Posthumanism: Towards a Relational Environmental Governance in the El Zarza Wildlife Refuge

Priscilla Massa-Sánchez[1]

Abstract

This article analyzes environmental governance in the El Zarza Wildlife Refuge, Ecuador, through a posthumanist and decolonial lens. Using a situated qualitative approach, it critiques hierarchical and anthropocentric conservation models that have historically neglected both posthumanist relations and ancestral knowledge systems.The research reveals that in El Zarza, alternative forms of territorial governance are emerging—ones that recognize nature not merely as a resource but as a constellation of beings with voice and agency. These practices involve emotional and spiritual ties to the environment—such as forest care or respect for water cycles—and actively resist extractivist logics that impose external models of development. This resistance takes shape as epistemic resistance, affirming forms of knowledge and life historically devalued by dominant paradigms.Based on interviews, participant observation, and documentary analysis, this study invites a reconceptualization of conservation as a relational and ethical practice, embedded within multispecies networks where all beings have a role in shaping the territory.

Keywords: *Environmental Governance, Wildlife Refuges, Posthumanism, Decoloniality, Relationality.*

Introduction

The contemporary ecological crisis has laid bare the limitations of classical normative frameworks in environmental management. In Latin America—and particularly in Ecuador—state-led conservation models have fluctuated between covert extractivism and a technocratic governance that, despite its participatory rhetoric, reproduces hierarchical and anthropocentric logics. Within this context, the study of the El Zarza Wildlife Refuge—located in the province of Zamora Chinchipe, in the southern Amazon region of Ecuador—offers a paradigmatic case for examining the tensions and possibilities of a situated environmental governance.

This article begins from a critical premise: current conservation mechanisms are far from neutral; they are embedded in colonial epistemic matrices and worldviews that exclude both local knowledges and the agency of nonhumans. The very notion of "environmental governance" often conceals power relations, simplifies territorial conflicts, and reduces nature to a manageable object. Against this, we propose a re-reading of territory as a relational and affective fabric in which humans and nonhumans coexist, influence, and transform one another.

From a posthumanist and decolonial perspective, we argue that sustainability cannot be achieved without dismantling the model of the modern subject—white, rational, urban, and masculine—as the sole legitimate agent of decision-making. Instead, we advocate for a shift toward an

---

[1] Departamento de Economía, Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja, Email: pmassa@utpl.edu.ec

ecological politics that acknowledges the multiplicity of life forms, territorial memories, and more-than-human subjectivities that weave the vital fabric of the Amazonian forest.

El Zarza is particularly relevant due to its history marked by socio-environmental conflicts, extractive pressures, and a strong state presence. Yet it is also a site where alternative forms of governance are emerging: practices that include spiritual care for the forest, attentiveness to environmental signs, the protagonism of women in water protection, and the generation of communal norms that transcend existing legal frameworks.

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach based on interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The research was conducted between January and June 2023, in collaboration with local residents, park rangers, and community actors. An ethical attitude of knowledge co-construction was privileged, in which the researcher is not positioned as external or objective, but rather as part of a situated ecology of knowledge.

The article pursues three main objectives: (1) to describe local environmental governance practices in El Zarza; (2) to analyze how these practices embody a multispecies relationality that challenges the nature/culture and human/nonhuman dichotomies; and (3) to propose a conceptualization of environmental governance as an affective, territorialized, and ontologically plural practice.

Within this framework, posthumanism offers theoretical tools to envision a politics not centered on the human, while decoloniality provides a necessary critique of hegemonic epistemologies of the Global North. El Zarza, in this sense, is not merely a geographic space, but a political and ethical possibility: an invitation to imagine alternative ways of living, caring, and resisting alongside the Earth.

Literature Review

This article is grounded in two intersecting critical frameworks: posthumanism and decoloniality. Although they emerge from different genealogies, both converge in their questioning of dominant epistemologies and ontologies that have historically shaped environmental governance (Escobar 2008; Braidotti 2013; Santos 2010).

Posthumanism: Beyond the Human Center

Posthumanism critically examines the centrality of the modern human subject—white, male, rational, urban, and Western—in political and ecological thought (Wolfe 2010). Rather than positioning the human as the only legitimate agent of action, it proposes a relational ontology in which nonhumans (animals, plants, rivers, mountains, technologies) participate in shaping the political and the living (Haraway 2016; Tsing 2015; Braidotti 2013; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

A notable example of this perspective in the Latin American context is the constitutional recognition of the rights of nature in Ecuador (2008), which represents an institutional attempt to decenter the human as the sole subject of rights and to recognize the legal and political agency of Pachamama (Gudynas 2011; Acosta 2013).

