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**Confronting Environmental Conservation and
Social Justice
The Case of *Páramo Santurbán***

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List of Acronyms

CDMB	Corporación Autónoma Regional para la Defensa de la meseta de Bucaramanga
Corponor	Corporación Autónoma Regional de la Frontera Nororiental
IGAC	Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi
ISS	Institute of Social Studies
MASL	Meters above sea level
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

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Abstract

This study analyses the perspectives of the different stakeholders involved in the conflict around *páramo* Santurbán, a mountain complex in Colombia threat by a large-scale gold mining project. In a dialog with theories about hydrosocial territories, conservation and social justice, I address the increasing tensions between rural and urban communities due to the various and sometimes opposite ways of perceiving nature and conservation. As part of the analysis, I try to identify the kind of knowledge used by the different groups to understand how the diversity and complexity of the perceptions seem to make the tensions there unresolvable.

Relevance to Development Studies

Conservation efforts are fundamental in times of environmental crises like the ones we are experiencing. But approaching conservation from a critical lens is also important as the preservation of strategic ecosystems not only involve plants and animals but also people. Understanding the contradictions that might arise when trying to preserve natural resources can bring light to the comprehension of the complexity of our societies and to the conflicts resulting from the different ways of perceiving the environment and the territories.

Keywords

Conservation, social justice, *páramos*, strategic ecosystems, rural communities, urban communities, livelihood, management, perceptions, knowledge, high mountains.

Chapter 1 Introduction

*Ay de las aguas revueltas
ay del silencio perdido
ay del incierto zarpazo
ay de ese páramo olvido.*

Woe to the troubled waters
Woe to the lost silence
Woe to the uncertain swipe
Woe to that forgotten *páramo*
(Song: *Estrellita Santurbana*. Lucía y los 5 Herentes).

1.1 Addressing the environmental crises

The worldwide environmental crises have increased the awareness about the need to protect the natural resources. Phenomena like climate change that have been considered the greatest challenge humanity is facing now (Moser, 2010) have increased the concern about the protection of natural resources, in particular water.

Some places have been considered strategic ecosystems because they are fundamental “for the provision of environmental goods and services for the development of the surrounding communities” (Carvajal *et al.*, 2017, p. 1203). People depend on those ecosystems for vital and productive processes (Marquez, 2014). That is why taking care of them is fundamental.

But ecosystems are not just about the space and about the biological resources. Ecosystems are also socioecological systems in which “the connections with socio cultural systems and the implications of human activity in the space are relevant for the structure and functioning of nature” (Rivera Ospina, 2010, p. 7). Then, thinking of the spaces taking into account the people that live in them and the way they relate to the resources is essential.

1.2 The research problem

Several initiatives have been created around the world to protect natural resources, mainly the water, but frequently those initiatives reveal inequalities -in the distribution of benefits and losses and evidence the disparities in power relations helping to marginalize, displace and impoverish local communities.

Throughout the world there are examples of how the knowledge predominant in conservationist’s initiatives naturalize injustices and inequities that involve the access to water (in quantity and quality), to the territories and its means of production. (Buscher, 2009) Some knowledges, discourses and meanings are imposed over others highlighting the power dynamics that are implicit in the

way people perceive and relate to the territory and its natural resources (Zwarteeven and Boelens, 2014, p. 13).

In decision making processes, economic power relations are relevant, as well as cultural norms that influence what knowledge is legitimate and which ones is not (Boelens, Vos and Perreault, 2018). This creates conflicts over the territories and their resources as different groups and ideologies compete and struggle to privilege their positions. “Social conflicts over water, are increasing around the world”. (Sneddon *et al.*, 2002, p. 667)

1.3 Colombia, water resources and social conflict

Colombia is an example of these tensions between conservation and social justice. The country, considered one of the most diverse in the world for the amount of species of fauna and flora (van der Hammen, 2005) is also home to half of the high-altitude mountain ecosystems, known as Andean *páramos*, that exist worldwide (only Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Venezuela have these ecosystems), but the country is facing the challenge to protect them.

The Andean *páramos* are strategic and very peculiar ecosystems that contain a huge and unique biological diversity. In Colombia they are responsible for regulating the water supply of 70% of the population. They are located in the high mountains and, according to the actual regulations, in Colombia they cover, above the Andean forest, a range from the 3000 meters above sea level to the beginning of the perpetual snows (See Figure 1). They are characterized by rainfall most of the year. Besides the water regulation they are important as a carbon storage and also serve as biological corridor for different animals (Rivera Ospina, 2010).

Figure 1 Páramos of Colombia



Source: (Corpoguavio, 2017)

Table 1 Páramos nationwide

37 páramos complexes identified.	The páramos occupy 2.5% of the national territory.	The páramos contain more than 4,700 species of plants.	In Colombia there are more than 4000 municipalities with páramos in their territory.
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Source: (Corpoguavio, 2017)

But besides their biological importance, as an strategic ecosystem, they are also socioecological systems (Rivera Ospina, 2010) with people living in them and using the territory for generations. As conservation initiatives arise local inhabitants are struggling to remain in the territory, to survive and to maintain their means of production.

The state has been historically contradictory in its messages and actions. While on the one hand announcing conservation strategies, on the other is promoting mining and hydrocarbons as two of the main engines of the national economy (Santos, 2014). Although more than half of the national territory is protected under natural reserves, natural parks or Integrated Management Districts (there are more than 23 million hectares under some protection system), there are no institutions strong enough to guarantee the conservation in these territories and historically there has not been a real intention from the governments to protect them. That is why protected territories, like the *páramos*, continue to be threatened. In the territories without any form of protection, even when they have been declared strategic ecosystems, the treats are even bigger.

During the past two governments there were several attempts to grant licenses in areas of strategic importance such as *páramos*.

As a result of these inconsistencies *between* designated protection zones and the award of mining licenses, civil society has begun to mobilize to protect different areas, especially those dealing with significant water sources. There are several national examples of civil society organizations that have tried to detain extractive projects in areas of strategic interest such as the *páramo Santurbán*, in the departments of Santander and Norte de Santander where civil society has organized to defend the water resources against the first large scale gold mining project planned in the high mountains. This case is emblematic for the strong civil resistance it has generated and also because as being the first large scale extractive project in the high mountains, what happens there will set a basis for the rest of the *páramos* in the country.

In the middle of the struggle between the thousands of people from civil society who have mobilized against extractivism, the big corporations and the state, there are local communities who have worked in small scale mining and agriculture for generations. Now their job has been stigmatized and their means of production is being threatened both by the large-scale mining, the State and by conservationists, mainly from the urban areas, that want to ban any activity in the *páramo* to protect the water resources. In this scenario I wish to understand how the different actors understand and are trying to resolve the struggle over the *páramo Santurbán*.

1.4 Research question:

What perceptions, knowledges and subsequent claims do various groups have concerning the *páramo*, and how do they affect (potential) solutions?

1.4.1 Sub-questions:

How do different stakeholders perceive the contested hydrosocial territory of Santurbán and what solutions do they propose to solve the existing conflict around mining expansion?

What kind of knowledge is used by the different groups to claim voice over decisions on the territory?

How do the different solutions proposed to solve the conflicts on the territory create tensions within the different stakeholders?

1.5 Theoretical framework

I analysed the conflict between conservation and social justice within the framework of political ecology. Several authors have attempted to define that concept (Escobar, 1998), (Robbins, 2012) and (Forsyth, 2003); For this work I used the concept by Boelens, Vos and Perreault (2018, p. 2) about the political ecology of water defined as “the politics and power relationships that shape human knowledge of and intervention in the water world, leading to forms of governing nature and people, at once and at different scales, to produce particular hydro-social order”.

From this lens of political ecology, nature, technology and society are inter-linked forming hydro social networks that establish how decisions about conservation are taken and the impact those decisions have over different livelihoods. The political ecology, then, helps to understand how unequal power structures as manifested.

1.5.1 Hydrosocial territory

Within this framework I explored the socio-environmental conflict taking place in Santurbán using the theories of Swyngedouw and Boelens (2018) and Sosa, Boelens and Zwarteveld (2017). The authors explore the hybridity of those territories that are perceived from a biophysical but also cultural perspective, making them subjects of material and political contestations. In the case of Santurbán, the different interests around the territory create diverse and sometimes contradictory perceptions about what the *páramos* are, what their importance is and about how they should be managed.

As defined by Agnew, (1994), cited by Swyngedouw and Boelens, (2018, p. 117), hydrosocial territory is “socio-nature deeply embodying its constituting societies’ contradictions, conflicts and struggles. The “hydrosocial- territory perspective also highlights how local human actors and non-human actants connect to broader political- economic, cultural, and ecological scales”. This concept then, is key when trying to understand the interaction between the different actors and interests involved in a territory where the territory and the water protection/use are under contestation, because it helps to approach how “divergent

territorial interest groups struggle to define, influence and command particular scales of resource governance”.

As highlighted by Swyngedouw and Boelens (2018, p. 115), “territorial struggles go beyond battles over natural resources per se, as they also involve conflicts over meaning, norms, knowledge, decision-making authority, representations and discourses”.

The concept of hydrosocial territory, then, is useful to understand how those divergent interests oppose each other in contexts in which certain groups and actors are empowered while others get disempowered, offering “arenas for claim-making and contestation”.

1.5.2 Social justice/ water justice

The concept of justice implies that there are a “wider range of ethical positions, such as concerns for ecological stewardship, the rights of nonhuman species and responsibilities to future generations ethical concerns at the heart of conservation” (Sikor *et al.*, 2014, p. 526).

The concept of environmental justice understands that the environmental problems are social problems (Taylor, 2000) and that aspects like race, gender or class are in the construction and solutions that come for those problems. The environmental justice, then, pay special attention to the knowledge that comes from the marginalized communities, the knowledge produced in the territory itself and tries to understand the powers involved in the defining of the priorities when decisions are taken.

As explained by Boelens (2018, p. 6) “decision-making authority is determined by economic power relations and cultural and behavioural norms that interlink with how particular forms of water knowledge are legitimized and privileged”.

Governance over resources, “almost always has moral implications that affect the distribution of rights and responsibilities and the recognition of particular identities and histories” (Sikor *et al.*, 2014, p. 529). If it so, it should also highlight the need of taking collective decisions about conservation and about the methods to achieve it. (Sikor *et al.*, 2014, p. 525).

Other authors (Swyngedouw and Boelens, 2018, p. 115) have also explored the issues of justice and environment with a focus in water, taking into account that “recent social- justice debate has extended to include the physical world as an integral component in structuring just/ unjust socio-ecological relations”.

These links between social justice and the protection of the environment are relevant for my study because in the case of the mining threat in *Santurbán*, the social justice debate not only relates to communities being displaced by big corporations but also by the outcomes of conservation efforts. This study analyses the interactions between mainstream conservationists and traditional communities.

In a country that has spent 50 years in an armed conflict that has left more than seven million people forcibly displaced by violence, one of the highest internally displaced populations worldwide (Centro de Memoria Histórica, 2018), discussing about the tensions between social justice and conservation is highly relevant.

