

NARCOS AND THE COCAINE HIPPOS DARK-ECO TOURISM PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore two dimensions of the tourism industry that intersect issues of violence and ecology (dark-eco) on the appearance of a narco-tourism trend in Colombia. The first part of the paper provides a contextualization on the emergence of narco-tourism, to later consider how recent policies and strategies that have tried to erase Pablo Escobar from the tourist industry, create issues of memory towards a violent period that marked Colombian society. This study used a qualitative methodology based on multiple sources to collect data. The process integrates text-film analysis with ethnographic fieldwork that consisted on participatory observation and interviews with tour guides, tourists, scholars, planners and government representatives. The research results show that there is a connection between the Netflix series *Narcos*, dark tourism theory, and the growing supply and demand interaction between tour guides and tourists that commodify a tragic historical period of Colombia. Further, this section examines dark-eco tourism perspectives that relate to the development of a narco-zoo culture in Latin America that started in the end of the 1980s when Escobar smuggled wild animals into Hacienda Napoles. I explore particularly the recent rise of a group of hippopotamuses as tourist attractions, that after Escobar's death escaped to the surrounding areas of the zoo and have been reproducing at alarming rates. This section then analyzes how and why the animals as an invasive species have started to pose great challenges for the community and the environment.

Keywords: Narco-tourism, dark-eco tourism, difficult cultural heritage, commodification, sustainability, ecology, violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

The recent history of Colombia has been marked by the illegal drug trafficking activities of paramilitary groups, guerrillas and mafias. Medellin was the city that became the epicenter of a drug and crime scene in the 80s and 90s in Latin America, turning into one of the most violent places of the world at the time. During the most difficult periods of the narcotraffic war started by the leader of the Medellin Cartel, Pablo Escobar (1949-1993), “the capital of the Antioquia department registered assassinations and kidnappings every day, and by the end of 1991 being one of the most violent years, 6.809 homicides were recorded” (Alonso, 2019). The infamous image of violence, cartels and assassins has hunted the second largest city of

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Colombia for decades, and despite the efforts of the government and locals to leave behind its dark appearance to the outside world, Escobar has remained a symbolic figure of a difficult period, leaving a legacy that has proved impossible to erase. The aim of this paper will be to explore the recent developments of this difficult heritage as tourism because many challenges that deserve consideration by policymakers have emerged. Therefore, by linking the so-called “narco-tours” in Colombia with ecotourism and dark tourism epistemology, I intend to unfold new perspectives on the subject.

By 2015 the tourism industry in Colombia had grown more than 300% in comparison to 10 years before when only around 1,000,000 tourists visited the country. Several political, economic and social factors were influential on the growth of the tourism industry. *Forbes* listed it as “one of the top 10 coolest places to visit,” *The Telegraph* published an article titled: “Colombia from failed state to Latin American Power house,” and *Lonely Planet* included it on its list of “best countries to visit from 2015 to 2018”. The country had transformed along last decade because it managed to find increased political stability, the peace agreements that started talks in 2012 and were later signed in 2016 with FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), economic development, foreign investment and the growing of a middle class became key elements that provided the adequate grounds for the boom of the tourism industry. The most popular destinations became the largest cities: Bogotá, Cartagena and Medellín.

While Colombia started to open again to the world for tourism, some parts of the conflict became a tourist product because of the increased interest of visitors. There is strong evidence that the development of the narco-tourism supply and demand in Colombia is largely attributed to the insanely popular success of *Narcos* on Netflix, the locals confirm it by taking advantage of a business opportunity that keeps changing and adapting to the market. For example, Popeye-Jhon Jairo Velásquez Vásquez (the closest and worst hit man of Escobar that died in 2020) became a tour guide and YouTube celebrity after he was released from jail in 2014. He capitalized not only fame in the media but also wrote 2 books about his story. Even today, after the government prohibited the tours in 2018, it is possible to book online activities where tourists will explore Escobar's old territories or join a history turnaround in his hometown. Countless tours capitalize on the popularity that *Narcos* and Escobar as a figure of popular culture brought to Colombia. The range is wide and for different tastes, some examples include: “How to make cocaine” tours, visiting places where the Medellín Cartel executed enemies, jails, Escobar's mansions, his grave and general tragic historical places.