From this standpoint, nature is not a resource to be managed, but a constellation of actors endowed with agency, memory, and affectivity. The posthuman subject is not autonomous but emerges through multispecies networks of interdependence, where relationships of reciprocity and care are cultivated (Despret 2016; van Dooren et al. 2016). This perspective helps overcome

the nature/culture dualism and imagine a mode of governance in which nonhumans are not objects of conservation but subjects of dialogue and cohabitation.

In Latin America, these ideas gain traction when articulated with territorial practices such as reverence for *apus* (sacred mountains), reciprocity with rivers, or Andean agricultural rituality (de la Cadena 2015; Blaser 2010). Far from being folkloric, these practices are ontological expressions of worlds in which humans and nonhumans coexist in networks of affect and responsibility.

Decoloniality: Epistemologies of the South

Decoloniality, rooted in Latin American critical thought, interrogates the coloniality of power and knowledge that has shaped the relationship between territory, politics, and knowledge in Latin America (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2011; Walsh 2010). In environmental terms, this implies recognizing that dominant conservation frameworks often ignore or subordinate Indigenous ontologies, campesino knowledge, and ancestral practices of territorial care (Alimonda 2011; Grosfoguel 2016).

The decolonial proposal is not to include local knowledges as appendages of a hegemonic system, but to allow them to guide life and territorial organization from within their own logic (Santos 2010). In communities such as El Zarza, this is expressed through the protection of sacred sites, the use of communal norms based on ecological cycles, and the affirmation of lifeways that prioritize multispecies harmony over economic growth (Escobar 2016; Kothari et al. 2019).

These practices do not merely resist external impositions; they affirm distinctive modes of inhabiting and governing territory, opening the path to a *pluriverse* (Escobar 2018): a horizon of multiple and coexisting worlds, each with its own logic of life, temporality, and relationality.

Convergences Toward a Situated Posthuman Politics

The interweaving of posthumanism and decoloniality generates a profound critique of the technocratic anthropocentrism that continues to underpin many environmental policies. Their convergence allows for the envisioning of an ecological politics in which nonhuman agency is acknowledged, ancestral knowledge is valued, and non-hegemonic lifeways are respected (Todd 2016; Viveiros de Castro 2014; Latour 2004).

In the case of El Zarza, this framework enables us to read communal management practices—such as the ritual planting of medicinal plants or the communal agreements to protect water—as expressions of relational, affective, and situated governance (Blaser & de la Cadena 2018; Haraway 2016). These lifeways are not residual or nostalgic, but contemporary experiments in imagining alternative futures. Rooted in mutual respect and care, these actions show how the community incorporates the voice of the forest and of nonhuman beings into its decision-making processes—establishing ethical forms of cohabitation with the environment. These are not simply local adaptations to national conservation policy, but emergent forms of ecological governance grounded in affective bonds with the forest, territorial memory, and living spiritualities.

Examples include the collective care of water bodies, the prohibition of logging in sacred areas, and the mediation of conflicts by wise women—concrete enactments of relational governance. These practices are not remnants of the past, but valid and emerging ways of imagining other

possible futures, rooted in lived experience in marginalized territories and proposing alternative relationships with life, power, and knowledge.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and situated approach, grounded in epistemologies of the South and the ethical principles of critical posthumanism. The research was carried out in the El Zarza Wildlife Refuge, located in the province of Zamora Chinchipe in southern Ecuador, between January and June 2023.

Three primary methods of data collection were employed: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document review. Observation allowed for the recording of everyday interactions within the territory, such as agricultural practices, forest stewardship, and community-based actions related to water. Twelve individuals from the community were interviewed, including local leaders, wise women, youth, and technical staff associated with the refuge. These interviews enabled a deeper understanding of the narratives, memories, and affective ties shaping human-environment relationships.

Documentary analysis encompassed environmental regulations, community meeting minutes, management plans, and local historical records. Data were analyzed using thematic coding, with emphasis on categories such as relationality, the significance of nonhuman beings (ecosystems), spirituality, and epistemic resistance. A reflexive, affectively engaged, and collaborative attitude was prioritized—recognizing the researcher as part of the relational fabric within which knowledge is generated.

This methodological approach seeks to avoid the instrumentalization of local knowledges, favoring instead an ecology of knowledge (Santos 2010) and the collective construction of interpretations that honor the voices, silences, and practices rooted in the territory.

1. Nature as a Relational Subject

One of the most significant findings of this research is the widespread conception of the forest as a living being that must be taken into account in decision-making processes. Several testimonies refer to the "voice of the forest," the sensitivity of water, or the "pain of the land" when it is harmed. These perceptions are not expressed metaphorically, but rather constitute ontological ways of understanding the territory. Nature, in this sense, acts, responds, and influences communal decisions.