1.5.3 Environmentalism

To analyse the kind of knowledge used by the different groups who claim voice over decisions on the territory, I explored the different tendencies of environmentalism proposed by Guha (2000), who makes a historically review of the multiplicity of approaches of modern environmentalism in the different socio-economic and political contexts.

Guha (2000, p. 3) defines environmentalism as “a social program, a charter of action which seeks to protect cherished habitats, protest against their degradation and prescribe less destructive technologies and lifestyles”. This broad definition introduces the diversity of approaches existing within the environmental movement “as a result of human reflection and action”, and also as a result of specific contexts and socio political and economic histories. The environmentalism proposed by the author is divided in different ‘waves’:

1. Back to the land which, with a moral perspective, claims for a return to idyllic landscapes and simple lifestyles. It defends an “organic union with nature” (Guha, 2000. p. 13) and a rustic way of living in opposition to the industrial world.
2. The scientific conservation, that intends to protect the environment based on scientific research and data and looks for the most efficient solutions for conservation. It is close to the idea of state control and gave origin to forest departments worldwide.
3. Cult for wilderness, that pretend to lock up certain areas to protect them from the advance of industrialization and natural devastation. It is close to the idea of protecting charismatic species and spectacular habitats but lacks attention on what happens to other species and places.
4. Environmentalism of the poor, which coming from the global south, defends a conservation that recognizes the importance of traditional knowledges. This concept was introduced by Guha (2000) and Martinez –Alier (2002 and 2014) who highlight the need of an extended understanding of environmentalism that includes within the environmental protection, the fight for enhancing in the living conditions of the people living in the places subject of conservation.
5. Environmentalism of the rich. In contrast to the last category, Guha (2002) Arsel, Akbulut and Adaman (2014) and Martinez- Alier (2002), talk about the ‘environmentalism of the rich’, to define social movements, mainly from urban areas, with higher capital than the rural communities, to promote their causes and create alliances.

1.6 Methodology

To approach the case of *Santurbán*, I used both primary and secondary data. I used previous academic studies about Santurbán and its socio political and economic situation and documentation about the ecosystem in general. I complemented this information with journalistic pieces from local and national newspapers and magazines. Searching in google, Santurbán releases more than 2600 possibilities. I complemented this information with semi structured interviews by skype with leaders involved in the defence of water in *Santurbán*. I interviewed five people involved in the committee for the defence of water (*Comité por la*

Defensa del Agua, from Santander and Norte de Santander) in different positions; I also interviewed two leaders of the small miners, three peasants of the high mountains and two officials of the national and regional environmental authorities, for a total of twelve interviews. I used a snowball sampling. The interviewees allowed me to generate a perspectives on the situation in *Santurbán* in order to analyse the way different people are trying to solve the issue from diverse logics and interests and the relations of power involved in the case.

As explained by Seidman (2006) “interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience”. For the case of *Santurbán*, the interviews allowed me a closer approach to the different perceptions and to the existing the tensions between the conservation initiatives and the local population, miners and peasants.

Although face to face interviews are still preferred for qualitative research, communication technologies, such as Skype and WhatsApp, have facilitated new modes of communication that open the access to global research participants. (Deakin and Wakefield, 2014, p. 603). It is my case. The financial constraints to travel to Colombia did not allow me to go to the territory but from the distance I was able to access most of the main actors. As an experienced environmental journalist in Colombia, I have access to different direct sources who have provided me information for this research. Aware of the importance of the ethical concerns, everyone who has been contacted are aware that the information was going to be used for academic purposes and I explained them what was my main question regarding the conflicts in *Santurbán*. They all agreed on the use of their information for this project.

Ellis (2007) talks about the ethics in research regarding the respect, dignity and connectedness that must exist between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they work. During this process I was highly aware of that. Every interviewee was treated with respect and every conversation was recorded (with previous authorization) and then translated by me. As this is a conflictive region in Colombia, I decided to keep the participants anonymous.

With the information collected I created a dialog with the theoretical concepts mentioned before to explain the perceptions of the *páramo* and the solutions to the existing conflicts there dividing the analysis by actors.

1.7 My positionality and limitations

As an environmental journalist I have worked for more than a decade highlighting conservation efforts around the world. Aware of the importance to fight against biodiversity loss and phenomena like climate change, I have tried to call people's attention on the need to take care of the planet. But studying the case of *Santurbán* an old idea about a social justice problem related to conservation came to my mind. I come from a country that has spent more than 50 years in an armed conflict that has affected mainly rural communities. The State of Colombia has been absent in several places and many communities were forcefully displaced from the most fertile zones, and moved to difficult landscapes, like the jungles and the high mountains, where the *páramos* are located.

I believe conservation is needed and the protection of water is a priority in the middle of the environmental crisis we are facing, but looking at the communities that have been forgotten for decades is also important. So, in this work I want to include their voices and their concerns and approach both the conservation efforts and the defence of local communities from a critical perspective.

Bourke (2014) mentions the need to recognize our biases in the research process and to reflect on how we approach the members of particular groups. I feel sympathetic to the struggle of rural people because I am concerned about the inequities in my country. This is one of the things that motivated this research. But as part of this project I tried to take distance from that sympathy in order to understand the different perceptions of the stakeholders in Santurbán. I did it through the problematization of each of the actors, contextualizing their perspectives and trying to deep in the intentions hidden in the different discourses.

I think this is a dialog that is needed because it is not exclusive of *Santurbán*. Around the world there are several examples of local communities being constraint in the name of conservation (Büscher, Sullivan and Neves, 2012), and attention to those communities, to the importance of their knowledge, their tradition and their culture is needed.

As my intention during the research process was to understand the different voices that surround the case of *Santurbán*, I interviewed a few people from each of the sides. As there were just few actors from each side I could not explore in depth the conflicts that might exist inside each of the groups. A more in-depth study would require a closer approach, a first site experience and more interviews with actors from the different stakeholders to better understand its contradictions and the tensions that (might) exist within the different forces.

Chapter 2 Santurbán, between mining and conservation. Introduction to the case study:

2.1 Chapter overview

In this chapter I introduce the case of *Santurbán* and identify the different stakeholders. I also explain the contradictory role of the state.

2.2 *Santurbán* and its people

The *Páramos* complex *Santurbán*- Berlin (a complex that reunites the whole mountain) is located in the departments of Santander and Norte de Santander. It has an extension of 142,608 hectares (ha) and is in the jurisdiction of 30 municipalities. The complex has three local corporations in charge of the environmental control: *Corporación para la Defensa de la Meseta de Bucaramanga* -CDMB-; *Corporación Autónoma de Norte de Santander* -Corponor (- and *Corporación Autónoma de Santander* -CAS- (Franco, 2013, p. 96). In the different areas of the mountain there are different economic activities.

This study will focus in the areas corresponding to CDMB and Corponor. CDMB, the environmental authority in the department of Santander is in charge of 8 municipalities located in the South west part of *Santurbán*. The basin of the rivers and streams coming from some those municipalities provide the water to Bucaramanga. Here is where the mining sector is concentrated. Corponor (in the department of Norte de Santander) is the environmental authority of 20 municipalities in the North part of *Santurbán* that together reunite 72% of the *páramo* in *Santurbán*. This area is mainly dedicated to farming (see Map 1).

Map 1 Mountain complex *Santurbán*

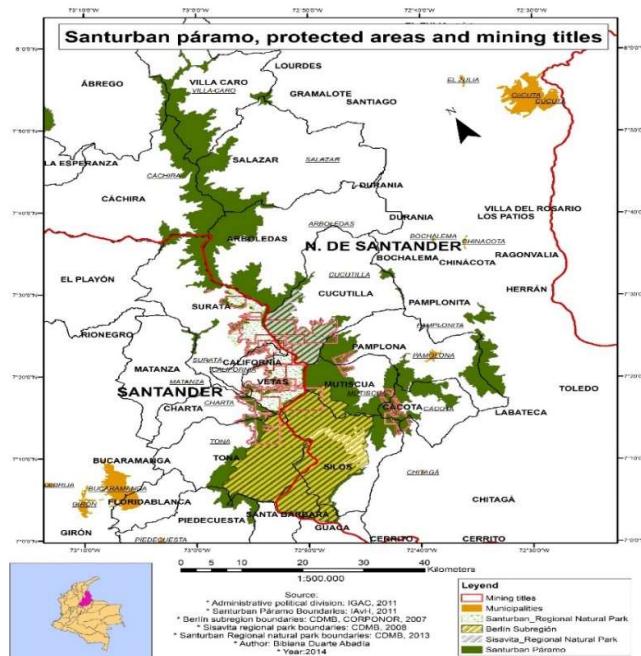
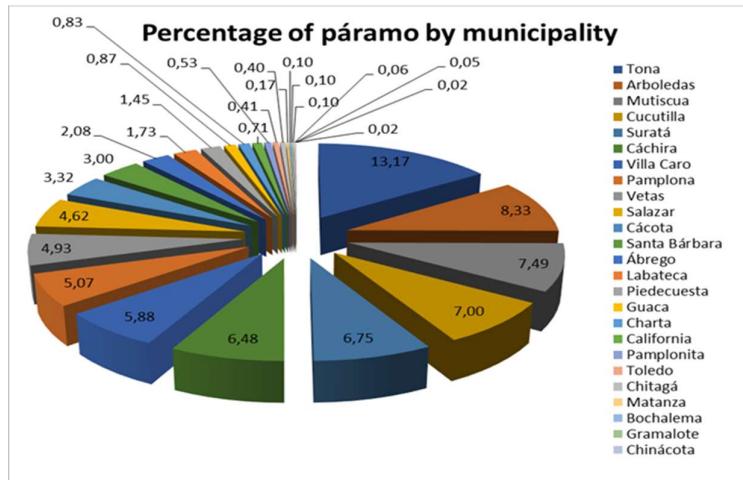


Table 2 Percentage of páramo by municipalities



Source: Created by the author based on (Franco, 2013)

Since the colonial times (starting year 1551) there has been mining in *San-turbán* (Riaño, 2015), mainly in the municipalities Vetas and California (See Figure 3). Mining has been fundamental in the development of the region as in the mid XVIII century some mining companies established operations there. Some of the mines have been located in the *páramo*, some others, outside.

An English company settled there in 1830 bringing indigenous from other parts of the country as a work force (Riaño, 2015, p. 547). Later, between 1904 and 1906 came the French company Francia Gold and Silver Ltd Company, until the First World War began. The mines remained for years in the hands of the ones who inherited those exploitations, in many cases in an informal way.

“The second half of the century the region lived a mining boom accompanied by the transition of mining from local entrepreneurs to multinational companies. In this same period emerged the environmental institutions in Colombia”. (Osejo, 2014, p. 15). Due to the increase in the mining activity, in 1988 Colombia established a Mining Code that lead to the formalization of many companies. The legalization allowed the purchase of titles by foreign companies. According to Osejo (2014, p. 15):

The XXI century has been characterized by the entry to the western region of numerous multinational mining companies, the presence in the territory of the state environmental sector through national norms and land-use figures, and the formation of organizations social, especially from the cities of Bucaramanga and Cucuta, which have expressed their dissatisfaction with the mining activity.