The first questions we should ask at this stage in this particular case study: Are people developing dark tourist places in relation to Escobar stories to heighten the understanding of the circumstances surrounding his emergence as a symbol of tragedy to educate? Are these emerging narratives a subversion to the state established absent memorability? Or, is the disclosure of this phenomena simply related to profit by taking the opportunity to promote a tourist site that satisfies some morbid curiosity? What are the implications and issues from leaving these now illegal tours, tv shows and dramas of popular culture as the only narratives behind this period of history? And, why Escobar's legacy has shaped into dark-eco tourism and how actions of the past (narco-zoos) are affecting the environment and the communities today? While some tour operators and other voices on the matter seem to have no concern about manipulating and even fabricating facts to up the gore factor for dramatic effect, others arguably approach sensitive subjects such as genocide, terrorism, and violence with the care and gravitas they deserve.

2. BACKGROUND

Although the story of Pablo Escobar is complex, multidimensional and impossible to grasp in just a few paragraphs, it is important to include in this section some of the well-known facts about his life to understand why he is such a controversial and important figure in Colombian history. He was born in 1949 in Rio Negro Antioquia, a small town near Medellin. “My father grew up in a family that was poor and modest, by the 1960s he moved to Medellin and started to get involved with criminal activities, in the 1970s he started dealing marihuana which gave him the foundations in cash and contacts for the later swiipe to the cocaine business that was booming in the US market” (Escobar, 2014).

Eventually, his vision and cold-bloodedness resulted in him holding a monopoly of the cocaine trade and he founded the Medellin Cartel, an organized network of cocaine smugglers, producers and suppliers. His dealings made him one of the richest men of the world in the 1980s-1990s and the wealthiest criminal that ever existed, with a net worth of approximately 30 billion US dollars. In the 1980s Escobar managed to get involved with Colombian politics and launched a campaign targeting the economically vulnerable communities of Medellin, where he invested a large part of his fortune on housing and social projects that eventually gave him an enormous popularity that helped him get elected for congress. His position as deputy was called into question by Rodrigo Lara (the minister of justice), who denounced him as a criminal. After being confronted by the Colombian institutions Escobar aborted his political pursuits and declared war on the government, starting one of the darkest periods in Colombian history. “The first action of this war was to order the assassination of Rodrigo Lara in 1984” (Velazquez, 2016).

On the following years, Escobar’s criminal acts brought terror to Medellin and Colombian society, ordering the murder of whoever stood on his way, including journalists, politicians, lawyers, cops, other criminals, etc. During this period, many civilians were collateral victims of his acts of violence, especially when he started to set off bombs around the cities on public spaces. “In 1991, Pablo agreed to surrender to the authorities with the condition that he would not be extradited to an US jail, negotiating also that he would be imprisoned in La Catedral, a strategically placed building of his own construction where he spent almost a year” (Salazar, 2012). During that period, he was still able to run the cocaine business; constantly receiving visits of family members, criminals, lieutenants, politicians, prostitutes and criminals of all walks of life. After his wanderings filtered in the media he was warned of a possible transfer to another prison, so he escaped. His last days were ruled by an 18-month persecution that involved the military, the police forces, the DEA (U.S. drug enforcement administration) and members of rival cartels that finally led to his death. Escobar was shot by the Colombian armed forces on December 1993 in one of his hideouts in Medellin, ending a period of horror that would reproduce to exhaustion on the coming decades in popular media such as novels (narco-novels), songs (narco-carrilera), documentaries, books, movies, art installations, comic books and ultimately tourism which is the main concern of this paper.

3. METHODOLOGY

The overall methodology of this paper is qualitative research through ethnography and case study analysis. The reason for choosing this method in the framework of this research is that dark-eco tourism as proposed needs to be tackled within its real-life context, especially because the boundaries between the phenomena studied are not clearly evident. Thus, multiple sources of indication with data needing to converge are required as a heuristic method to gain in-depth

understanding. The multiple dimensions of the narco-tourism phenomena are explored through the lens of dark tourism and ecotourism (separately), to later understand if there is an intersection of these two dimensions. The process to collect data includes ethnographic fieldwork that uses formal and semi-structured interviews with tour guides, scholars, planners, consultants; and a more informal and conversational approach to interview tourists and community members when necessary. I also used participatory observation to understand the setting and design of the tours (sites), while assessing the behaviors and motivations of tourists and tour guides. My role in the process was that of an observer-as-participant (video, photographs and field notes were used to collect data for further analysis).