A concrete example is the customary practice of asking the forest for permission before undertaking any intervention—such as trail clearing, selective logging, or the gathering of medicinal plants. These ritual practices imply an ethic of care that recognizes the agency and value of nonhuman life. This worldview diverges from conventional conservation and proposes instead a multispecies politics in which the forest is not a passive resource, but an active co-governor.

2. Memory, Territory, and Spirituality

In El Zarza, territory is not conceived as an abstract or merely geographical space. It is imbued with memories of struggle, living spiritualities, and ancestral narratives. Sites such as "the tiger's cave," "the eye of the water," or certain centuries-old trees are considered places of power and connection with the ancestors. These territorial memories directly influence environmental decision-making.

During interviews, it was common to hear that environmental imbalances—such as pest outbreaks or water scarcity—are interpreted as consequences of failing to honor agreements with the spirits of the forest. In response, the community carries out collective cleansing rituals, symbolic offerings to the land, or reactivates ancient ceremonial pathways. These practices reinforce governance grounded in the spiritual dimension of territory.

3. Tensions with the State and External Normativity

Although El Zarza is officially part of the National System of Protected Areas, many of the community's decisions come into conflict with state-imposed policies. For instance, reforestation programs often promote species that are foreign to the local ecosystem, and land-use regulations fail to account for the spiritual dynamics of the territory.

These tensions manifest in disputes over territorial boundaries, permitted activities, and forms of participation. In response, the community has developed strategies of negotiation and, in some cases, epistemic disobedience. The creation of internal regulations, the oral defense of local knowledge before government officials, and the revalorization of the wisdom of elder women are expressions of resistance that challenge the prevailing models of environmental governance (Agrawal 2005).

4. Affects, Gender, and Care

Fieldwork revealed the central role that women play in environmental governance practices. Beyond functional responsibilities, women act as mediators between the human and nonhuman worlds through an affective logic. They are the ones who interpret signs from the forest, safeguard seeds, and uphold the care of water sources.

Many women described their relationship with the land in affective, somatic, and spiritual terms: "the land speaks to me in dreams," "the river gets sick if we leave it alone." These narratives embody an epistemology of embodied care that challenges the rationalist logics of mainstream conservation and offers a sensitive, deeply posthuman perspective on sustainability.

5. Pluriverse and Territorial Autonomy

Finally, the analysis shows that the community of El Zarza is not merely seeking integration into the regulatory frameworks imposed by the state; rather, it strives to affirm its own way of life. The horizon of *Buen Vivir* (*Sumak Kawsay*) emerges repeatedly as an alternative to development—not understood as economic growth, but as multispecies harmony.

Territorial autonomy is expressed through the defense of the forest as a subject of rights, the promotion of regenerative agricultural practices, and the strengthening of communal decision-making. This autonomy is not isolationist but open to dialogue—yet from a position of epistemic affirmation. In this sense, El Zarza becomes a laboratory of the pluriverse: a space where multiple ecological rationalities coexist, not always translatable, but all essential to sustaining life.

Conclusions

This study has shown that environmental governance in the El Zarza Wildlife Refuge cannot be understood solely through institutional or technical frameworks. By analyzing everyday practices, discourses, and relationships with nonhuman entities, the research reveals an alternative form of relational, affective, and situated governance that challenges the anthropocentric and colonial assumptions of conventional environmental management.

One of the central contributions of this study is the recognition of nature as an active subject in territorial decision-making. This perspective breaks away from the logic of conservation as control or administration, and instead embraces a multispecies politics in which forests, rivers, animals, and intangible guardians of the territory participate meaningfully.

The analysis also highlights the significance of memory, spirituality, and affect as constitutive dimensions of governance. Environmental decisions are not based solely on technical criteria but are grounded in historical, ethical, and emotional ties to the territory. In this context, the figure of the wise woman emerges as a key actor in sustaining practices of care, reciprocity, and intergenerational continuity.

The study further reveals the structural tensions between state-led conservation policies and community-based territorial logics. In response to these tensions, the El Zarza community deploys strategies of epistemic resistance and autonomy-building. These are expressed through local regulations, self-governed environmental practices, and the affirmation of a *Buen Vivir* horizon.

From a posthumanist and decolonial perspective, this research invites us to reconceptualize environmental governance as an ontologically plural practice—not as a singular formula, but as a constellation of situated experiments in ethical cohabitation among multiple forms of life. The experience of El Zarza thus becomes an invitation to imagine policies beyond the human, beyond development, and beyond the state.

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen a more plural, affective, and ontologically respectful approach to environmental governance:

Acknowledge the Agency of Nonhuman Entities in Environmental Policies.

State institutions and international organizations should reconsider their criteria for management, conservation, and monitoring through the lens of relational and multispecies ethics.

Affirm the Validity of Territorial and Ancestral Knowledge Systems.

