



‘Gateway Communities’ Play a Vital Role in Protecting Chilean Patagonia

Residents in Chile’s most isolated areas have a strong connection to the land—and know how to best preserve it

Overview

Chilean Patagonia is an international icon: It’s one of the world’s most remote places and also one of the few remaining pristine areas on Earth. Much of its value comes from the interconnectivity of land and sea in its countless fjords and channels, the variety of its wildlife, and the communities that not only have thrived in the region for millennia but also play a crucial role in protecting it.

Although Patagonia's towns and villages haven't historically been very visible, they are fundamental to any discussion of protected areas, where they serve as so-called gateway communities. These communities have a strong connection to the land, and maintaining that connection is a conscious decision that for many residents is rooted in their culture and family traditions. Their livelihood and economic well-being also depend heavily on the land and its preservation: Tourism to Patagonia's protected areas begins and ends in these communities—either through transportation to and from those remote locations or via information services, park administration, food, and lodging.

Yet Patagonia's communities differ from others in Chile largely because of their isolation. No other part of the country has such a high percentage of communities that are difficult to reach, have such a low population density, and have so little access to basic public services, including public education and health care. As a result, these places have a higher degree of social inequality than the rest of the country. According to the Chilean undersecretary of regional and administrative development's "Study of Locations in Isolated Conditions," 80.7% of the towns and villages in the Magallanes region and 66.6% in the Aysén region are considered isolated.¹



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In addition, a recent study by Chile's Austral University, which sought to describe the relationship between Chilean Patagonia's urban inhabitants and protected areas, revealed that throughout Patagonia, residents strongly associate the land with isolation, nature, and a quiet way of life, all of which is experienced with pride, some sacrifice, and a sense of "making a homeland."² Tellingly, 79% of Chilean Patagonia's urban population recognizes that protected areas contribute to their region's socioeconomic development,³ which is borne out in countries as different as Ecuador and the United States—where analyses show that every dollar invested in protected areas returns \$10 to the local economy.⁴

Activities associated with protected areas can boost a community's economy by creating businesses and jobs linked to responsible tourism, while also preserving the destination's local culture, history, and ethnic identity.

If the link between a protected area and a gateway community is properly coordinated with the agency in charge of administering protected areas—such as CONAF (Chile's Forest Service and Protected Areas Agency), the Ministry of the Environment, or the Ministry of National Assets—lodging, food service, and even park administration can be based in gateway communities, ensuring direct income for residents and alleviating any pressure to build expensive infrastructure in Patagonia's protected areas.

Chile made landmark progress in protecting this treasured region four years ago by expanding its protected area system by more than 5,000 square miles, effectively concentrating more than 90% of the country's protected areas in Patagonia. Today, gateway communities can help safeguard and build on that progress.



Gateway communities in development

Gradually in Aysén and more rapidly in Magallanes, the towns and villages surrounding Chilean Patagonia's protected areas are being transformed into gateway communities, places that not only provide access to these areas but also increasingly offer products and services associated with ecotourism. Although the COVID-19 pandemic had stanching the flow of tourists for over a year, visitors now appear ready to return and enjoy the area's natural wonders.

One of Aysén's emerging gateway communities is Villa Cerro Castillo, where the municipality of Puerto Ibáñez acquired the land next to the Paredón de las Manos, or Wall of Hands, archaeological site and built a visitors center and other infrastructure to protect the site while continuing to support tourism. Under an agreement between the municipality and CONAF, the national park administration building will be located in the community, facilitating management of the site and strengthening residents' connection to the protected area. Meanwhile, the public high school, the Liceo Rural Cerro Castillo, is training students in special-interest tourism and taking them on field trips to more established gateway communities, such as El Chaltén in Argentina.

These activities have inspired special-interest tourism ventures in Villa Cerro Castillo, including a rock climbing festival known as Roc’Fest and the wintertime Patagonian Ice Fest, which helps extend the tourist season while positioning the town as a leader among up-and-coming gateway communities.

Gateway communities’ residents are called upon to serve as hosts, beneficiaries, and custodians of nearby protected areas. Their involvement will determine, among other things, local and regional planning and management that incorporate greater citizen participation into conserving natural and cultural treasures and managing protected areas, transforming these places into economic, social, and cultural engines for gateway communities.

For communities, this economic revitalization is especially important as they begin to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

Gateway community strategy

Establishing gateway communities helps ensure that the effective conservation of protected areas also creates a better quality of life and greater development opportunities for Patagonia’s people. To achieve an ideal gateway community model, residents, officials, and protected area administrators must work together in a coordinated fashion.



