

Press Release

A MAPUCHE TERRITORY, KURAREWE, REACHES HISTORIC AGREEMENT FOR THE GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF THE VILLARRICA NATIONAL PARK, IN THE PUESCO LANÍN SECTOR.

On Tuesday, December 3, the Agreement that creates the Villarrica National Park Governance and Management Council, Puesco Lanín sector, was signed between the Association of Mapuche Winkul Mapu Communities of Kurarewe, the National Forestry Corporation (CONAF) and the Ministry of National Assets. With the institutional change that will take place in the next few months (based on the SBAP law), the agreement will be automatically revalidated to remain in effect by the Ministry of the Environment. This agreement applies to the southern part of Villarrica National Park, the area at the foot of the Lanín Volcano, which is crossed by the road that goes to the Mamuil Malal border crossing. The agreement covers 17,000 of the 53,000 total hectares of Villarrica National Park, which represents a little more than one third of its total area. This Council will ensure the constant participation of Kurarewe Mapuche communities.

Although the Agreement will be signed with the CONAF, the entity currently in charge of Protected Areas, within the Agreement and its regulations it has been made explicit that once the Biodiversity Law approved in Chile in September 2023 becomes fully operational, the role of the CONAF will be taken over by the new Biodiversity and Protected Areas Service under the Ministry of the Environment. All of this is a step towards updating the institutional framework in accordance with current national legislation and the international conventions ratified by the State of Chile, which recognize the participation and access to the territory by Indigenous Peoples as right holders.

The signing of this Framework Agreement will give life to a new phase, and it is a historic milestone, as it creates a formal space for a binding collaboration between the Mapuche communities of Kurarewe and State institutions in the field of nature conservation. This signing represents considerable progress in the recognition of territorial rights for the Mapuche people and the creation of an intercultural governance model for the management of Protected Wildlife Areas in Chile.

Simón Crisóstomo Loncopán, president of the Association of Mapuche Winkul Mapu Communities of Kurarewe, said, "After two years of work, we have reached this agreement on the effective and binding participation of the Mapuche communities in the decision-making process of the Villarrica National Park, in the Puesco Lanín sector, in relation to the management of this protected area. The Governance Council is a mechanism for the effective participation of the Mapuche communities in Villarrica National Park's decision-making process. It is a consultative and resolute council, binding on all actions taken within this National Park".

Context and relevance

Kurarewe, as a territory, has 60% of its surface area under a type of category of Protected Area, Reserve or National Park. All of this area overlaps with lofs (Mapuche territories). It is important to recognize the progress made in the 2000s with the implementation of "Framework Agreements" for the adequate management of the Hualalafquén National Reserve, which is also present in the Pewenche-Winkulche region, but this has not ensured the real protection and safeguarding of these environmentally sensitive areas. Examples of this are threats of hydroelectric plants, the Añihuerraqui power plant on the Trancura River, and more recently mining threats. All this has generated mobilization of local communities against extractivism and the defense of the territory. As these cases show, western forms of territorial planning bring about certain contradictions in their implementation, because while it creates zones "for biodiversity conservation," it also tacitly allocates spaces, even adjacent ones, as areas of environmental sacrifice because they could be used for other purposes, such as large-scale tourism projects, or through the fragmentation of the territory and biological corridors by allowing the subdivision and sale of plots of land adjacent to the protected area.

In addition, Villarrica National Park was created in 1940 and is currently one of the most emblematic parks due to its biodiversity, volcanic landscapes, and relevance to Mapuche culture. However, since it was established under a conservation model that completely excludes the communities, it restricts access, modifying the traditional practices and uses of the territory by the neighboring Mapuche communities that have coexisted in these areas for dozens of generations. Restricted access creates difficulties for Mapuche spirituality to be practiced in the region, which would require visiting certain areas that are now inside the national park. Furthermore, collecting pine nuts has been a key aspect of the Mapuche's diet, but in the past, they would have stayed up in those mountains with their families for several days. Add to this that for decades the collection of medicinal herbs has been limited, as many of them are only found in the highlands and are fundamental for the Mapuche's health and for that of everyone who use this ancient natural medicine. We must keep in mind that within the park there are many of these identified plants and their existence also depends on the knowledge related to their extraction. The continuing existence of that knowledge contributes to the health of the biological and cultural ecosystems of the territory.

In short, the daily practices of the ancient inhabitants of this territory, as well as their relationship with the elements that make up the natural environment that is now a National Park, are indivisible. These practices are also highly relevant in terms of safeguarding these customs, since they allow for a sense of social and cultural cohesion through a shared history, a way of seeing and being in this world. Likewise, this agreement reached among the Winkul Mapu Association, the CONAF and the Ministry of National Assets lays the groundwork for a particular model of shared and respectful governance that recognizes the

territorial, cultural and spiritual rights of the Mapuche communities, while ensuring the conservation and protection of the collective heritage for future generations.