2.3 The municipality of Vetas

Figure 2 Sculpture that represents the mining tradition in the municipality of Vetas



Source: (Agencia de Noticias u.n. 2014)

The municipality of Vetas, the place where most of the small scale mining activities take place, has an area of 9,327 has. According to the Institute Alexander von Humboldt, the *páramo* occupies 7,028 hectares, that is, 75% of the municipal area. This municipality covers 4.9% of the whole complex of *páramo* jurisdictions of *Santurbán* and *Berlín* (CSJ). The urban centre is located at 3350 meters above sea level (inside the *páramo*). It has a population of 1709 inhabitants in an area of 94 square kilometers. (Franco, 2013, p. 96). The main economy of the municipality is gold and silver mining (see Figure 4), and activities related to it. There are also agricultural activities but are less relevant. In Vetas 1% of the land is dedicated to agriculture, mainly potato, and onion. According to Franco (2013), in Vetas there are small gold mining companies with some technology located in high Andean forest and *páramo* areas, combined with double purpose cattle ranching and diversified subsistence crops in the *páramo* area.

Due to violence and market liberalization policies in Colombia, through the years, locals have been forced to sell or rent their mining titles to multinationals companies, (Franco, 2013). Also, during the last governments mining was considered a strategic sector for the economy, mainly focusing on the big corporations so the small scale mining has been relegated. In 1988 a Mining Code was amended (Law 685 of 2001) to eliminate small-scale mining as a legal category, placing it in the same category as informal mining, which tends to have the connotation of illegal mining (Duarte-Abadía and Boelens, 2016, p. 25).

As a result, Vetas development Plan 2012-2015, cited by (Sarmiento and Ungar, 2014, p. 62) indicates that in the recent years multinationals have acquired more than 70% of the traditional mining titles. “This fact has affected the traditional mining of Vetas; due to the impossibility of competing with the technology offered by the multinationals, the local labour force is used, but there is no wage equality, nor job stability, nor opportunities for women”, the plan says.

There are two local companies remaining: “La Elsy Ltda. and Trompetero Ltda. Other local mines (five of them) have employed different forms of association with foreign companies” (Osejo, 2014, p. 53). But despite the arrival of multinational corporations, the mining in Vetas has remained at a small scale.

Different sources interviewed for this research project state that the uncertainty regarding the future of mining in the town has already driven several people in town to illegal mining (an activity known in the region as *galafardeo*: people that gets together at night to illegally extract gold from different mines). “People has despair”, says one of the miners. “The youth do not want to study anymore because with the possible restrictions to mining their future might be *galfardear* and they argue that education is not require to do that”, she says. (Miner, 2018, WhatsApp interview)¹. The future of the whole mining activity in the municipality is now depending on the new delimitation of the *páramo*. “When the delimitation began, the problems started”, she says.

2.4 The mountain peasants

Figure 3 Peasants in Santurbán.



Source: Journal *Vanguardia Liberal*, 2014

The *páramos* are also the home of peasant communities that have occupied the land after internal migrations (driven by civil wars and by the dispossession of land an inequality in the access to land titles). There is evidence of human presence in the *páramos* since about 10.000 years ago and the agriculture production has been linked to this mountain since the times of colony (Osejo, 2014), but the increase in violence since the middle XX century has also increased the population there. “Jungles and *páramos* became refugees of the losers of violence and the fertile lands became spoils of war” (Carrizosa, 2008, as cited by Rubiano, 2015).

The access to land has always been a struggle for rural communities in the country as Colombia that is considered one of the most unequal countries in the world: 1% of the biggest farms reunite 81% of the land in Colombia. Only 19% of the remaining land reunites 99% of the farms (Cardona, 2018), so peasants have had to occupy these territories despite the adverse natural conditions. Also, they have had to face the confrontation of armed groups disputing the control of rural production and roadways" (Duarte-Abadía and Boelens, 2016). Right now this region is one of the highest producers of scallions nationwide (see Figure 4). A variety of vegetables, fruits and also potato grow in the *páramo Santurbán*. Norte de Santander, the department where farming is concentrated, reunites 72% of the *páramo*. More than 2.000 peasants from Norte de Santander live and work inside the *páramo* ecosystem.

2.5 The beginning of the conflict: Large scale mining and the delimitation

In 2008 the Canadian company Greystar Resources Ltd., integrated some titles in California and Vetas el (Mining title N° 3452) and created the Project *Angosturas* that intended to create an open cast mining project of 1.104 has between 2.600 and 4.100 M.A.S.L. to extract about 330,6 million tons of golden minerals in 15 years. Angostura was going to use 230 tons of explosives and about 40 tons of cyanide daily. The project created a huge polemic (as it was the first large scale mining project in the Colombian *páramos*) and a big social mobilization that lead to a reform in the Colombian mining code in 2011 that prohibited any mining and farming activities in the *páramo* ecosystems. ¿Where exactly are the *páramos* located? This question became central because the ban to mining included an order to delimit the 37 *páramos* there are in Colombia (despite there was a delimitation made before). The environmental license for Greystar was finally denied, but with the delimitations pending the problems did not stop there.

A new company then, entered the process in *Santurbán: Minesa* (there are more but *Minesa* is the main one), a company with capital from the United Arab Emirates that is planning to do a large-scale subsoil exploration that, according to the company, will not require the use of mercury or cyanide in the region.

Minesa will create tunnels starting at 2640 meters above sea level (below the limits of the *páramo*) and close to the water intakes of Bucaramanga, the main city around the area (Castellanos, 2017, p. 26).

The project includes an integral environmental plan to expand the forest and recover the areas altered by the existing mining. The company promises to develop a program to coexist with traditional miners with capacity building projects to improve health, security and environmental protection (miner, 2018, WhatsApp interview)². *Minesa* is advancing in its exploration phase despite the viability of its project is still pending and a subject of contestation. This new project is not fully planned in the *páramo* but the impacts it might have in the water resources coming from the mountain are keeping the tensions alive.

2.6 Social movement

Figure 4 Protest in Bucaramanga against mining



Source: Alcaldía de Bucaramanga (Bucaramanga, City Hall, 2017)

The threat created by Angostura initially warned people in Bucaramanga, a city located in the lower part of the mountain that takes the water from the mountain. As the project advanced, a huge civil society movement got together (integrating other cities that take the water from *Santurbán* like Cucuta and Pamplona) (see figure 4) to oppose mining and defend the water. The movement reunites several actors from various origins and tendencies and it has resulted in different branches that protest with different interests in mind, although they all still sometimes create joint strategies. According to Osejo (2014, p. 16):

The movement includes organizations of small miners who oppose mining on a large scale or who have ambiguous relations with it. It also involves NGO, academy and inhabitants of Bucaramanga, Cucuta and Pamplona concerned about the quality and access to water; associations of professionals and productive sector of Bucaramanga in opposition to large-scale projects; at a second scale there are international organizations that oppose large-scale mining.

The movement started with some hikers that used to visit the mountain, mainly students from the local universities together with people from the union of Bucaramanga's aqueduct, animal rights defenders and members of the left party who organized some protests against the mining project. Opinion leaders, professional associations and the local merchants association (Fenalco) also joined and convened people of different backgrounds and political views, including members of the church and the local schools. This helped to avoid the perception of a movement only related to the left, in a context in which a very popular right-wing government, had just left power. They all created el *Comité por la Defensa del Agua* (The committee for the defence of water). Then, they called the attention of the national media and were able to reunite 50.000 people in an emblematic march the 20th of February of 2011.

Under the umbrella of the committee for the defence of water there are also peasants located in Norte de Santander who are trying to defend their means of production from the prohibitions, imposed by the government, of any activity, including farming, within the limits of the *páramo*. Aligned with the discourse of the defence of water and the fight against large scale mining, the committee in

Norte de Santander has created its own branch to protect their interests and pledge for an inclusive protection of the ecosystems in consideration with the actual uses of the mountain.

In general the committee for the defence of water “is emblematic because it is where several sectors that were antagonistic come together: merchants, unions, students, academics... there are many interests around the defence of water”, says one of its members (member of the *Comité por la Defensa del Agua*, 2018, WhatsApp interview)³. More than 40 civil society organizations (including the Society of regional engineers, merchants, the regional Assembly), are now its members (Osejo, 2014).

“All those interests got together because they all focused the attention on the water” (Member of the Committee for the Defence of Water, 2018, Skype interview)⁴. That is how different regional governmental institutions, politicians, social leaders aligned. They also made an effort to “sensitize the public opinion of the country about the importance of water, the *páramos* and the defence of ecosystems that allow the production, distribution and storage of water for a large part of Colombians (Parra-Romero and Gitahy, 2017, p. 122). According to Parra-Romero and Gitahy (2017, p. 126):

Constituting a social movement that prevented the exploitation license for the Angosturas project and managed to establish the debate at the national level on the relevance of large-scale mining in the *páramos*, required, on the part of the committee, to associate diverse elements and to deliver a message that would be able to ally different actors to its cause.

At the international level, they allied with organizations like the Inter-American Association for the Defence of the Environment (AIDA), the International Center for Environmental Law (CIEL) and “Mining Watch (from Canada), which filed a complaint against the World Bank Investment Fund in relation to the mining project “Angostura”(Osejo, 2014, p. 56).

At the same time, they contacted the ministry of Environment and sent communications to the president, Juan Manuel Santos soliciting a public audience.

It is important to highlight that “two years before the arrival of Greystar in Santurbán, the *páramos*, sub *páramos*, water bodies and aquifers recharge areas were declared objects of special protection and, therefore, excluded from any mining or agricultural activities (Article 202, Law 1450 of 2011). Despite that, the mining threat continued. Scientists started alerting about the instability of the land in the region and the risks involved in altering the landscape.

In the middle of this struggle the Ministry of Environment was assigned to officially delimit the *páramos*. Of the 37 *páramos* there are in Colombia, the Ministry of Environment decided to start the delimitations with *Santurbán* and the 19th of December of 2014 the delimitation was made official. “This was the biggest lie in Colombia’s environmental history because the *páramos* were already defined”, says one of the member of the Committee for the defence of water. (Member of the committee, 2018, Skype interview).

For the Comité, the new delimitation benefited the mining companies because it reduced the extension of the *páramo* from 146.000 to 94.000 has (Castellanos, 2017, p. 19).

National organizations and professors from different universities were also against the new delimitation and supported the movement. In addition, “many citizens joined as anonymous supporters” (Hurtado Sabogal, 2011, p. 68). One discourse was in everybody’s mouth: “water is life”. Being the first *páramo* delimited, not only had local implications because it was going to be the example to follow in many other *páramos* and also because the case reflected the national contradiction between the conservation of strategic ecosystems and an arrival of “an avalanche of environmental licenses for large extractive projects” nationwide (Hurtado Sabogal, 2011, p. 69).

