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Loving it to Death: The Gran Pajatén Predicament

In developing nations preoccupied with the enormous challenges of political, economic and social reorganization and recovery during the 1990s, caring properly for natural protected areas and archaeological heritage is not always a high priority. In Peru, the search for revenues during the past decade has taken a significant toll on the nation's natural and cultural resources, a trend that culminated in the recent controversy over the Lima government's plans to expand tourist infrastructure at the Inca "palace" of Machu Picchu, arguably South America's greatest tourist attraction. Yet while a political storm drawing international interest raged over Machu Picchu, a quieter but similar dilemma had begun emerging decades earlier at another remarkable ancient settlement in the eastern Andean cloud forests of northern Peru. The equally spectacular Chachapoyas site of Gran Pajatén was targeted for tourism development soon after its 1964 discovery.

The site has so far been spared development by virtue of its remote location and difficult access, and its incorporation in 1983 within a protected area, the Rio Abiseo National Park (Figure 1). This is indeed fortunate, as the political forces seeking to turn Gran Pajatén into an economic asset have so far failed to understand the fragile nature of this cultural resource. Several articles have highlighted threats to the Rio Abiseo National Park as a protected area (Leo 1992; Young et al. 1994), but the following article details problems that distinguish the conservation status of the park's archaeological resources. My perspective is derived from par-

ticipation in archaeological investigations within the park since 1985, and from avid observation of political developments affecting both research and conservation. Most of Gran Pajatén's problems epitomize a single dilemma facing cultural resource managers in national parks and preserves around the world. How can we facilitate public access to fragile archaeological sites without fatally compromising their historical and scientific integrity?

Gran Pajatén

The archaeological site of Gran Pajatén is a prehispanic settlement perched on a high terraced ridge top

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Figure 1. Map of the Rio Abiseo National Park.

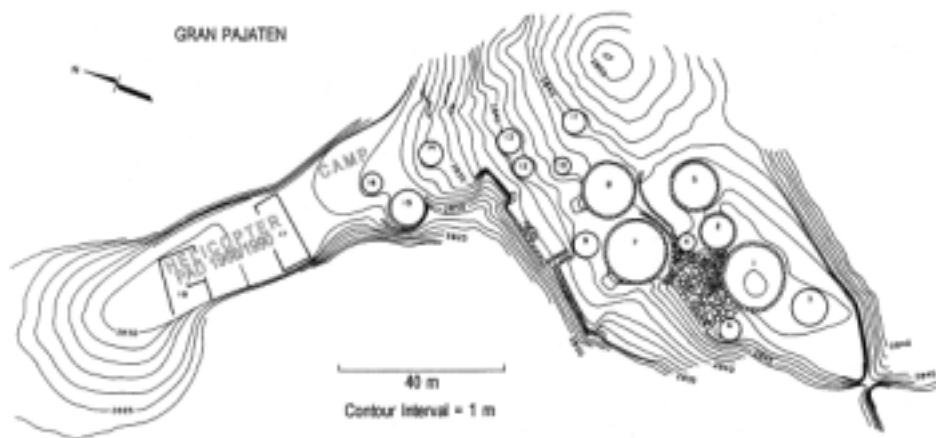


Figure 2. Map of archaeological site of Gran Pajatén. Note the helicopter pad and campsite used in 1966 and 1990.

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overlooking the Montecristo River Canyon (Figure 2). The Montecristo lies within the Abiseo River drainage, which empties into the Huallabamba tributary of the Central Huallaga. At 2,850 m, Gran Pajatén lies deep within the tropical Andean cloud forest where temperature averages between 6 and 12 degrees Celsius, and annual precipitation ranges from 2,000 to 4,000 mm. Rain and thick mists are almost daily occurrences, even during the dry season between May and October. Dense forest covers masonry constructions at Gran Pajatén and other archaeological sites within the surrounding valley. This region is mostly uninhabited today, as the rugged terrain, high humidity and unstable soils of the upper forests have been unattractive to Andean farmers. Government agencies responsible for evaluating natural resources describe the upper forests as virtually useless from an economic standpoint (ONERN 1976). Consequently, both scholars and lay persons tend to assume that the region has always been uninhabited, perhaps utilized only sporadically by temporary or transient populations.

