smuggler. As recounted in the previous section, Inderena was the authority in charge of regulating the use of natural resources. In 1974, decree 2811, known as the Natural Resources Code, established this institute's responsibility in overseeing zoos as well as the importation of fauna. Inderena was a young institution charting new terrain, with many responsibilities and few resources. Escobar was a master in eluding and buying off state officials, and could be rude, to say the least, when faced with impediments. In 1981, before his power was conspicuously known but after he had made a name for himself, Customs accused him of smuggling 85 animals, and in 1983 Inderena fined him while Customs ordered the animals to be auctioned (Pablo Escobar..., 20 June 1991). Although it is unclear what effect these measures had, anecdotal evidence indicates that Escobar was annoyed at the efforts state authorities made to exert some control over Nápoles' zoo. The son reports that his father complained that "the state persecuted the animals of the zoo" (Escobar, 2015, p.153) and, according to Castro Caycedo (1996, p.248), the drug baron told him that "the high society of Medellín, in cahoots with Inderena, wanted to stop [him] from bringing in the animals." The son also mentions that during one of the official raids on Nápoles, Inderena's officials confiscated 12 zebras, which his dad promptly brought back, leaving behind donkeys to replace them (Escobar, 2015, p.154).

Escobar confronted state authorities on a much larger scale after they threatened to extradite him and drug traffickers to the United States. He had first supported paramilitary

groups in the mid-Magdalena river valley, which worked in cahoots with the army to annihilate guerrillas (Barón, 2011; Villamizar Hernández, Gómez Duque, Peña Aragón, 2020). Although Nápoles' environs became a battleground, the animals fared well until the drug baron's demise. The hacienda was first seized in 1984, after the assassination of Rodrigo Lara Bonilla, minister of Justice, and permanently occupied by the police in 1989, after the killing of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán – two crimes ordered by Escobar (Muertos dos agentes..., 9 Feb. 1991). In 1991, the drug lord handed himself in after negotiating an assurance that he would not be extradited, and was imprisoned in a luxurious jail that he had built and controlled. A few months into his confinement, journalist Olga Behar visited Nápoles. In a short article published in *Cromos* magazine, she reported that the “the animals are completely healthy. Their skins are soft and attractive, their bellies full and their hearts happy. They receive very good food on a daily basis and more than 200 people have been commissioned to look after them” (Behar, Sept.-Oct. 1991). The article included a picture of Mustafa the dromedary, and also mentioned Margarita the elephant and three friends of hers of the same species. Their well-being, she was told, was guaranteed by “donations,” which she interpreted to mean that their owner continued to care for them. Escobar escaped in July 1992 and the police killed him in December of the following year, sealing the fate of his zoo.

In June 1993, the Office of the Attorney General (Fiscalía) ordered the seizure of Hacienda Nápoles, and a couple of months later the National Narcotic Direction distributed the animals between the Santa Fe and Matecaña zoos, in Medellín and Pereira (Ordenan..., 11 June 1993). Even though various officials opined that the creatures should remain in the hacienda, no institution was remotely capable of taking care of them there, Inderena included. When Jorge Luis Ochoa (also from the Medellín cartel) turned himself in two years earlier, the animals he had in Hacienda Veracruz were similarly sent to zoos, especially the one in Barranquilla (Gómez Giraldo, 6 Mar. 1995). But after the bosses stopped supporting their animals, many did not fare well. Most of the ones from Veracruz perished, while one of Escobar's elephants died in the Matecaña Zoo two months after his arrival, apparently from eating things that visitors threw into his enclosure; a second one succumbed six months later to pneumonia (No todos..., 11 Nov. 1993; Murió elefante..., 22 Mayo 1994). Yet the flamingos taken to the Santa Fe Zoo survived for many years, and so did Tantor, an elephant that had belonged to the Ochoa brothers (Descendientes..., 7 Sept. 2008; Así fue..., 11 Nov. 2017). The hippos that were left behind in Nápoles did not only survive, they thrived.

Invaders and refugees

The 65 to 80 hippopotami that live in the mid-Magdalena valley, descendants from the four to six immigrants, have become the living memory of the extinct zoo (Shurin et al., 2020). By managing to survive and reproduce without human assistance, these mammals have become an invasive species. Fecundity is a known trait in hippos: females can start having offspring at three years of age, and can bear a calf every two or three years for up to four decades (Subalusky et al., 2021)! Although the original group came

from the United States, hippos are African herbivores that are still found, in declining numbers, in various spots across West, Central, and East Africa. As their scientific name implies, *Hippopotamus amphibious* live between land and water in swampy areas. Barely 14km from the Magdalena river, the rolling pastureland of Hacienda Nápoles has lakes and channels where these animals wallow during the day and from which they emerge to graze at night. Some scientists have suggested that the only wild hippo herd outside of Africa is regaining the vacant niches left by the large herbivores that went extinct in the Late Pleistocene (Lundgren et al., 2020).