For the people in the mountain the delimitation also meant the end of their ancestral mining and agricultural activities. “More than 3000 people were left without the right to develop the activity in a territory where they had been for a long time. Without possibility of anything, the government did not grant them even stages of transition. They were simply told: ‘from now on mining is forbidden in the *páramo*’, said Fabio Maldonado, an agronomist and community leader from the Soto Norte region in Santander in an interview with *Mongabay Latam* (Paz, 2018).

But members of the committee (in a joint strategy between the branch in Santander and Norte de Santander) sued the process because of the lack of public consultation and the Constitutional Court decided to revoke the delimitation (Corte Constitucional, 2017) and order a new one that must be ready at the end of 2018. As explained by Hurtado (2011, p. 91), “the *páramo* is now politicized because its future depends on who makes the decisions, who privately appropriates it and how their decisions are taken”.

The group in Bucaramanga still meets every Wednesday and permanently tries to reinvent itself to maintain the interest of the members. In Norte de Santander the movement is also growing.

Figure 5 Poster for the defense of water in Norte de Santander



Source: Comité por la Defensa del Agua Norte de Santander, 2018

2.7 The contradictory role of the state

Since the creation of the Ministry of Environment in 1993, following the compromises achieved during the Earth Summit in Rio (1992), Colombia legally recognized the *páramos* as strategic ecosystems of great importance for the country and declared them subjects of special protection (Law 99 of 1993). This Law defined the need of an environmental planning of the territory to guarantee its adequate exploitation and sustainable use (Corponor, 2017).

In 2001 the Ministry of Environment created a plan for the sustainable use of the high mountains to guide the environmental management at a local, regional and national level. (Rubiano, 2015). Also, the Decree-Law 216 of 2003, declared zones of particular protection not only the *páramos* but, the *subpáramos* (below the *páramos*), the streams and the aquifer recharge areas. According to the Law, the environmental authorities need to work on the conservation and management of those areas.

That same year with the Law 685 the Mining Code was created and the state declared mining a subject of public interest. But “the legal framework did not correct the informality accumulated in two centuries regarding property rights and the enforcement of environmental laws” (Hurtado Sabogal, 2011).

In 2011, the government banned any mining and agricultural activities in the *páramos* (Article 202, Law 1450 of 2011), but did not provide clarity about how to implement that prohibition (Rubiano, 2015). This uncertainty has remained until today.

In the middle of all this legal support for the protection of the environment, mining remained central for the economy. As mentioned before, although more than half of the national territory is protected under natural reserves, natural parks or Integrated Management Districts, there are no institutions strong enough to guarantee the conservation in these territories. During the government of Alvaro Uribe, for example, dozens of mining titles were granted in protection zones where those activities should be prohibited. According to data from the Ministry of Environment, during Álvaro Uribe’s government, 38 mining titles were awarded on 36,400 hectares, equivalent to 0.3 percent of the total National Park areas, and 360 applications for titles were pending on 193,274 hectares (Pulido, 2011). During that government not consideration was taken on the socioeconomic nor environmental effect of large scale mining.

The contradictions between the legal environmental framework and the support of the state to extractive projects remain until today leaving territories like *Santurbán* still under risk.

Chapter 3 Opposing perceptions about the *páramo*, analysis of the actors

3.1 Chapter overview

In this chapter I analyze the case based on the interviews. I divide the chapter by actors and link the knowledge of the various stakeholders to different categories of environmentalism. I consider the urban perspective (with the committee for the defense of water in Bucaramanga, link to the environmentalism of the rich and the cult of wilderness), the rural perspective (with miners and peasants, link to the environmentalism of the poor) and the perspective of the environmental authorities (regional and national officials, link to the scientific conservation). I analyze the interviews from the perspective of the hydrosocial territories, linking conservation and social justice.

3.2 Stakeholders and their different perspectives

I created three categories based on my sub-questions, that will help me analyze the 12 interviews and answer the main research question (Do the different and contradictory perceptions about the *páramo* make the management problem unresolvable?).

Categories

1. Understandings of the *páramo*.
2. Solutions to the existing tensions.
3. Knowledge used by the actors.

Through those categories I explore the hybridity of the territory (Swyngedouw and Boelens, 2018). These categories bring light to the multiple perceptions and uses of the territory as biophysical, cultural and political space. The categories will help me analyse how the different actors try to resolve the existing tensions in *Santurbán*. Exploring the different actors taking into account their alternative locations, forms of economic activity, social class and views, visions of the territory and its future is central in this work, understanding that the concept of “hydrosocial territory does not lend itself to ‘objectifying’ a single truth; on the contraire, it is an area where divergent socio-environmental imaginaries are generated and contested” (Duarte-Abadía and Boelens, 2016, p. 16).

As mentioned before, the concept of hydrosocial territory “involves not only the scientific knowledge about it but also the “social, political, and cultural visions of the world” (Swyngedouw and Boelens, 2018, p. 116). As explained by the authors, “territories are actively constructed and historically produced through the power-laden interfaces among society, technology and nature”. As we will see from the interviews, those cultural visions of the world differ from one place to the other, creating contestations, contradictions, conflicts and struggles about the use of the water and the land.

This historical and active construction of the hydrosocial territory is evident when different perceptions about the *páramo* arise and when different solutions

to the existing tensions are put under the table. A commonality within the interviews is the perception of the *páramo* and mainly its streams as sacred places and the agreement on the need to protect them in order to secure the water. The discourse of sacrality is usually linked to a strong catholic tradition in the region. God and water as source of life are frequently mentioned in the same sentences. To protect that source of life, all the interviews agreed on the need to leave some parts of the *páramo* untouched to be able to preserve the water.

The contradictions arise when deeping on the how and the what exactly to preserve. This, then is evidence of the complexity of the socio environmental conflict in a hydrosocial territory that is full of tensions and confrontations resulting from the different perspectives. (Swyngedouw and Boelens, 2018)

3.2.1 Conservation from the city: The Committee for the Defence of water in Santander

As mentioned before, the Committee for the Defence of Water in Santander is diverse and reunites different interests. Nevertheless, behind the discourse of water as life there is one interest in common: preserving their urban livelihood.

The commonality of a *páramo* that is sacred is present in the urban branch of the committee for the defence of water as it is in the case of the people from the mountain that I will explain in pages ahead. When some of them address the hydrosocial territory, they talk about the sacrality of the *páramo* as an ecosystem fundamental for the protection of life for present and future generations. This discourse that highlights the sacrality of the *páramo* also involves an economic interest connected to the protection of an urban livelihood that also depends on the mountain and on the water supply to survive. There is an economic interest because the economic future of a city that is in expansion depends on the water. Their discourse, then, envisions a protection not only of the *páramo* ecosystem itself but to the whole mountain that surrounds and provides the liquid to the city.

The idea of protecting the whole mountain comes from the threat of the mining company, *Minesa*, that now is trying to open operations outside the limit of the ecosystem itself but still in the basin that provides water to the city of Bucaramanga. The location was put below the limits established in the last delimitation. According to committee, the government's intentions to open the roads for mining when announcing the last delimitation, were evident, as *Minesa* moves accordingly to the regulations that, they believe, are aligned to its interests. The committee believes that the reduction in the hectares that correspond to the *páramo*, as a result of the last delimitation, just pretend to leave the space open for the mining expansion.

To understand the resistance created by the committee to this threat, the concept “environmentalism of the rich” (Arsel, Akbulut and Adaman, 2014) is useful.

3.2.1.1 Environmentalism of the rich

As an urban group, the committee is close to levers of power. As it was mentioned before, the group gathers actors of industrial and political leadership, including journalists, scientists and politicians, whose interests over water are also connected to their economic activities. Inside the discourse about water as life,

there is an interest to protect an ambitious expansion project of the city of Bucaramanga that will require a secured provision of water, according to different interviewees.

The powerful actors involved have the resources and connections to call national and international attention and have been able to congregate an enormous solidarity within the scientific and international community, such as professors from universities like Oxford or institutes like the Smithsonian who have written letters supporting the defence of the *páramos* (El Espectador, 2018). The concept 'environmentalism of the rich', then, helps to highlight the power relations between the ones in the city and the ones advocating from the mountain, including miners and peasants. The committee has the material conditions, education and social connections to generate a visibility more difficult to achieve for the people from the mountain. This characteristics: a level of economic, political and social capital necessary to influence the decisions regarding the conservation of nature are the ones that link them with the environmentalism of the rich (Guha, 2000).

But the difference in their interests with the ones of the rural communities is creating tensions in the region, mainly among the people in Bucaramanga and the miners of the higher mountain because the urban committee supports banning any extractivist activity in the *páramo*. They propose an economic reconversion or a relocation of people to protect the water resources.

Members of the committee have expressed their sympathy and solidarity with the people from the rural areas and have organized seminars to discuss about it, but their main motivation is protecting their own urban livelihood not rescuing the economic activities that have historically existed in the *páramo*. In fact, their interests largely oppose the conservation of those communities as they live now because for the urbanites, even the small scale mining is perceived as a risk due to the accumulative effects it will have in the ecosystems. Also, as mentioned before, the fact that international corporations have acquired mining titles during the recent years has created distrust among the people of the committee regarding the real existence of small mining and the real intentions of the ones who defend it. "The small mining have been absorbed by big mining. I see an interest of the government to highlight mining as the only economic option", says one of the persons interviewed (member of the committee for the defence of water. Skype interview)⁵.

According to some of the interviewees, one of the main objectives of the protests is to force the government to turn the attention on the communities living in the mountain. Nevertheless, he emphasized again that the attention should be put on economic reconversion, not in preserving the actual livelihoods.

Members of the committee recognize there is a confrontation between the mining communities and the people from Bucaramanga but, according to them, it is important to acknowledge the law that completely prohibits any activity, mining and farming in the *páramos*. "We have always said that our first debate is with the national government; our protests are trying to force the government to do what they have to do, according to the environmental mandate. If the government did what it has to do, mining wouldn't have any space in the *páramos*" (Member of the committee for the defence of water, 2018. WhatsApp interview)⁶.

As explained by Boelens Vos and Perreault (2018, p. 2) “power and politics also significantly work through more invisible norms and rules that present themselves as naturally or technically ordered”. The additional problem of a state that does not do what it is supposed to do, is that civil- society organizations (as in the case of the committee) and multinational companies (like *Minesa*) end in a contestation over the governance of the territories based on its own interests (Boelens, Vos and Perreault, 2018). The people less privileged, coming from rural contexts, remain left aside with less capacity to negotiate.

The committee is keeping its alarms on, in a moment when a pending delimitation of the *páramo* has the threat of the large scale mining in suspense. Workshops, meetings, seminars and discussion sessions keep occurring in Bucaramanga while *Minesa*, that keeps advancing in the exploration process, is being accused of damaging already some streams. According to the people from the committee, *Minesa* is creating all kind of excuses to avoid monitoring of the actual situation in the mountain.

In the middle of all this uncertainty, there is an increase alert about an imminent situation of water scarcity. Recent research has suggested that Bucaramanga is about to have a water crisis due to the increase in the demand and the decrease in the availability of water (Castellanos, 2017, p. 29).