Gran Pajatén has been known to science only since the American explorer Gene Savoy (1965) publicized its discovery by local villagers from Pataz. Most extraordinary about the site was the unexpected sophistication of its architecture given its remote location within one of Earth's most

hostile environments. The complex of at least 26 stone buildings, most of which are circular, crowns a crescent-shaped ridgetop hewn into ascending terraces, skirted by staircases, and entirely paved with slate slabs (Figure 3). Ornamenting the building walls are inlaid slate mosaics depicting a variety of geometric shapes, bird motifs, and rows of human figures each with sculpted sandstone-toned heads (Figures 4 and 5). The mountain slopes below the settlement are also terraced, giving the entire built complex a total extent estimated at 50 ha. The exact size of the settlement remains unknown, but it does not exceed 2 ha.

The interest awakened by the discovery of this "lost city" brought about two government-sponsored expeditions during 1965 and 1966 led by high government officials, including several from Peru's tourism industry sector. The Peruvian military, especially the Air Force, had a celebrated role in clearing the forest from the ridgetop, building a landing site, and providing helicopter access for the government officials. A popular image of Gran Pajatén subsequently reproduced in widely distributed posters and pamphlets shows the Peruvian flag flying atop the ridge where it was planted within Building No. 1, the most prominent construction at the site. As news of the spectacular discovery spread around the globe, Gran Pajatén became a source

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Figure 3. Gran Pajatén's Building No. 1 and its staircase entryway in 1985. Slate-paved plaza and stela in foreground.

of great national pride. Its discovery coincided with then-President Fernando Belaúnde Terry's social programs to promote colonization of the jungle. The site was regarded as monumental testimony to the fortitude and indomitable spirit of the ancient Peruvians who conquered an environment which has repeatedly thwarted contemporary attempts at colonization.

During their brief visits, expedition personnel and supporting Patash villagers cleared vegetation over an estimated area of 6,000 sq m and neatly stacked the collected masonry rubble lying within and around the buildings.

The helicopter-landing site was built on top of buildings at the north end of the site, and a camp with latrines was established along the northeastern edge. Expedition personnel produced several magazine articles, a few brief scientific reports (Pimentel 1967; Rojas 1967), a TV documentary by the British Broadcasting Corporation, and, most importantly, one monograph (Bonavia 1968) describing the results of concurrent archaeological investigations at the site. Always one of Peru's most outspoken scholars, Bonavia was especially critical of expedition activities that damaged the site's constructions. The plan to prepare Gran

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Pajatén for use as a tourist attraction was quickly forgotten in Peru's shifting political landscape.

Between 1966 and 1985, numerous expeditions of tourists and archaeologists visited Gran Pajatén and reported other archaeological sites (Deza 1976; Kauffmann 1980; Leo and Ortiz 1982). Largely due to the efforts of Leo, Ortiz, and other dedicated Peruvian naturalists, the region was set aside as a national park in 1983. The creation of the Rio Abiseo National Park provided a refuge for the endangered yellow-tailed woolly monkey (previously thought extinct) and for other rare and threatened animals and ecological systems. The

park's area of 274,520 ha is delimited by the natural boundaries of the Abiseo River watershed (Mendoza and Lozano 1997). At 4,200 m elevation, its western edge coincides with the political boundary separating La Libertad and San Martín departments (technically referred to as *Regiones*), while its eastern boundary lies 70 linear km distant within San Martín's lowland tropical forest at 500 m elevation. The World Wildlife Fund has helped fund a staff of locally recruited park guards and an administrative director that succeeded in removing livestock and discouraging the frequent burning of the forest. Although the park lies completely within San Martín



Figure 4. Stone mosaic frieze with seated anthropomorphic figures on the exterior walls of Building No. 1, Gran Pajatén.