Joint decisions and implementation

The signing of this Agreement is the result of a process that began in 2017, when the Mapuche communities decided to enter the Villarrica National Park to demand their territorial rights. In the following years, through a process of dialogue and generation of trust with the administration of the National Park, a work group was formed in 2022 that brought together the Kurarewe communities, the Ministry of National Assets and the National Forestry Corporation (CONAF) to establish a shared management model for the territory.

This agreement aims to create a Governance and Management Council, which will be the first body of its kind in Chile, in which the Mapuche communities will be able to actively participate in decision-making on the management and conservation of Villarrica National Park, in the Puesco Lanín sector. The Council's regulations establish guiding principles of mutual respect, intercultural collaboration, and integrated management that recognizes both biodiversity conservation and the customary rights of the Mapuche people, acknowledging the importance of preserving and conserving both biodiversity and physical and spiritual nature (itxofillmogen).

It also explains that it will seek to establish a space for dialogue based on good faith, transparency, interculturalism, respect for others, a collaborative spirit and compliance with legislation, with the goal of reaching agreements. The Council will be governed by the principles of participation and transparency, promoting the integration of Mapuche communities into decision-making processes in a binding manner, while ensuring that Mapuche knowledge is an integral part of the protected area's planning and management.

The Framework Agreement formalizes the creation of this Council, which will need to carry out difficult tasks, including the creation within 2 or 3 years of an intercultural management plan in accordance with international standards, improving management activities within the protected area, and studying the carrying/usage capacity when deciding which and if a trail may be used.

The Board of Directors of the Governance and Management Council will be made up of the Board of Directors of the Winkulmapu Indigenous Association of Kurarewe, the Administrator of Villarrica National Park, a representative of the Regional Director of the Biodiversity Service (when it becomes operational), and the SEREMIA, the entity responsible for the administration of protected areas. For the time being, as the Biodiversity and Protected Areas Service is not fully operational, the agreement will be made with the CONAF.

It should be noted that the Association of Mapuche Winkul Mapu Communities is composed of lonko, machi, werken and lofche leaders who have been working together for more than 15 years in the defense and protection of the territory against extractive projects, building an alliance for a proposal of territorial governance based on the protection of nature in a context of climate crisis and accelerated loss of biodiversity at local and global levels. This Association has the participation of more than thirteen communities, six lofs and Mapuche people from the territory.

"This milestone is the result of years of work to strengthen the alliance between Mapuche communities in the Kurarewe territory, who came together to confront extractive projects, especially hydroelectric and mining projects. The Winkul Mapu Association is the result of this alliance and this work," said Simón Crisóstomo.

Active safeguard

Despite the fact that Indigenous Peoples have proven to be the best guardians of what remains of the planet's biodiversity, their territorial rights are not recognized, and they do not own or manage these spaces. It should be noted that 85% of the planet's remaining biodiversity is in Indigenous territories, according to various international studies and reports, including those of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). This is because Indigenous Peoples have managed and conserved these areas for centuries, applying traditional knowledge that maintains the balance of these ecosystems. Despite their importance for the protection and conservation of biodiversity, their contributions are still scarcely recognized and supported, even though human rights standards require it (Convention 169, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), Indigenous Peoples and conservation (Convention on Biological Diversity, International Union for Conservation of Nature). Although there is a tendency towards changing current practices, the classic paradigm of conservation of uninhabited Protected Areas, keeping them open only to visitors (tourism, science and education), continues to prevail.

The creation of Protected Wildlife Areas in Wallmapu, which is Mapuche ancestral territory, has been one of the main causes of tension between the State of Chile and the Mapuche People. There have been no national governance frameworks, nor implementation of international agreements, participation with recognition of territorial rights or dialogues with knowledge exchange between the institutions and Indigenous Peoples. All of this has not only generated significant territorial imbalances but has also exacerbates the political tension between the State and the Mapuche People. The signing of this Agreement opens the possibility for an effective dialogue that has been achieved in this territory after 15 years of local work in search of an approach that is appropriate and pertinent at the territorial level.

Regina Carinao, a member of the Manuel Quintunahuel Community, says that this is a great step forward because it allows "caring for and protecting our environment while ensuring that it is cared for by us, the Mapuche. It is an achievement that we have reached an agreement and have been able to work together. There have been many years of struggle and discussions to take care of this space that has always belonged to us, the Mapuche. We inherited this space to care for it and protect it, not to damage it, and leave it for our future generations.

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