3.2.1.2 The cult of wilderness

But the distance of the urban committee to the rural hydrosocial territory keeps arousing contradictions of their ways of perceiving the ecosystem and to the solutions they propose for the existing conflicts. For the people in Bucaramanga it is not the *páramo* itself as a territory, like in the case of the people who live in it, but the resources it provides what matter the most. The message of the committee is clear in this regard:

For the community in Santander the main worry regarding the mining project is the affectation it might have in the quality and quantity of water in Bucaramanga. The destruction and contamination of aquifers is a real threat due to the intervention to the mountain with big tunnels because the mine is over 2.600 meters above sea level and the aqueduct takes the water from the same mountain and tributaries (Castellanos, 2017, p. 25).

In this sense, the committee can be also close to what Guha (2000) and Martinez-Alier (2002) call the “cult of the wilderness”. This concept relates to conservation efforts coming from people who live outside the ecosystems considered of special importance. As explained by Martinez-Alier (2002, p. 14), the cult for the wilderness “is concerned with the preservation of wild nature but does not attack economic growth as such. In its place, it fights a ‘rear-guard action’ in order to preserve the remnants of pristine natural spaces outside the market”. The reasons to protect those spaces can vary from religious, aesthetic or utilitarian motives. All of them reunited in the case of *Santurbán*.

As explained pages before, at the beginning, the movement started with hikers interested in protecting the water but also the aesthetic of the ecosystem they visited in the weekends; as time went by, also religious leaders got involved (and some members of the committee also claim a religious and moral reasons to protect the water). As well, the utilitarian motives are central as the economic future of Bucaramanga and the ambitious plan to expand its industries and population depend on the provision of water.

Close to the ideas of Martinez- Alier (2002) regarding the cult for the wilderness, the committee in the effort to preserve the water is not attacking the economic growth. On the contraire, it is trying to preserve an ecosystem that as a water provider, serves the interests of economic growth and accumulation of the city of Bucaramanga.

For the people in Bucaramanga, then, life is not the ecosystem itself (as it is in the case of rural communities) but the water that comes from the *páramo*, so the cult for a wilderness that remains apart from their daily life is related to the protection of a resource fundamental to guarantee the subsistence and expansion of the urban livelihood.

As we will see, the perception of the hydrosocial territory from the rural and the urban areas oppose each other. Also the solutions to the tensions existing there, oppose.

The origins of the cult of wilderness go back to 1900 when the first international environmental conference took lace to protect the wildlife of Africa. The highlight of the conference is that no African participated in it. It was a conference dominated by the Dutch and English who decided on the future of their colonies. It was a way to impose the ways of the colonizers in the territories and to impose the knowledges coming from the west without taking into account the local knowledge. The cult of wilderness became very popular with the in the USA when natural parks were created to protect special ecosystems. This was not free of tensions with the local communities who's means of production were constraint for the new rules imposed in their territories. (Guha, 2000). Different authors like Büscher *et al.* (2012), Arsel, Akbulut and Adaman (2014) and Martinez-Alier (2002), among others, from the perspective of the political ecology have long criticized the historical marginalization of local communities in the environmental decisions. The marginalization creates a conflict between conservation and social justice. They have also warned about the risks of neglecting the importance of local knowledge for the success of the conservation efforts.

In the case of *Santurbán* we are not talking about a colonizer imposing its points of view, but similar to back then, there is an imbalance in the powers (rural/urban) that are addressing the conflict and trying to solve the case of *Santurbán*. The voices of the people from the mountain are not as loud as the ones from the city, neither their interests get the same attention as the ones from Bucaramanga.

This imbalances existing in *Santurbán* reflect how nature and the hydrosocial territories in general are not just determined by biophysical characteristics but weigh in power relations and sociological meanings (Swyngedouw and Boelens, 2018, p. 115) that include “just/ unjust socio- ecological relations”.

The people from the committee is using all its capacity and influence to protect the water resources from a very powerful mining machinery, supported by a contradictory state. The large scale mining is using so many strategies to advance in its purposes (with discourses like the coexistence of large and small mining) and influence the state in its favour, that the alternative left to the committee is to fight for completely banning any activity in the *páramo* and extend the prohibition of mining to the whole mountain (*Comité por la defensa del agua*, 2018. Skype interview)⁷. With a state full of contradictions, leaving the *páramos* in the hands of permissive regulations with no guarantee of effective regulations,

maintains the mountain under threat. “What we need is a delimitation that guarantees water and that takes on consideration the basins and micro basins. Any delimitation in coexistence with mining over the water intakes of Bucaramanga is going to affect the quality and quantity of water”, said one of the interviewees (*Comité por la defensa del agua*, 2018. Skype interview)⁸ ¿What are the alternatives left if the committee succeeds? ¿a productive reconversion for the inhabitants of the *páramo*? ¿a relocation? Up to know it is not clear how that will take place and how it will be supported.

As explained by Guha (2000, p. 6), “the cult for the wilderness as a response to the devastation caused by industrialization pretends to “to lock up areas still untouched to keep them free from disturbance, sometimes with the motivation to protect an endangered species”. In the case of *Santurbán*, is the water what is endangered and locking up the *páramos* to productive activities is the way to protect it. The problem is that the *páramos* are not pristine places, they are hydrosocial territories where communities have intervened and created a history and a livelihood, so excluding them from the decisions taken and ignoring their knowledge and traditions when addressing the solutions there creates a conflict between conservation and social justice.

The problem of the cult of wilderness in a place that is already habited is that it favours a ‘biocentric’ attitude to nature and ignores the anthropocentric one (Guha, 2000, p. 3). In that sense, excludes the possibility of “co-management with local peoples”.

In pages before I mentioned the support the committee has gained from international environmental organizations. Those organizations, as explained by Guha (2000), are close to the doctrine of pristine ecosystems and have spread these ideas through Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The case, then, is not exclusive of *Santurbán* and this same situation of marginalization has repeated in several places where an extended axiom about a wilderness that need to remain wild and untouched of all human intervention is confronting the dilemma of making people pay the price of the conservation of that wilderness “while nobody pays for the conservation of their communities” (Guha, 2003, p. 19).

3.2.2 Conservation from the mountain

In contrast to the proposals coming from the city, for the people living in the mountain the fight to defend the hydrosocial territory is a fight against the destruction of their productive resources. In the case of the miners, “gold represents wealth, but also history, legend, symbolizing tradition and knowledge, as well as one of the mainstays of their socio-economic livelihood”. (Duarte-Abadía and Boelens, 2016, p. 21).

These can be considered acts of environmental resistance, with an expanded definition of “environmentalism” (Arsel, Akbulut and Adaman, 2014, p. 390), because if the hydrosocial territory is destroyed, its diversity and resources, also their livelihood will be. That is why also from the mountain there is a claim for territorial planning, so the environment can be protected while the keep working. In that sense, their concern about preserving their livelihood is also a real concern about the territory and they can be linked to what Martinez- Alier (2002) and Guha (2000) call “the environmentalism of the poor”.

32.2.2.1 Environmentalism of the poor

Their classification as poor reflects their unprivileged position to negotiate their interests in the middle of a contestation with powerful actors, such as the big corporation, the state, as well as the urban *Comité por la Defensa del Agua*.

The miners

For the rural communities, in this case of the miners, the sacrality of the *páramo* is manifested in the knowledge they have of the territory. Aware that there are lagoons and streams that should remain untouched, people in the mountain perceive the *páramo* as a source of life. But that life is not simple because it includes them as community. Beyond the nature centric perspective, that takes into account water resources, plants and animals, the people living in the *páramo* have an anthropocentric perception in which, they perceive, that they themselves are part of the ecosystem and with their culture, beliefs and traditions conform the sacred place as “sons of god”. One of the miners claim a recognition of her people’s conservation efforts, like limiting the places where they extract gold to leave the higher parts of the mountain and water births untouched or avoiding the use of mercury or cyanide and replacing them with a technique of centrifugal tables. In the processes of formalizing, miners have gone through different trainings, supported by international cooperation, to reduce their environmental impact. She highlight that they have historically done an effort to enhance their practices and follow the mining regulations. Nevertheless, the actual circumstances might force them to illegality (Mier, 2018, WhatsApp interview)⁹. For the people living in the mountain the conservation is not only about the land and the water, but about their livelihood, about having the material and social resources to survive.

“We are also peasants, we are peasant miners¹⁰. We have been here for more than 400 years and none of us has dried any stream. Now that the big mining comes, the streams are drying”, says one of the miners (Miner, 2018. WhatsApp interview)¹¹.

This could only be partially true. As mentioned before, the miners have done efforts to formalize and enhance their practices to reduce their environmental impact but, as stated by Riaño (2015, p. 570), there has been a gradual environmental deterioration in the area for centuries because of the use of techniques that were not environmental friendly. “This deterioration could worsen with a large scale gold exploitation”, says the author.

According to him, water has always been fundamental for the mining activities. There are still remains of the constructions made in the 1500’s to store and conduct the water. Nevertheless, the small scale mining has left up to now the higher parts of the mountain untouched.

But as there have been an occupation of the highlands for centuries, in their fight for their preservation, people from the mountain claim to be part of the ecosystem. When they talk about the *páramo* as a sacred place, the sacrality includes them and their culture and traditions (like the catholic cult to the miners patron San Antonio de Padua) that are linked to the territory and is part of what gives meaning to their existence as miners. The name of the town ‘Vetas’ comes from the gold found in the mountain (*Vetas* means the vein of gold).

“For us the lagoons are sacred, we do not conceive touching them or swimming in the lagoons. Gold and water have lived well together. The indigenous

used to make dams (with water from the surrounding rivers) and burned wood to release the water (the strait of the water released helped to move the land to extract the gold.). Those were their explosives at the time. Now we use explosives but we do it in a legal and controlled way”, says another miner (miner, 2018. WhatsApp interview)¹² who argues that their love for the *páramo* is real and that they are fighting for an ancestral life.

As part of their tradition, she also highlights their music, usually close to the rhythms of the Mexican music *Norteña*, but with lyrics about their job.

“The national government is ignoring the territory and that is leaving the *páramo* under threat”, she says, highlighting that if they are not allowed to exploit the gold legally, the *galafardos* (illegal miners, as explained before) will do it. Right now they buy shared explosives from the same company that makes arms for the army. “Where are the explosive going to come from if we become illegal”, she wonders.

Close to the perspective of the hydrosocial territories, in this way Santurbán becomes real and symbolic, because it is not an empty land but a space that results from human interactions and relations constructed through history (Sauer, 2012). The *páramo* as a hydrosocial territory that is sacred is also understood “as the place of life and of the preservation of identity”. In that sense, the conception of the territory from the rural involves, within the culture, a recognition of the territory as a place to achieve not only the conservation of the environment but the conservation of “rights education, work and infrastructure” (Martinez-Alier, 2014).

“We named our resistance ‘mining dignity’ because we feel our dignity is being trampled. How are they going to substitute our mining activity? If here there are slopes of 75 degrees that make farming impossible. Are they going to expel us from our land? Do you think we are going to allow them to displace us and leave us starving anywhere else?” says one of the miners who represents an organization of small mining companies (Miner, 2018. WhatsApp interview)¹³.