Legal and regulatory frameworks must recognize the legitimacy of communal and spiritual practices as valid forms of environmental knowledge. This requires a deep intercultural dialogue—not merely instrumental—that enables communities to uphold their own governance logics without being absorbed by hegemonic models.

Strengthen Community Autonomy as A Foundation for Sustainability.

The protection of territories like El Zarza must be grounded in respect for collective decision-making and the support of locally led self-management processes. Autonomy should not be seen as an obstacle but as a condition for truly situated and ecologically sensitive governance.

Incorporate Affect, Gender, and Spirituality into Sustainability Frameworks.

Women play a central role in sustaining both forest ecosystems and the community's social fabric. Their knowledge, practices of care, and spiritual connections to the territory must be recognized as fundamental pillars in any environmental governance strategy.

Promote A Political Ecology of the Pluriverse.

Rethink legal and policy frameworks so that they become more flexible, epistemically and ontologically diverse, and capable of sustaining posthumanist worlds.

References

Acosta, Alberto. 2013. *El Buen Vivir: Sumak Kawsay, una oportunidad para imaginar otros mundos*. Barcelona: Icaria. https://isfcolombia.uniandes.edu.co/images/2020intersemestral/16_de_junio/ReseaElbuenVivir.pdf.

Agrawal, Arun. 2005. *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Alimonda, Héctor, ed. 2011. *La naturaleza colonizada: Ecología política y minería en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO. https://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/clacso/gt/20120319035504/natura.pdf.

Blaser, Mario. 2010. *Storytelling Globalization from the Chaco and Beyond*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346160667_Storytelling_Globalization_from_the_Chaco_and_Beyond.

Blaser, Mario, and Marisol de la Cadena, eds. 2018. *A World of Many Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://www.academia.edu/38095011/A_World_of_Many_Worlds_Marisol_de_la_Cadena_Mario_Blaser_pdf.

Braidotti, Rosi. 2013. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press. https://ageingcompanions.constantvzw.org/books/The_Posthuman_-_Rosi_Braidotti.pdf.

de la Cadena, Marisol. 2015. *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/68721.

Despret, Vinciane. 2016. *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. https://archive.org/details/whatwouldanimals0000desp.

Escobar, Arturo. 2008. *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/1166/Territories-of-DifferencePlace-Movements-Life.

Escobar, Arturo. 2016. *Autonomía y diseño: La realización de lo comunal*. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón. https://tintalimon.com.ar/public/t9924e4gnhfdarefj529d4ikr8r8/pdf_978-987-3687-27-3.pdf.

Escobar, Arturo. 2018. *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://www.academia.edu/38094580/Designs_for_the_Pluriverse_Radical_Interdependence_Autonomy_and_the_Making_of_Worlds_Arturo_Escobar.

Gudynas, Eduardo. 2011. "Buen Vivir: Today's Tomorrow." *Development* 54 (4): 441–47. https://gudynas.com/publicaciones/GudynasBuenVivirTomorrowDevelopment11.pdf.

Haraway, Donna J. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://www.academia.edu/123164652/Staying_with_the_Trouble.

Kothari, Ashish, Ariel Salleh, Arturo Escobar, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta, eds. 2019. *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*. New Delhi: Tulika Books. https://radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Pluriverse-full-printable-version-July-2019.pdf.

Latour, Bruno. 2004. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. https://doctoradohumanidades.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/latour-politics-of-nature.pdf.

Mignolo, Walter D. 2011. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press. https://www.academia.edu/11468468/The_Darker_Side_of_Western_Modernity_Global_Futures_Decolonial_Options.

Puig de la Bellacasa, María. 2017. *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/matters-of-care.

Quijano, Aníbal. 2000. "Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina." *Revista Internacional de Ciencias Sociales* 49 (153): 583–591. https://www.unc.edu/~aescobar/wan/wanquijano.pdf.

Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. 2010. *Epistemologías del Sur*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO. https://www.eurozine.com/epistemologies-of-the-south/

Todd, Zoe. 2016. "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word for Colonialism." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29 (1): 4–22. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/johs.12124.

Tsing, Anna L. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691220550/the-mushroom-at-the-end-of-the-world.

van Dooren, Thom, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster. 2016. "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness." *Environmental Humanities* 8 (1): 1–23. https://read.dukeupress.edu/environmental-humanities/article/8/1/1/81103/Multispecies-Studies-Cultivating-Arts-of.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. 2014. *Cannibal Metaphysics*. Minneapolis: Univocal. https://www.academia.edu/11468468/Cannibal_Metaphysics.

Walsh, Catherine. 2010. "Interculturalidad crítica y pedagogía decolonial." In *Educación popular y pedagogías decoloniales desde el Sur*, edited by Catherine Walsh, 25–50. Quito: Abya Yala. https://repositorio.flacsoandes.edu.ec/handle/10469/1477.

Wolfe, Cary. 2010. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.