Figure 1

Model Without an Organized Gateway Community

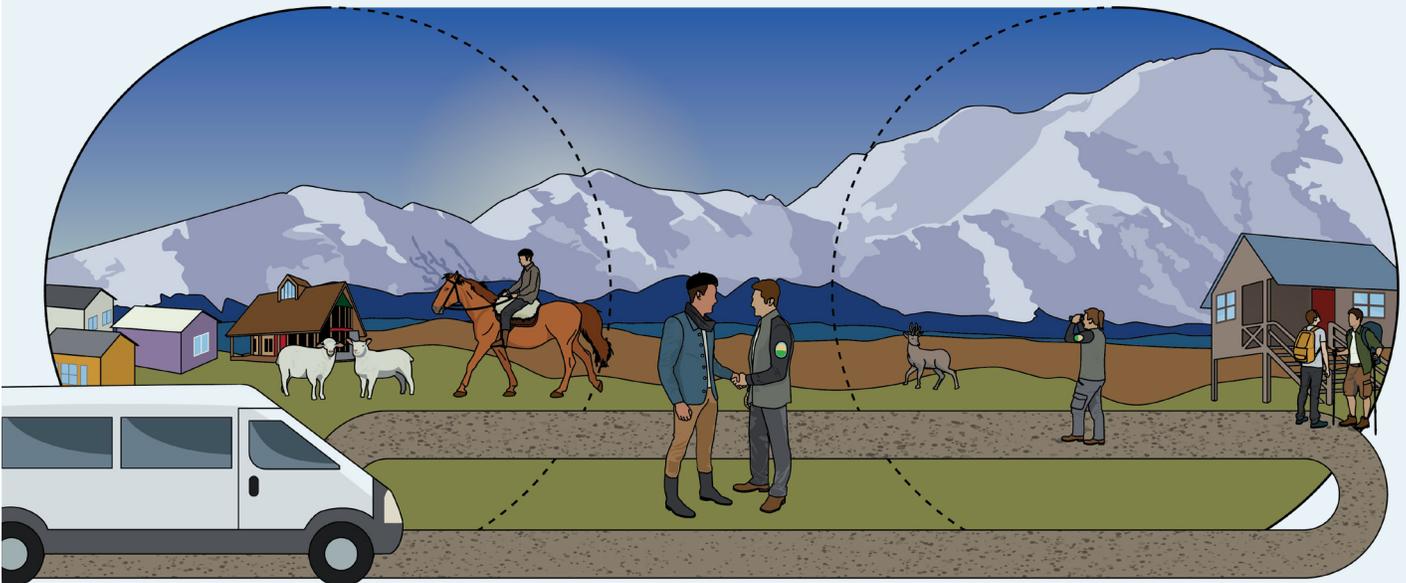


Without a gateway community, there's no link between residents and a protected area, despite their geographic proximity. So residents don't receive the social and economic benefits that come from living near a protected area; and for economic development, they are left to rely on extractive activities that aren't necessarily compatible with conserving biodiversity.

Visitors and tourists go directly to the protected area without interacting with the community. And infrastructure such as hotels and park administration facilities are built within the protected area, often exceeding safe capacity levels and deviating from the protected area's primary purpose: conserving ecosystems.

Figure 2

Model of an Organized Gateway Community



In an established gateway community, residents are connected to the protected area, participate in its management, and receive socioeconomic benefits by developing activities compatible with the area's ecosystems.

Because authorities are part of the strategy, which is supported by public policies, the roads to the park integrate the town and help lead tourists to the community. Services linked to the protected area, including park administration, are provided in the town, promoting the local economy and freeing the protected area of the burden of creating and maintaining infrastructure, while also allowing park rangers and administrators to focus on park management and effective conservation.

Endnotes

- 1 Chilean undersecretary of regional and administrative development, "Study of Locations in Isolated Conditions (Estudio Identificación de Localidades en Condiciones de Aislamiento)" (2012), http://subdere.gov.cl/sites/default/files/documentos/zonas_aisladas2.pdf.
- 2 C. Sepúlveda Luque, "Social Base Line of Chilean Patagonia's Protected Areas (Línea de Base Social de las Áreas Protegidas de la Patagonia Chilena)" (Austral Patagonia Program, Austral University, Chile, 2020), https://programaaustralpatagonia.cl/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Sepuilveda_LineaBaseSocial_ProAP-UACH-2.pdf.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 U.S. National Park Service, "About Us," accessed June 4, 2021, <https://www.nps.gov/aboutus/news/release.htm?id=1821>.

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