For the people in the mountain the conservation of a place that is sacred is also about the conservation of values that “enable processes of sustainable development and improvement of life conditions” (Sauer, 2012). They envision that the water, they call sacred, must be preserved and untouched, to guarantee the life for the people in the mountain as well as the ones in the lower parts.

But the preservation of their tradition does not lack contradictions. Defining a traditional community is not simple as it is usually related to a self-definition of a group with a strong sense of social identity linked to territory and land and therefore, to territorial rights. constituted by identity (Sauer, 2012). The concept of traditional community does not need to oppose the notions of progress or development.

In the case of *Santurbán*, we are not talking about indigenous communities neither are we talking about isolated communities without access to some kinds of technology. As explained before, on the one hand mining is linked with international corporations that have bought mining titles during the last years. Local people facing violence, the economic disturbance of an armed conflict and the abandonment from the state, had been forced to hand over use different legal forms to trespass the titles to international corporations. Some have sold, some have yield temporary use of their titles. But despite the changes produced by the

arrival of multinational corporations, they still claim their means of production as “traditional” because it has a history of mining tradition since the XVI century that have survived and that is inserted in the culture.

They support their claims as traditional communities with the fact that despite the changes in the industry, the violence and the economic disturbances they have remained in the territory and have maintained the links to the land and the culture. For example, the use of family and community labour remains. Also remain religious practices of catholic tradition mentioned before. As small miners, they have limited access to technology but through the years they have done efforts to formalize their activities and move towards cleaners’ practices. But as the state is more inclined to large scale mining they have not received enough support to keep advancing in that road.

Many miners have become employees of the multinationals and that has changed part of their social structure. For example, as employees they reduced the benefits they get from mining and the capacity of negotiating profits with their colleagues (Franco, 2013). But the small scale mining has remain and so far, that has helped to protect the water births in the higher parts because the mining remains concentrated in limited parts. Also the geographic conditions mentioned by one of the miners (see in the previous page) has helped to maintain the mining at a small scale.

The fact that the violence and the economic conditions forced them to sell or modify part of the mining titles does affect the way the community relates to each other as it has impacted the way money is distributed, but it does not break the mining tradition in the area and it does not fully affect the roots they have in the territory, despite the fact that some families have migrated due to the difficult economic conditions. In the defence of their livelihood, the ones who have survived violence, and have been able to remain in the territory in a country with more than 7 million people forcibly displaced, say their root to the territory becomes even stronger.

“We have been here for more than 400 years, we did not arrive here 10 or 15 years ago like the ones from Bucaramanga”, says one of the miners¹⁴ who claims having an inherited knowledge that comes from the ancestors, in opposition to the conservation initiatives from urbanites who, according to them, barely know the territory.

The economic circumstances have transformed the situation in Vetas and California, the two main mining municipalities, but they still claim a “traditional mining” that is not completely real in the practice, but is real in the remaining sense of belonging. When they talk about traditional mining, then, it is not about an archaic way of extracting gold but about a traditional livelihood, that involves their families, community relations and, in that sense, a long term perspective of the territory in which the land and the labour are essential in order to maintain what gives meaning to their existence (Duarte-Abadía and Boelens, 2016).

What are the solutions to the problem coming from the miners? The response is not a sole one. Within the miners themselves there are tensions about the best way to preserve the territory.

Minesa, the main mining company in the territory, on one side has expanded the idea that only with their presence and capital the mining, in a conjunction between small and large scale, can survive, so some people are supporting their

presence. They claim the possibility of a coexistence between the large scale and a small scale mining, as *Minesa* is trying to suggest. They propose to remain working in a conditional way following a mining plan that delimits their activity. They assured they will never touch the higher parts of the *páramo* and request a scientific and judiciary supervision in that regard. “We require a mining environmental territorial planning to do it the best way possible. Give us a chance to keep working. That is all we ask”, says one of the miners (miner, 2018. WhatsApp interview)¹⁵.

But through the territory there is mistrust on the people supporting the idea of coexistence with the big mining as many believe they are being paid by the multinational.

On the other side, the frustration of the inhabitants for the poor employment conditions offered by the multinational so far, the changes in the local dynamics and the impacts in the water resources people believe the large scale exploration has left to the territory, have increased the opposition to the big mining. Some miners want to expel *Minesa* and any other big corporation in order to rescue the traditional livelihoods and as, they say, “preserve their territory with their ancestral knowledge” and the family and cooperative ways of Doing mining.

But as the hydrosocial territory has already been influenced and transformed by the multinationals, it is not clear how they would return to what they called their “ancestral practices”.

The last group also supports the idea that some parts of the mountain (mainly the water births located in the higher parts) must remain untouched but some others can be productive. They claim support from the state to manage the territory and delimit their practices so they know what places are due exclusively for conservation purposes. The tensions and diverse perceptions on the best way to manage *Santurbán* are also confronting the local population.

Could be easily said that there is no a real environmental concern in those proposals, but it might not be as simple because miners (as well as peasants) could be identify with the “environmentalism of the poor”(Martinez-Alier, 2014), as this concept relates to conflicts that reunite ecological and social justice elements involving impoverished communities, as in this case study. It is important to highlight again that the companies, in their efforts to formalize, have changed some of their technologies and practices to reduce their environmental impact.

The struggle to preserve their livelihood by the people in *Santurbán* is similar to other cases around the world where mining is trying to expand its frontiers. As explained by Bebbington (2008, p. 2891), the expansion of mining in areas already occupied by humans “brings new threats to the material and cultural bases”. In *Santurbán*, where a large scale mine could change the whole panorama of the region, the resistance of the miners to the threat over their livelihood is in the core of the tensions between urban and rural communities while both maintain the discourse about the importance of conservation.

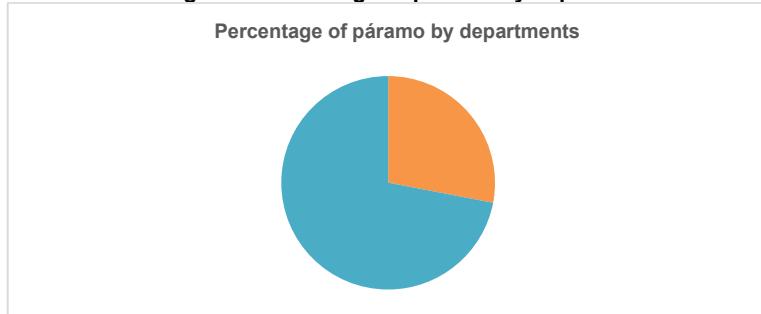
As I have shown, the way rural communities perceive the *páramo* is different than one by city dwellers because of the proximity and dependence on it. The hydrosocial territory itself gives meaning to the existence of the rural population (Sauer, 2012) through its historical uses. On the other side, the perceptions of

the urban people comes from a reflection made from the distance in the middle of a mining expansion perceived as a threat.

The peasants

Peasants are also central actors in the mountain. As mentioned before, farming is mainly concentrated in the department of Norte de Santander where the tensions about production and territory are different. Norte de Santander reunites 72% of the *páramo* ecosystem (See Figure 6). In this department the situation is different because it does not have a big mining activity (despite that large scale mining projects have tried to acquire mining titles in the department) and also because the territorial planning is more advanced than in Santander: in response to the mining threat, in recent years the local authorities have created 4 natural parks where mining activity is banned. Local environmental authorities have also worked in mapping the mountain to understand the socio-economic uses of the territory and contribute with information to support the decisions that will be taken there.

Figure 6 Percentage of páramo by departments



Santander	Norte de Santander
28	72

Source: Created by the author based on (Franco, 2013)

Nevertheless, communities are worried about the impact large scale mining will have on the water resources in the whole area and about the implications of breaking the natural composition of the mountain that might have unforeseen consequences. They are concerned about the delimitation of the *páramo* because according to them, not only the *páramo* ecosystem itself should be taken into account but also the surrounding ecosystems, like the Andean forest, that is fundamental for the functioning of the *páramo* and is the place that reunites the highest biodiversity. They emphasize that the whole basin should be considered and highlight that the whole mountain is connected, so if the lower parts are affected also the regulation water process in the high mountain will be affected. “The different organs connect humans, same happens with the *páramo*. It is like sex: what happens in the lower parts you feel it in the upper parts and vice versa”. (Farmer, 2018. Skype interview)¹⁶.

In reality, the upper parts affect the lower parts much more than vice versa but as the Andean forest is key for its high biodiversity, maintaining the connection between lower and upper parts is also important. The discourse, nevertheless, also involves an interest in preventing the peasants to sell their lands and a concern about a possible change in the economic vocation of the region.

This concern does not include the continuity of small mining because they identify it as a traditional practice and consider miners “peasant miners”, just like the peasants, with rights over the use of the territory. The proximity of both situations make them empathic about their fight for the preservation of their livelihood. Linked to “the environmentalism of the poor”, they share with small miners the concern about social justice (Guha, 2000).

This is not just a solidarity concern from peasant to miners. Peasants are also worried because the Law says that no mining nor farming activities will be allowed in the *páramo*. To defend the water that allows them to work in farming but also their livelihood, some peasants and urbanites from the cities of Pamplona and *Cúcuta* have created a branch of the committee for the defence of water in Norte de Santander.

When interviewed, they also talk about the sacred *páramo*, but peasants as miners conceive a *páramo* that is sacred in a sense that provides the living for the people working in it. Their activism in the defence of the *páramo* is the one of the excluded, as “peasants suffering simultaneously from ‘accumulation by dispossession’ and ‘accumulation by contamination’” (Arsel, Akbulut and Adaman, 2014, p. 391). The first one is understood as the resulting centralization of wealth and power in few hands due to neoliberal policies. (Harvey, 2004). The second one, as the social and environmental consequences of the need of capital development to expand its territory. (Ejolt, no date). In the case of *Santurbán*, the dispossession regards to the historical accumulation of land (and mining titles) and the expansion of a large scale mining activity that is damaging and threatening the mountain, its traditional uses and its water resources. As part of their discourse linked to the sacred one of the interviewees mentioned:

In the creation, God made the animals, the rivers and the *páramos*; he also made the low lands and made humans to govern the ecosystems. Humans must be there to define where to cultivate and where not to do it. You cannot do conservation displacing people. It is like saying that we need to move the people from Bogota (the main city in Colombia) because they are polluting (Farmer, 2018. WhatsApp interview)¹⁷.

It is evident that the sacred discourse is also used to justify their presence in the *páramo*.

The peasants living in the mountain are not subsistence peasants; although most of them have family systems of production, most of the products they produce are sold in the cities (some use for self-consumption). They are producers of onion and a diverse of other products (see page 12). In Colombia most of the peasants are family producers. Nevertheless, they are linked to the market and their earnings come from selling their products; some also hire labour, buy supplies and rent or buy machinery (Rubiano, 2015).

“Their livelihood also involve traditional knowledge, practices an rituals of cultural meaning” (Rubiano, 2015, p. 10). For example, they have practices of forestation to protect the water births; also of seed conservation and seed improvement that has allowed them to maintain the productivity of the soil despite the hard environmental conditions of the high mountain (Farmer, 2018. Skype interview)¹⁸.