The extraordinary existence of these hippos, plus their dangerous character and link to Colombia's most notorious son, has drawn much attention to them. Journalists first remarked on them for venturing outside of Nápoles. In 1994, for instance, *El Tiempo* reported that "Residents [of the neighboring town of Doradal] said that [a] hippo lived in the hacienda in the company of a pair whose female was in heat. The female's partner did not allow other males to share his territory and decided to harass [the lone hippo] to the point of driving him into exile" (León Restrepo, 5 Mar. 1994). A more famous adventurer, Pepe, acquired prominence in 2009 when the army killed him in Puerto Berrío, 90km downstream, provoking much disapproval (Samper Pizano, 12 July 2009). Two years later, Napolitano, also a stray, was castrated (through a costly and difficult procedure) and returned to the Hacienda. Three more male hippos have been castrated, but the herd continues to grow, and occasionally scare and injure neighbors (Suárez, 15 Mar. 2011; Subalusky et al., 2021). Like Escobar's, the hippos' fame goes well beyond Colombia; they appear in YouTube videos, have starred in several documentaries, and are the subject of scholarly articles (Pablo's..., 2009, 2012; Los hipopótamos..., 2011).

With the opening of Hacienda Nápoles Theme Park in 2008, "Escobar's hippos" regained their role as official attractions. Visitors tend to stop by the Hippopotamus Lake to observe the creatures from afar. They also drive to see the two elephants, the tigers, and the lions, encountering along the way a few free ostriches that best evoke Escobar's safari park. Additionally, camouflaged under the tropical foliage, are some cages with peccaries, monkeys, and other native animals; out in the open, the enclosures of tapirs and capybaras are easier to spot. Visitors do not realize that just a few decades ago animals such as these lived freely in this same area in bygone forests.

In the Theme Park, both native and foreign captives play a subservient role to aquatic entertainments, just as other animal exhibits inaugurated in Colombia in the last decades are ancillary to other kinds of attractions.⁴ Zoos, especially those with few resources, have lost part of their allure. The cruelty of confinement has come to weigh on people's conscience. In 2016, the Buenos Aires Zoo closed and is being transformed into an "eco-park." Similarly, Ukumarí Bio-Park replaced Pereira's Matecaña Zoo. While the Santa Fe and Santa Cruz zoos still exist (as do the ones in Cali and Barranquilla), other places for entertainment associated with nature have gained more appeal. In 2008, the heirs of the Antioqueño elite that built the Santa Fe Zoo sixty years ago created Parque Explora, an interactive science museum that has eclipsed the city's zoo. Not far from Hacienda Nápoles, another Antioqueño, Juan Guillermo Garcés, revived the nature reserve that protects the karst forests that surround Claro river, one that runs on a marble bed. Garcés created the

reserve along with his brother, Jorge Tulio, who sold Escobar the area that became Hacienda Nápoles. From his property, Escobar used to venture into Río Claro, his favorite playground (En busca del..., 30 Nov. 2013; Turismo..., 28 Mar. 1983; Escobar, 2015; Vallejo, 2017).

Río Claro Canyon Reserve provides a refuge for native animal species, such as howler monkeys, amidst the sea of grass that the mid-Magdalena valley has become several decades ago. In other forest fragments scattered along the region, camera traps have captured images of other refugees, including tapirs and even pumas (Link, 2020). Trapped in the remnants of what used to be extensive forests, native mammals are forced to inbreed, just like the expanding hippo herd that traces its lineage to a single male (Leaño Bermúdez, 2015; Subalusky et al., 2021). Both the hippos and the remaining native animals are hard to observe, but if we managed to look at them carefully, we would probably see – as happened in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to the Buendía family, whose members were attracted to one another – little pig tails emerging from their behinds. This zoological history leaves us to wonder if imprisoned and freewild animals have a second opportunity on earth.

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NOTES

¹ This article enriches the literature on zoos, which has focused on the developed world, as Vandersommers' and McDonald's 2019 overview demonstrates. It follows in the steps of Duarte's (26 Sept. 2017, 2019) work on Latin American zoos, and of those scholars who are building the field of Latin American animal history (see Few, Tortorici, 2013; Vergara, 24 May 2018). It also takes its inspiration from Sharma and Gupta (2006) in their approach to studying the state.

² I thank Gustavo Villa for sharing with me the materials of his exhibit. The document, whose title is unknown to me, was retrieved from the Archivo General de la Nación and seems to be from the Ministry of Public Works; the citations are from pages 69 and 70.

³ Santa Cruz Zoo website: <https://zoosantacruz.org/historia>. I found the Inderena archive, which was in the process of being organized, within the Archivo del Ministerio del Medio Ambiente, and was granted access to it the week in which confinement for covid-19 started. I was able to see some "actas de decomiso" as well as the "Acta de liquidación Inderena, entrega de expedientes decomiso definitivo, 1995," which show that in 1989 the zoo received 36 birds, among them an "águila real," and in 1991 "two miras and two morichas" (Carpeta 4, caja 22).

⁴ Such is the case of Parque Jaime Duque and Piscilago, north and south of Bogotá, respectively.

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