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Figure 5. Stone mosaic frieze of bird on the exterior walls of Building No. 2, Gran Pajatén.

department, its administrative headquarters was established in the highland village of Pias because all access (and therefore virtually all threats) to the archaeological sites is exclusively through the highland villages of La Libertad. Topographic barriers in the lower Abiseo valley have so far thwarted twentieth-century attempts to create access to Gran Pajatén from San Martín by means other than helicopter.

In 1985, scientists from the University of Colorado–Boulder, Yale University, the University of Trujillo, the Asociación Peruana para la Conservación de la Naturaleza (APECO),

and the National Agrarian University–La Molina began a much publicized, long-term multidisciplinary research project in the park that included the identification of more sites, as well as test excavations at La Playa, Gran Pajatén, Manachaqui Cave, and several others (Lennon et al. 1989; Church 1991, 1994, 1996, 1999). The new data undermine accepted theories that characterize cloud forest sites such as Gran Pajatén as late-fifteenth-century agricultural colonies established by highland populations who were forced into the forest by environmental or demographic stress or were seeking access to lowland crop

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production zones (e.g., Bonavia and Ravines 1967; Bonavia 1968; Kauffmann 1992; Moseley 1992). There is now overwhelming evidence that indigenous cloud forest societies (1) have utilized the forests since 8,000 BC; (2) settled deep within the forest at Gran Pajatén as early as 200 BC; and (3) built many settlements far larger than Gran Pajatén, indicating that a thriving population numbered in the many thousands on the eve of the Spanish conquest. Yet despite the scientific theories devised to explain cloud forest settlement, an aura of mystery, mostly perpetuated by the Peruvian media, continues to surround Gran Pajatén.

Historical Perspective

In response to several different factors, a predicament began to emerge at Pajatén during the early 1990s. An undercurrent of tension between scientists and administrators on the one hand, and local politicians and developers on the other, had already become evident owing to the Ministry of Agriculture's closing of the park to public access in recognition of the region's environmental fragility. Consequently, Gran Pajatén and the Colorado-led research project became "political footballs." During the 1989 elections, political candidates from Pataz drew attention to themselves by denouncing the looting of Gran Pajatén by "foreigners with backpacks." Simultaneously, several original members of the 1960s

government expeditions publicly decried the site's "abandonment" and claimed that the foreign research project had done nothing (e.g., Mejía 1990). Antagonisms escalated as ecotourism entrepreneur teamed with San Martín politicians to undermine APECO's credibility by publicly accusing the association of embezzling research funds (e.g. Radio Programas del Perú 1990). Further, the pro-development faction repeatedly claimed that plant regrowth was destroying Gran Pajatén's buildings, which urgently required cleaning.

The mounting clamor culminated in a 1990 re-enactment of the "conquest" of Gran Pajatén, led again by the Air Force and facilitated by a television crew from the Peruvian weekly television news magazine *Panorama*. Soldiers again cleared the 1960s helicopter pad and other portions of the site, set up camp in the same location, and scraped vegetation off of the building walls with machetes, hands and fingernails. These loud proceedings were witnessed from a distance by Peruvian biologists attempting field studies in the valley below Gran Pajatén. The television spectacular aired on 10 August 1990. Shortly afterward, newspapers informed by the biologists reported the illegal intrusion into the national park, and noted that the expedition not only lacked proper authorization, but failed to notify park administrators (Expreso 1990).