We are first born here in the country side and we become peasants, later we are presented in the city and get registered as citizens with all our rights and obligations as Colombians. We are born and die here working as peasants our

whole life; every day, every year like we have done for several years, like our parents taught us to do (Asosalados, 2018)¹⁹.

Nevertheless, it is also important to highlight that some socio environmental problems have been linked to this communities as they use chemical that damage the soil for their production and also because of the excessive use of water (Franco, 2013). Despite that, studies made in the area reveal that the overall the quality of the water in the micro basins is good because the *páramo* remains in a good level of conservation (Osejo, 2014).

In response to the environmental impacts, peasants highlight the lack of a national policy to promote a cleaner agriculture. They say people from the cities are pointing the fingers on them when addressing pollution but do not recognize the support from the state to certified seeds and agrochemicals. “If Colombia regulated the use of biological pesticides and promoted them, peasants would use them; but if what we find in the market is agrochemicals, peasants should not be blamed for using them, but the state for supporting the multinationals” (Farmer, 2018. Skype interview)²⁰.

Despite the use of chemicals, the peasants still consider themselves conservationists because they leave certain areas of particular importance untouched and have guard certain species that maintain the water and because, according to them, “it has been because of us that the *páramo* has been preserved until now” (farmer, 2018. WhatsApp interview)²¹. That is why, for them, preserving their livelihood is also a way to preserve the ecosystem and the water resources.

As part of the environmentalism of the poor (Martinez-Alier, 2014, p. 241), their main concern is to maintain an environment that for them is a source of life and in that road “try to stop degradation of the environment by arguing not in terms of economic costs but in terms of rights (territorial rights, human rights), or in terms of sacredness”. This efforts, then, combine social justice and ecological sustainability; social and the environmental fights are in this case inseparables (Guha, 2000). “Colombia is full of norms nobody follows but we do need to work in agriculture and conservation because we are in the middle of a very complicated situation” (farmer, 2018. Skype interview)²².

The environmental concerns of peasants and miners then, is based on the need to preserve their livelihood, claiming a connection they have with the hydrosocial territory and an intimate understanding of its management (Martinez-Alier, 2014). That claim is expressed with statements like the following:

The *páramos* are worlds of water and when we are here and walk around we can tell everything is water. That water belongs to the people who work here to protect it and also to the ones who need it. This is the water our grandparents told us to protect, the water we drink. But we have not drink it all! (Asosalados, 2018)²³

Their discourse tries to highlight their ancestral connection with the hydrosocial territory and in that sense their relationship with the natural resource that is most relevant and that symbolises the *páramo*, as it is the water. When linking this narrative with the theory about the hydrosocial territories, it reveals how the conservation efforts that include their livelihood, challenges “the structures, discourses and institutions that drive and permit exploitation and dispossession”. This is motivated also by the protection of “cultural and psychological losses that might arise when livelihoods are disarticulated” (Bebbington *et al.*, 2008, p. 2890). For the peasants, the mountain with a large scale mining or preserved as

a pristine environment (that does not exist) will destroy “the historical and cultural heritage as well as the natural resources communities have learned to manage”. (Guha, 2000).

Besides its beauty, many things are endemic of the *páramos* and nothing can be compared with the *páramos*. I feel rich having this territory because when I am here I feel alive. This is something God gave to us and we need to protect it. We used to sell sheep but 30 years ago we learned that that was affecting the *páramo* and we were told the business was the water. Also, we know the *páramo* is an indicator of climate change and is a decontaminator. That is why we need to protect it to increase water. The *páramo* for me is life (Farmer, 2018. Skype interview)²⁴.

The hydrosocial territory also has a religious meaning. This adds to the reasons why peasants, as well as miners, claim for a territorial management plan and for the support of the state to be able to remain in the territory enhancing and delimiting their practices. “People in the cities see us as predators of the *páramo*, but it has been us, the peasants and the miners the ones who have been in this land, the ones who have invested in the conservation of this land” (Farmer, Skype interview)²⁵.

At the moment of writing this paper the focus of the members of the committee in Norte de Santander is to take advantage of the Sentence T361 from the Constitutional Court that revoked the last delimitation of the *páramo* because the sentence talks about the need of concertation for the following delimitations. “There will have to be an agreement on how to have agriculture and environment coexisting because the Constitution says that ancestral work and cultures must be preserved” (Farmer, 2018. WhatsApp interview)²⁶.

Then, as explained by Martinez Alier (2002) this acts of resistance against the destruction of their productive resources can be considered as “acts of environmental resistance”, as according to the rural communities, the conservation of the *páramo* also depends on their own conservation.

The uncertainties regarding the future of the delimitation have already reduced by more than half the price of the land in the area as people is not certain about the activities that will be allowed there. This is not all. In the second chapter (page 12) I explained the inequality use of the land in Colombia and how many of the high mountain peasants are the result of enforced displacements. Therefore, the discourse about the peasant’s efforts in conservation and the importance to protect their livelihood is also linked to the fear of displacement related to land property. It is true that there is no clarity about the alternatives of economic conversion for the *páramo* inhabitants, but adding to that problem comes the fact that not all the actual users of the *páramo* have legal titles of the land. In that case, any official support for conversion might not include them. This adds complexity to the situation because as many other communities from the global south, the conflict of the rural people in Santurbán is rooted in claims for economic justice and the rights to maintain the access to natural resources (Guha, 2000).

3.2.3 State officials

In the area surrounding Bucaramanga the *Corporación para la Defensa de la Meseta de Bucaramanga* (CDMB) is the local environmental authority. Different sources complain about the lack of territorial planning in this area which has increased

the conflicts regarding mining. As an environmental authority, CDMB has remained silent regarding the mining expansion and this has been considered by the committee as a tacit acceptance of the large scale projects (Castellanos, 2017) and is an extra reason for the committee to keep organizing public debates, popular consultations and mobilizations for the defence of water and the *páramo*.

But as part of a contradictory state, not the same case happens in Norte de Santander where the environmental authority (Corponor) has worked for years in the territorial planning with the communities and has been able to create 4 natural parks to prevent the expansion of mining and protect the strategic ecosystems. The implementation of those parks, nevertheless, have been difficult. At the beginning this initiative found a strong resistance within the community who felt their means of production were limited (Osejo, 2014), but they finally agreed on the need to protect the land from the mining threat and also from the impacts of agriculture.

Scientific conservation

These actions put the officials are close to what Guha (2000, p. 27) categorized as “scientific conservation”, that, according to the author “believe in a prompt intervention in the form of public ownership of forests and other natural resources to reduce the environmental decline and provide the basis for economic growth”. An economic growth, nevertheless, that must made in a rational and far-seeing forms of resource use to avoid the total destruction of the environment.

Based on the knowledge produce through scientific research and data, the scientific conservation looks for the most efficient techniques for conservation. In Colombia, the recognition of the importance of the scientific knowledge and of the benefits of protecting strategic ecosystems like the *páramos* has influenced the expedition of norms for conservation (Osejo, 2017, p. 159). Different institutions and universities work producing that knowledge but still there is a lack of detail information about the biodiversity of the country and about the way rural people live and uses land.

The existence of those environmental officials, then, is the result of the contradictory state that promotes environmental regulations and institutions supported by science (Guha, 2000) but at the same time lacks of commitment in the processes of implementation and regulation.

Both institutions the officials represent have created scientific material about the mountain, its ecosystemic services and its actual uses (Corponor, 2017; Instituto Alexander von Humboldt, 2013; Franco, 2013 and Osejo, 2014). As a result of those studies and aware of the socio economic situation of the people in the mountain, the officials say it is important to take into account the actual uses of the *páramo* and the people living in it and criticize the idea of areas that should remain free from disturbance. According to them, only taking into account the knowledge that has been produced within the local communities of the *páramo* will be possible to protect the ecosystem and the water resources. Protecting some parts and regulating the use of others, they are considering a protection that also involves the economic growth as mentioned by Guha (2000). In this case of the rural communities.

Their perspective in that sense is different than the one of the committee in Bucaramanga because they acknowledge the importance of maintaining the communities and preserving their knowledge, helping them to enhance it.

They have an important knowledge of the environmental dynamics of the *páramo* and consider themselves *parameros* (belonging to the *páramo*) as subjects of resistance. That has made them proud to be from the *páramo* despite being the sum of enforced displacements. People have gone up the mountain to places where productivity is inefficient because they had no alternative, but in that process they have created a knowledge that is important (environmental official, 2018. WhatsApp interview)²⁷.

It is with that knowledge they have acquired through their experience in the hydrosocial territory, through saving and enhancing seeds that they have been able to make the *páramo* a highly productive place and feed the people in the cities although the difficult natural conditions.

Environmental officials criticize that ‘cult of the wilderness’ that think of the *páramo* as a pristine ecosystem and accused the environmental groups of being too radical.

According to one the officials, this radicalism is expanding in Colombia and the “discourse of the wilderness untouched is very perverse because it not taking into account the place of humans in the middle of conservation” (environmental official, 2018. WhatsApp interview)²⁸.

The official believes the committee sued the last delimitation of the *páramo* pretending to increase the limits of the ecosystem to a point where no industrial mining is allowed in the mountain. “But scientifically we cannot support that”, she adds.

The conservation agenda has ideological interests. This is creating a conflict with science. The committee wants to define the *páramo* as a cultural object in which people decides the limits. This is not what institutions like the Humboldt have done, because we are entering in the environmental subjectivity in which the *páramo* is used in a political fight. This is something we as a scientific institution cannot support (environmental official, 2018. WhatsApp interview)²⁹

The official argues that it is unacceptable that the management of the mountain ends by displacing communities that have been historically forgotten and points out that those communities are needed to administer the well-functioning of the *páramo*.

In the same sense, another environmental official said that “nobody has taken into account the economic impact of enclosing the *páramos*. They provide the food for the cities. What are we going to do then, import them? We are dealing with a state that have abandoned this communities for more than 25 years!” (Environmental official, 2018. Skype interview)³⁰. Regarding the economic conversion, the official says that it could only be possible, in the case of farming, through a concertation about how to do it in a cleaner way, but that requires research and investment.

He mentioned how the urban communities are disconnected from the ecosystems and that lack of connection is preventing compromise, so there is a need to connect the urban and the rural areas.

The official highlights that the committee in Bucaramanga needs to enter more into the territory. “While paying attention to the mining threat, people

from the committee have forgotten the peasant communities”, he says. (Environmental official, 2018. Skype interview)³¹. Also, he mentions the need of a big social research because there is little information about the people living in the mountain. He also highlights the need of more research about the water and its uses in the territory. “This must be done field by field, taking into account the local economy”, he adds.

People from the lower areas need to recognize the importance of the ones living in the higher parts, because the greatest polluters are the ones living in the cities, not the ones in the mountain (environmental official, 2018. Skype interview)³².

The official states the need of further research for an integral water management that also needs to take climate change into account. “Who is going to coordinate that?” He wonders.

