

Introduction to the South American Environmental Philosophy Section

Environmental Ethics: South American Roots and Branches



Photos courtesy Eduardo Pavez y Ricardo Rozzi

“In the heights of the Andes in ancestral times, *Viracocha* emerged from Lake Titicaca and created the sun with his light, the rain and water with his tears, the heavens, the stars, the humans and the other living beings that people the region. In the “Sun Gate” in Tiahuanaco, the figure of *Viracocha* sculpted in stone 2200 years ago endures silently looking toward the sunrise. This representation of *Viracocha* is surrounded by 48 winged figures, of which 32 have human faces, and 16 of condors. This figure reminds us just how linked human natures are with those of the birds, such as the condor; with the ecosystems and their rains, rivers and lakes; with the sun, moon, stars, and the community of beings that inhabit the skies, the waters, and the soils.

For the Mapuche culture, the condor, or *mañke*, is the king of birds. It also symbolizes the Andes mountain range since, in addition to its great size, it wears the colors of the white snow and the black rocks and minerals. This king of birds flies at great heights, and embodies the fundamental virtues. *Mañke* is, at the same time, *Kimche*, a wise person; *Norche*, a just person; *Kümeche*, a kind person and *Newenche*, a powerful or governing person.

The king of birds is also the national bird of Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile, and until recently soared above the entire Andes range, from Santa Marta in Colombia to Cape Horn at the southern end of South America. It also abounded in the lands that are today occupied by urban centers like Bogotá, Quito, La Paz, or Santiago, where Manquehue Hill in Chile’s capital city means place of condors (*mañke* = condor; *hue* = place).

Paradoxically, today the condor finds itself threatened with extinction. Together with the bird the cultural values of the Incas that venerated *Viracocha* and the Mapuche who admired *mañke*, are also threatened. In this way, with the extinction of *mañke* in neotropical urban centers, so too disappear the fundamental values of wisdom (*kim*), justice (*nor*), kindness (*küim*) and discipline (*newen*) cultivated by this king of New World birds.”¹

The vision of the condor inaugurates this new Section on South American Environmental Philosophy in the Newsletter of the International Society of Environmental Ethics, inviting us to remember that environmental problems affect as much humans as other living beings, that biological and cultural diversity are intimately integrated, and that social well-being and biocultural conservation flight together.

Today, it is not enough to research, describe and understand the marvelous ecological and cultural systems that unfold in South America, but it is also urgently necessary to create intellectual spaces that inspire the diverse persons of our societies and make possible the evolutionary paths of the multifaceted life-histories of humans and other biological species that inhabit the South American continent and the planet. The perceptions, understandings and relationships that we human beings establish with our habitats and co-inhabitants have been different in the past (and probably also in the future), that is to say in a diachronic or temporal dimension, but also vary dramatically in the integrated biocultural mosaic of the planet, that is to say in a synchronous dimension of spatial, ecological and cultural heterogeneity. Each of the mountains, river basins, oasis, nomadically or sedentarily inhabited with singular practices, languages and narratives offer idiosyncratic forms of connection (or disconnection) of human communities with their ecosystems and the cosmos.²

This vision of an integrated biocultural mosaic reveals to us two notions that can be indispensable in approaching the problem of global climate change and other dimensions of the present environmental crisis:

1) Environmental problems have specific causes y agents. Therefore, environmental problems do not take place between Humanity and the Planet in general, as is often expressed. Consider, for example, the universalizing rhetoric of the best-selling documentary and book “An Inconvenient Truth” by Al Gore³. The perspective of an

¹ Taken from *Prólogo* (Ricardo Rozzi, 2006) in *Fundamentos de Conservación Biológica: Perspectivas Latinoamericanas*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México. 2nd Ed.

² See, for example, J. Baird Callicott (1997) *Earth's Insights: A Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback*. University of California Press, Berkeley; Ricardo Rozzi and Francisca Massardo (2000) *Ecological and Social implications of bioengineering: an analysis from the South of Latin America*. In: “Genetic and Environmental Engineering: Philosophical and Social Problems” (T. Kwiatkowska and J. Issa, eds), pp. 187-207. Editorial Plaza and Valdes, Mexico.

³ A review of Al Gore’s documentary and book is available at: <http://www.climatecrisis.net/> (*An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It*. Rodale Books, New York. 2006).

integrated biocultural mosaic emphasizes, instead, that environmental problems derive from some human practices, exerted by identifiable people, organizations or countries. Not all human communities, regions, or countries are equally responsible or suffer the consequences equally. For example, today the greatest levels of ultraviolet radiation fall upon Patagonia and the Antarctic Peninsula, affecting the health of human and other species populations that inhabit these regions, which are the most distant ones from the centers of chlorofluorocarbon emissions responsible for the hole in the ozone layer over the austral portion of America⁴. Moreover, it seems that agents are more specific at greater scales of environmental impacts, which today extend even beyond the planet Earth. For example, this is the case of the contamination of Mars with bacteria accidentally transported from Earth by a well-identified agent: NASA's "Odyssey to Mars" spaceship⁵, and not by humanity in general.

