

30 September 2019

Propuesta de Ponencia Libre, X Simposio de la Sociedad Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Historia Ambiental, Quito, Ecuador 2020

Moisés Bertoni and Environmental Conservation in Paraguay, 1887-1914

Chris McQuilkin, PhD Student, University of California, Santa Barbara, United States.

cmcquilkin@ucsb.edu

Lineas temáticas: historia del clima, historia de animales, plantas y bosques

In 1901 the Swiss-Paraguayan scientist Moisés Bertoni published a small pamphlet titled “El cambio de clima en la cuenca del río Paraguay,” in which he warned that rapid deforestation, caused by loggers, ranchers and farmers, was causing dessication that would soon have drastic negative effects on those very same industries, and on Paraguayan society in general. As solutions, he proposed putting an export tax on timber, planting new trees (often of an imported species), and state intervention to halt overlogging. He also called for seasonal bans on burning the forest for agriculture.

I propose to present a paper on Bertoni’s studies of environmental dessication in Paraguay in the early twentieth century, and how his perspective was influenced by emerging conceptions of environmental degradation and conservation in the Río de la Plata basin. The paper will focus on Bertoni’s writings as a starting point to a wider exploration of public debates about conservation, resource extraction and economic growth in Paraguay, drawing on newspapers, agricultural journals, and such government records as are publicly available. The paper will address four main questions: What kinds of agricultural methods did Bertoni consider “modern” and scientific? To what extent, if any, were such ideas and methods institutionalized in universities or educational settings in Paraguay or neighboring countries? To what extent were such methods actually taken up by Paraguayans in this period? And finally, what unintended effects did conservation measures have on the environment of the Paraguay River basin? The research for this paper will be conducted primarily at the Biblioteca Nacional de Agricultura “Moises Bertoni” and the Biblioteca Nacional del Paraguay in Asunción, Paraguay from February to April 2020.

Such a study would contribute to historians’ understanding of the role scientific knowledge and expertise played in Paraguayan society between the War of the Triple Alliance and the Chaco War. Specifically, it would further illuminate the importance of agriculture, silviculture, and cattle breeding in the reconstruction of Paraguay after the devastation of the War of the Triple Alliance. Although historians, notably Gabriela Dalla-Corte Caballero, have shown how the Paraguayan government sold off large tracts of land, especially in the Chaco, to raise revenue after the war, the role of scientific knowledge in changing (or failing to change) practices of agriculture and cattle ranching has been less studied.¹ Likewise, although scholars such as Carlos Pastore and Jan M.G. Kleinpenning have provided detailed studies of agrarian history in Paraguay, less attention has been paid to the intertwined histories of agriculture,

¹ Gabriela Dalla-Corte Caballero, *Empresas y tierras de Carlos Casado en el Chaco paraguayo: historias, negocios y guerras, 1860-1940* (Asunción, Paraguay: Intercontinental Editora, 2012).

agrarian reform, and conservation movements in Paraguay during this period.² Looking at Moisés Bertoni and the agricultural journals he helped to create would help fill these gaps in the literature. Finally, studying Bertoni's work would demonstrate the long history, and controversy, of widespread slash-and-burn agriculture and ranching that is currently under renewed scrutiny in Paraguay, Brazil and elsewhere in the region.

² Carlos Pastore, *La lucha por la tierra en el Paraguay*, 3a edición (Asunción: Intercontinental Editora: 2013 [1949, 1972]); Jan M.G. Kleinpenning, *Rural Paraguay 1870-1963: A Geography of Progress, Plunder and Poverty* (Madrid: Bibliotheca Ibero-Americana, 2009), 2 volumes.