Aligned to these ideas, Guha (2003, p. 18) highlights that “no conservation efforts will succeed without the fully informed backing support of public opinion”. That opinion, includes, not only the supporters the urban committee has been able to achieve but, off course, the ones living in the area.

In the same line, authors like Özkaynak et al. (2012, p. 113) link conservation and social justice highlighting that the “information is not the sole domain of experts and that communities are capable of taking more control of their shared environments”. But in order to succeed, they need support, training, planning and monitoring efforts coming from different levels, local, regional and national. This idea of co-management or ‘participatory governance’ (De Castro, Baud and Hogenboom, 2016) is only possible if it comes aligned with models that include the state and the local communities to develop a sustainable plan for the traditional hydrosocial territories.

“The Ministry of Environment needs to have a consistent policy, it has not had up to now, to manage the *páramo* because this is becoming a breeding ground for violence”, says one of the officials (environmental official, 2018. WhatsApp interview)³³.

Both state officials alert that in a country facing an armed conflict (that has not ended completely) constraining the activities of rural communities with no backing support for them can lead to an increase in violence and the recruitment of rural people, with no other job opportunities, to illegal armed groups. Therefore, social and environmental solutions must go together.

For the officials, the *páramo* can only be saved adding integral actions of conservation, restoration, and promoting better practices between the peasant and miner communities. “The *páramo* cannot be saved only with a delimitation and a Law” (environmental official, 2018. Skype interview)³⁴.

They state that it is also important to advance in a clear territorial management with a closer look to the actual uses of the *páramo* in order to plan effective conservation strategies.

But the perspective of the state environmental authorities are not free of contradictions itself. As part of a contradictory state, there is a disagreement regarding the information that has been collected at a local level and the one at a national level because the data do not match. The numbers of municipalities that are supposed to be part of the *páramo*, the uses and amount of people living in it are different in the zoning map made by the local environmental authority

(Corponor) and the one of the national environmental authority (Humboldt Institute): the first one talk about 10 municipalities and the other mentions 20. “We have done a zoning work to plan the parks so we know the territory but this work was not taken into account for the last delimitation of the *páramo*. Then comes the Humboldt, but you cannot do a socio economic study without people and properties”, says the official from Corponor (Environmental official, 2018. Skype interview)³⁵. The differences in the information and the lack of attention to the knowledge produce from the local environmental authority in the delimitation of the *páramo* has created distrust within the environmental institutions.

The official also mentions that there were several discussions before announcing the last delimitation, but none of them happened in Norte de Santander although this department covers 72% of the *páramo*. “This happened because the only interest was mining”, he says.

This adds to the distrust to the other local environmental authority, the CDMB, which has not done its job in zoning the department of Santander and that, according to the official of Corponor, is the main cause of the conflicts occurring in the region.

The case of the state officials evidence a problem that is not exclusive of *Santurbán*. In many other places of Latin America and the world, the contradictions of the state leaves different actors, even at state level, struggling to get their data and knowledge taken into consideration in the decision-making process. These state actors’ struggles take place in conjunction with private interests gaining increasing influence over those decisions (Buscher et. al., 2012). This is helping to maintain the socio environmental conflicts alive.

Chapter 4 Conclusions

As mentioned by De Castro, 'et al'. (2016), "multiple images and values create dissonance among stakeholders' perceptions of nature-related problems and possible solutions". This is evident in the case of *Santurbán* where the different positions regarding the future of the *páramo* seem irreconcilable.

The widely mentioned sacrality of the *páramo* hides the need to protect a hydrosocial territory that beyond this connotation, is fundamental to sustain the livelihoods of people, both in the mountains and the cities. But as the urban and rural interests are different and the livelihood they are trying to defend are not the same, the perceptions and solutions coming from both of them differ and several times oppose each other.

The tensions among rural and urban communities, both in the middle of the mining threat, are about the way both are trying to save their livelihoods which in both cases depend on the existence of the *páramo*. But for the rural communities the *páramo* itself as a hydrosocial territory brings meaning to their existence. They call themselves *parameros* (belonging to the *páramo*) as a subject of resistance and as a representation of their root to the hydrosocial territory. On the other side, for the urban communities it is the water resources coming from a distant *páramo* what matters the most because the water guarantees their survival and the possibility of expanding their city. In that sense, the disputes regarding the possible solutions to the existing conflict remain in contestation despite rural and urban communities highlighting the need of an environmental planning of the territory.

The difference in the type of environmentalism and knowledge used by the various actors adds to the tensions that arise from the different perceptions of the *páramo*, of the existing conflict and of the possible solutions, as several times they contradict each other. In this case I explored the different categories of environmentalism used by Guha (2000) and analysed the cult of the wilderness and the environmentalism of the rich in relationship with the urban committee; the environmentalism of the poor in relationship with the rural communities, and the scientific conservation, with the environmental officials.

In the case of rural communities, despite the solidarity between peasants and small miners regarding the preservation of their livelihood, both resist in different contexts and defend different traditions, knowledge, and relationship with the hydrosocial territory so their perceptions of the situation differ.

Among the inhabitants of the mountain there are tensions due to the dissimilar perceptions about the *páramo*, the conflict and the solutions. The affinity some groups of miners have shown to the big mining corporation has created distrust and division among the rural communities.

Although there is evidence of the environmental impacts of miners and peasants in the *páramo*, both groups still claim a recognition for their conservation efforts because while living in the difficult conditions of the high mountain they have acquired knowledge and practices that are important for the protection of the ecosystem and the water resources. As they have a long term perspective of the territory, they are aware of the importance of protecting the water and other resources for their survival.

For the state officials it is fundamental to recognize the relevance of the local communities and to deepen in the understanding of their ancestral practices to be able to advance in the protection of the mountain. They also emphasize in the need to provide them state support in order to enhance their practices; they highlight the importance of considering the space of humans in conservation.

Environmental authorities do not lack the contradictions of the state they are representing. Their role gathering information, socializing it and creating plans for co management and governance add to the existing tensions and contestations over the territory. They, as environmental officials, are also struggling to position their knowledge about the *páramo* and the solutions they propose for the existing tensions.

There is a perception from the peasants and miners that the contradictions coming from the state and the power of the extractive companies which expanded in the territory have radicalized the position of the urban people that now fight for the untouchability of the mountain as a way to secure the availability of water for projects of urban expansion and economic growth. Rural communities feel that they are remaining in the middle of two forces: the mining expansion supported by the state and the conservation efforts. Both could end by marginalizing them and neglecting the knowledges that has been produced in the territory and the efforts peasants have done to preserve the *páramo* up to now, despite the lack of resources and support from the state.

The *páramo* has become an agent of integration and dissociation. It has integrated several interests in the cities, within the committee for the defence of water for the protection of the vital resource, but it has also divided rural and urban communities and has created tensions among them for the best way to manage and preserve the mountain. In that sense, the *páramo* has become a subject of political contestation that not only confront environmentalism with extractivism but also the different forms of environmentalism. This is an example of what is happening worldwide with environmental crises expanding in economies lead by accumulation and by the dispossession of less privileged communities.

Appendix 1

Initial questions for semi-structured interviews

1. How is your relationship with the *páramo*?
2. What does the *páramo* mean for you?
3. What is the first think that comes to your mind when you think about the *páramo*?
4. What do you think is the most important thing in the *páramo*?
5. What do you want to protect from the *páramo*?
6. What do you want the water for?
7. How does the expansion of mining in *Santurbán* affect you directly?
8. What is your position in this case?
9. Are you advocating on any side?
10. How did you join the cause?
11. How do make your voice to be heard?
12. How do you perceive the relationships between the different actors in the area?
13. What is your opinion about the actual uses of the *páramo*, mainly mining and agriculture?
14. How to prevent a noble cause like conservation from becoming an object of social marginalization?
15. Is it possible to include local population in the solution of the conflict that existed in *Santurbán*? How to do it?

Appendix 2

List of actors interviewed by position and date of interviews

Position of the interviewee	Date
Member of the committee for the defense of Water in Norte de Santander	07/05/2018
Member of the committee for the defense of water Bucaramanga	07/05/2018
Leader of miners in Vetas	05/09/2018
Director of the research institute Alexander von Humboldt	15/09/2018
Member of the committee for the defense of water Bucaramanga	21/09/2018
Farmer. Leader of the committee for the defense of water Norte de Santander	22/09/2018
Official at Corponor	24/09/2018
Legal ally of the committee for the defense of water.	25/09/2018
Farmer. Norte de Santander	27/09/2018
Farmer and leader of peasants in Norte de Santander	27/09/2018
Leader of miners in California	02/10/2018
Leader in agroecology. Committee for the defense of water Norte de Santander	03/10/2018

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Notes

¹ WhatsApp interview with a leader of local miners, September 6th, 2018. Translated by the author.

² Ibid.

³ WhatsApp interview with a member of the *Comité por la Defensa del Agua de Santander*. May 5th, 2018. Translated by the author.

⁴ Skype interview with a member of the *Comité por la Defensa del Agua de Santander*. September, 21th, 2018. Translated by the author.

⁵ Skype interview with a member of *Comité por la Defensa del Agua de Santander*. September 21st, 2018. Translated by the author.

⁶ WhatsApp interview with a member of *Comité por la Defensa del Agua de Santander*. October 10th, 2018. Translated by the author.

⁷ Skype interview with a member of the *Comité por la Defensa del Agua de Santander* September 25th, 2018. Translated by the author.

⁸ Skype interview with a member of *Comité por la Defensa del Agua de Santander* September 21st, 2018. Translated by the author.

⁹ WhatsApp interview with miner. September 6th, 2018. Translated by the author.

¹⁰ When miners call themselves peasant miners, they try to link themselves to peasants. It is a way to highlight their tradition in the territory. In this work I consider peasants and miners as people from the mountain, but in this case the differentiation as peasants is made by the interviewee.

¹¹ WhatsApp interview with miner. October 2nd, 2018. Translated by the author.

¹² WhatsApp interview with miner. September 6th, 2018. Translated by the author.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ WhatsApp interview with miner. September 9th, 2018. Translation by the author.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Skype interview with farmer. September 27th, 2018. Translated by the author.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Skype interview with farmer. September 27th, 2018. Translated by the author.

¹⁹ Statement against mining created by the peasants association, Asosalados. Translated by the author.

²⁰ Skype interview with farmer. September 27th, 2018. Translated by the author.

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Statement against mining created by the peasants association, Asosalados. Translated by the author.

²⁴ Skype interview with farmer. September 22nd, 2018. Translated by the author.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ WhatsApp interview. October 25th, 2018. Translated by the author.

²⁷ WhatsApp interview with an environmental official. September 15th, 2018. Translated by the author.

²⁸ WhatsApp interview with an environmental official. September 15th, 2018. Translated by the author.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Skype interview with an environmental official. September 24th, 2018. Translated by the author.

³¹ Skype interview with an environmental official. September 24th, 2018. Translated by the author.

³² Ibid.

³³ WhatsApp interview with an environmental official. September 15th, 201. Translated by the author.

³⁴ Skype interview with an environmental official. September 24th, 2018. Translated by the author.

³⁵ Ibid.