To assess the new damage done by

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the 1990 expedition, the National Institute of Culture (INC) office in Trujillo sent an archaeologist to join park administrators at the site. Among the damages reported at Gran Pajatén, it was observed that some sculptures were indeed missing, and that the sandstone-tenoned heads were eroding rapidly without the cover of vegetation (Briseño 1991). It was also observed that every cleaning of the mosses and lichens removes surface grains from the moist sandstone sculptures. There were, on the other hand, some positive developments about the same time, most notably UNESCO's recognition of Rio Abiseo National Park as a World Heritage Site, first in 1990 for its natural features and again in 1992 for its cultural attributes. In 1991, the University of Colorado and the Fundación Peruana para la Conservación de la Naturaleza (FPCN) jointly published a management plan for Rio Abiseo National Park (University of Colorado and FPCN 1991). This was followed by an international symposium in Lima sponsored by APECO and the World Wildlife Fund. There, scientists and administrators united to discuss the results of the research undertaken since 1985, and make recommendations for the future (Aguilar 1992). Despite these developments, however, Gran Pajatén was increasingly viewed as an untapped economic resource, especially by politicians in San Martín who felt more strongly than ever that their

departmental authorities should be guiding the destiny of the site and the national park.

The dismemberment in 1992 of the Sendero Luminoso and Tupac Amaru revolutionary movements cleared the way for a national economic expansion that further stimulated entrepreneurs and politicians to seek access to the park. Intense political pressure now originated from the department of San Martín, where the regional economy has long been isolated and depressed. Beginning in 1996, the Ministry of Agriculture's Institute of National Resources (INRENA), under the auspices of Peru's National Fund for Natural Protected Areas of the State (PROFONANPE), held a series of meetings and workshops in Lima and San Martín (including both politicians and scientists) aimed at developing a plan for public use of the park (INRENA 1996). The meetings were accompanied by "fact-finding" expeditions to examine Gran Pajatén (Mendoza 1997). These activities culminated in two government-sponsored studies conceived to analyze of all of the factors involved with creating responsible, sustained public access (i.e., tourism) to the park. These were contracted to the nongovernmental organizations ANDESTUDIO (to study the easternmost portion of the park; ANDESTUDIO 1997) and APECO (to study the westernmost portion). I participated in the latter study (APECO 1999) in which I

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advocate a landscape conservation approach (Church 1999).

The Pajatén Predicament

One might hope that Gran Pajatén's dual World Heritage status as a cultural and natural site, protected by both the Peruvian INC and INRENA, would ensure the site's integrity in the face of a wide variety of threats. However, the INC and Ministry of Agriculture have not communicated effectively with one another with regard to granting access to archaeological sites and development planning. The Ministry of Agriculture, in the form of INRENA with PROFONANPE, has taken the lead in terms of planning because it is simply better equipped to do so. This seems appropriate since Gran Pajatén has certainly benefited from the park's underdeveloped, but nominally protective, infrastructure. Due to lack of governmental support, Peru's INC central office with its appointed staff of archaeologists has historically been unstable, and therefore unable to maintain long-term conservation initiatives. However, neither INRENA nor the INC's San Martín office maintain staff archaeologists, and there is no clear legal mechanism to govern the quality of the cultural resource management so critical to the process underway. Finally, a latent threat exists in Peru's own Ministry of Industry and Tourism's 1997 mandate to generate revenue from the nation's cultural resource assets.

Some conflicts that threaten site conservation in the Rio Abiseo National Park are more imagined than real, yet even false perceptions can inflict damage. Many people and institutions see the problem of prohibited public access as residing in a small, selfish group of APECO and FPCN conservationists trying to prevent the public from enjoying its rightful access to the park. Actually, the founders of APECO foresaw the park's tourism potential (Leo and Ortiz 1982), and conservationists now struggle mostly to prevent the kinds of thoughtless atrocities committed by past expeditions. The event with greatest potential for negative impact was the 1997 relocation of the park's administrative headquarters from highland Pias, La Libertad, to Juanjuí, San Martín, at the behest of San Martín politicians. As a consequence of weakened vigilance at the western boundary, consulting scientists in 1998 encountered cattle grazing among the archaeological ruins at 2,650 m elevation, deep within the park (APECO 1999).