2) Thousands of human communities have co-evolved with the web of diverse living beings, ecosystems, and landscapes that constitute their habitats, and from this co-evolution have emerged practices and worldviews that are "ecologically and evolutionarily attuned with their environments. That is to say, cultures that promote the life of humans and of the diverse beings with which they cohabit. In South America, the perspectives on biocultural coevolution advise us that in order to address current environmental problems very frequently the challenge will not be to invent new technologies or cultural visions. Instead, this perspective persuades us to allow that those biocultural webs that have co-evolved attuned to the diverse coastal, mountainous, forest, desert and glacial regions of the American continent, can express themselves and continue their paths of human and ecological coexistence.⁶

The International Society for Environmental Ethics (ISEE; "Sociedad Internacional de Ética Ambiental, SIDEA) offers an ideal forum for investigating the reticulated specificity of the causes of environmental problems, as well as for favoring the expression of diverse forms of ecological knowledge, languages, and practices. This conviction motivated me to adhere to the motion presented May 31, 2007 during the ISEE Annual held in Colorado⁷, in which we proposed that the ISEE Bulletin begin to be published "online", for free with the inclusion of special sections in Spanish. As representative of the South American chapter of ISEE I decided with Mark Woods, the

⁴ See Kurt Jax y Ricardo Rozzi (2004) *Ecological theory and values in the determination of conservation goals: examples from temperate regions of Germany, USA and Chile*. Revista Chilena de Historia Natural 77: 349-366.

⁵ NASA's Mars Odyssey Orbiter might have transported up to 13 strains of a novel spore-forming, Gram-positive, heterotrophic bacterium on the surface of the spacecraft, according to analyses done at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California and the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. See Masataka Satomi, Myron T. La Duc, and Kasthuri Venkateswaran. 2006. *Bacillus safensis* sp. nov., isolated from spacecraft and assembly-facility surfaces. International Journal of Systematic and Evolutionary Microbiology 56: 1735-1740.

⁶ This notion is developed by Ricardo Rozzi y Peter Feinsinger (2001) *Challenges for conservation biology in Latin America*. In "Fundamentals of Conservation Biology: Latin American Perspectives" (Primack, R., R. Rozzi, P. Feinsinger, R. Dirzo, F. Massardo, eds), pp. 661-688. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México.

⁷ See "Future Trends in Environmental Philosophy 2007" <http://www.cep.unt.edu/ISEE2/pay.html>

new editor of the ISEE Bulletin, to initiate a section of brief essays in Spanish of South American environmental philosophy, which also would be published in English within this quarterly publication. During the 2007-2008 year, we will include in every issue of ISEE a vision of South American environmental philosophy written by a different author, with the purpose of promoting a multi-vocal expression that overcomes the frequent homogenizing (even oppressing) effect that exert univocal discourses that with their synthesis take over the voice and talk *for* instead of *with* those with whom we co-inhabit the southern part of the New World.

I have named the introduction to this section *Environmental Ethics: South American Roots and Branches*⁸ alluding to the roots of the millenary Amerindian environmental ethics and to the ramifications of the syncretic contemporary expressions, within and outside academia, of our continent. The distinguished Colombian philosopher Ana Patricia Noguera de Echeverri inaugurates this series with one of the fertile branches of current Latin American thinking, which is rooted in the Institute of Environmental Studies (IDEA) of the National University of Colombia Sede Manizales.⁹ Ana Patricia Noguera is the co-founder and coordinator of the Group of Environmental Thinking, which has already organized three Meetings of Latin American Philosophy and the Environment, which have stimulated a rich regional and international dialogue about environmental thinking. In her essay “Horizons of Environmental Ethics in Colombia,” Ana Patricia offers us a perspective coming out of her experience in these meetings, while she also introduces us to the thinking of five seminal Colombian authors that give an initial impulse for this ISEE section of South American environmental philosophy.

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⁸ This title attempts to continue unraveling the perspectives of the chapter *Latin American Environmental Ethics: Roots and Branches* (Ricardo Rozzi, 2001) in “Fundamentals of Conservation Biology: Latin American Perspectives” (Primack, R., R. Rozzi, P. Feinsinger, R. Dirzo, F. Massardo), pp. 311–362. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México.

⁹ See <http://www.manizales.unal.edu.co/idea/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=7>
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