San Martín and its regional INC office views itself as engaged in a struggle for control of the park with the INC's La Libertad office. The conflict is one manifestation of the wide political rift between these two departments which were to be administratively joined in the early 1990s under Peru's "regionalization" plan—until San Martín reasserted its autonomy in a public referendum.

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Opponents of the plan argued that the administrative coupling made no sense given the lack of economic and transportation linkages. In this politicized context, Mendoza's (1994, 1997) repeated assertions that the ancient inhabitants of Gran Pajatén spoke the language of early historic lowland (San Martín) Cholón Indians seems to be a reaction to the perception of La Libertad's historical domination of political, economic, and cultural affairs. Mendoza's assertion contradicts more popular interpretations of cloud forest occupations as colonization by highland Quechua-speakers (from La Libertad). The desire to lay claim to the site's ancestry, as well as to its present administration, reflects the intense feelings of national and regional pride connected with Gran Pajatén. Actually, the INC La Libertad office has traditionally administered projects in the Rio Abiseo National Park at the request of investigators because research projects are based at coastal universities in La Libertad and Lima. Most importantly, however, scientists are forced by geographic reality to enter the park from the western (La Libertad) side. From the coast it takes four travel-days by air, car, horseback, and foot, not counting days necessary for staging activities in Pataz or Pias. Construction of a road into the park is out of the question for reasons well-known to all but the most obdurate pro-development advocates. The upper

Montecristo Valley's high altitude, capricious weather, lack of appropriate landing locations, and fragile ecology preclude systematic helicopter access. It remains to be seen how San Martín will administer conservation activities and regulate entry while being denied direct access to Gran Pajatén by immutable topography.

From a technical standpoint, Gran Pajatén's predicament is even thornier. Pro-development factions, backed by the popular media, have perpetuated the idea that it is better to cut the vegetation off of the ruins rather than let it recover from its 1965-66 shearing. However, botanist Kenneth Young, who is familiar with the park, observes that the secondary regrowth is dominated by crowded stands of bamboo and light-demanding shrubs with voluminous root systems. These systems tend to penetrate and burst the masonry walls of archaeological structures. Presently, Gran Pajatén's primary constructions are in dire need of emergency stabilization. Subsequent maintenance may require that a resident caretaker cut the bamboo and shrubs constantly, allowing only the growth of strategic tree species that will restore the forest canopy. However, maintaining an individual and his or her family in such an isolated place for extended periods of time may not be practical for many reasons. Strategically important sectors of the site must be covered with roofs that can withstand exposure to severe weather.

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With a slate pavement and an elaborate covered drainage system, Gran Pajatén was built to shed water efficiently. The drainage system might be restored, but the site's slate covering is brittle, and the deterioration of passages and stairways is accelerating with the passage of visitors with heavy footgear. Further damage might be avoided by constructing alternative access or elevated walkways.

Most troublesome of all, how will access and visitation to the sites be effectively controlled if vigilance is not based at the point of greatest threat to the park's resources (i.e., highland La Libertad)? The recently televised scientific recovery of Chachapoyas mummies from cliff tombs at nearby Lake of the Condors has stimulated great public interest in cloud forest

antiquities. Fortunately, looters have so far overlooked many of the park's vulnerable antiquities that remain *in situ*. What has kept looters at bay, and what will most likely keep significant numbers of tourists away indefinitely, is the park's remote location. The question then remains: Who will provide the large sum of money required to deal with Gran Pajatén's urgent conservation needs given the complex political landscape and the unlikely probability of recovering the investment through a viable tourism concession? Without the immediate implementation of a cautious conservation program, Gran Pajatén will suffer inevitable disintegration through a tragic combination of neglect and more of the same kinds of abuse that have characterized its recent history.

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