The proposed multidisciplinary methodological framework, that focuses on the relationship of ecology and violence in dark-eco tourism use a multi-sided approach that will fundamentally mix three mechanisms as a research strategy:

- Participant observation, field notes and visual data collection (photos and video)
- Oral Interviews that used structured and semi-structured interviews about life history and experience reports
- Bibliographical and documentary research (audiovisual and text analysis)

Following this triangulation in collecting and presenting data, the idea will be to understand in detail the relevant relationships, plurality of perspectives and also interpretations and meanings regarding these tours as dark-eco tourism.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. The Paradox: Deletion Policies and the Construction of Memory

Nowadays, Medellin is often singled out as a changed and prosperous city, driving a large extent of Colombia's economy. “The city has made huge efforts to be positioned as an example of innovation and social inclusiveness in Latin America, achieving great transformations that dwell on infrastructure, security and sociocultural dimensions” (Alonso, 2019). The radical change of the city took many years to achieve and great efforts from the community and the local government proved to be effective on many fronts. The tourism industry has been one of the engines for progress, trying to reposition the image of the city on positive grounds. Thus, many policies and strategies have tried to remove the image of Escobar from the context of the heritage of the city. Yet, the increasing interest of tourists on “narco- tours” or “Pablo-tours” has continued to be a profitable way to make a living for many locals, so this phenomenon has continued to expand in the surroundings.

In September 2018, as one of the first actions that took place against the “narco-tour” trend, officials raided and subsequently closed in an exclusive sector of the city the Pablo Escobar Museum. The museum was run by Roberto Escobar, the older brother of the drug lord who was also the accountant and bookkeeper of the Medellin Cartel.

Researcher notes-10/06/2018

On arrival, we are welcomed by Roberto himself with a greeting: “welcome to our museum, welcome to our story.” The premises have a Pablo imitator that would happily pose for pictures, for 30 US dollars entry fee (a very expensive price indicating that the target customers are foreign, not local), we have the chance to move around some secret passageways installed in the house that show how Pablo (or “El Patron” as he was commonly known) used to be always ready to escape from the authorities in all of his properties. Bizarre and eccentric memorabilia

of personal items are there for display, where thousands of homicides and horrors are romanticized and sweetened through an empty rhetoric that is starting to cause discomfort among the community. Yet, the place has become a honeypot for international tourists.

Tours like the one just mentioned on the narco-tourism industry, made the authorities of the city to start to take action against the phenomena. Several debates were held with regard the difficult heritage of Medellin and the government decided to declare a war on this type of narratives. On the 22 of February 2019, the city administration decided to demolish the Monaco building, a luxury eight floors structure where Escobar lived with his family for many years, because it also became a place of pilgrimage for those interested in his life. Federico Gutierrez, the mayor of the city at that moment, stated that: “drug lords are not heroes nor legends, therefore it is time to commemorate the victims and not the perpetrators” (Betancur, 2020). After the symbolic destruction of the Monaco building, the “Memorial Park Inflection” was inaugurated two years later in the same location.

Researcher Notes-10/12/2021

Memorial Park Inflection. The park design uses a large black stone wall of 70 meters long perforated by 46,612 small holes that at night are illuminated; these perforations intend to represent the number of victims of narcotraffic in Colombia. On the other side of the black wall, the visitor finds the chronological line of horror, an installation that aims to portray the 208 violent events attributed to the narcotraffic war period that took place between 1983 and 1994 in Medellin and Bogota. There is an effort of resignification of the place. One of the neighbors told me that the change is positive, apparently many tourists are still coming but they leave with a different message. There is no mention of Pablo Escobar whatsoever. The only symbolic reference to that past are some debris left from the demolition.

In 2019, the local government also started the project: “Medellin embraces history.” This new plan of memorialization was financed by the largest business group sectors and the Medellin town hall, boosting a narrative that focuses on the victims of the conflict only. However, some critical voices have described the project as having an absence of a call for plurality, where the nature of the resources used have been questioned, calling it “an initiative that is contested in between a memory gamble and an advertising campaign” (Parrado and Arias, 2019). One of the most debated sides of the plan has been the link between the local government and the private sector, not only because the investment of corporations represents the voice of a sector of society that claims to be on “the right side of the story,” but also because it simplifies the relation of the victims and the perpetrators in a period of history, where there are still many wounded versions that need to be healed.

Therefore, the discourse created around an “official memory” became problematic because it was established under the narrative of a right-wing government and a private sector that represents only the feelings of the rich. But, if the process of memory that is taking place was more on the objective side of a wide spectrum, it should talk of narcotraffic as a phenomenon that permeated all segments of society, including the middle and poor classes. Laura Gallego, director of the Center for Political Analysis in the Eafit University believes that: “The investment of the private sector is not the real problem, but instead the political signature of the administration that started the project because a change of administration could destroy the continuity as it happened many times; then the right approach would be to make an exercise of memory that could be sustainable in the long term.”

In a recent interview I did to Franz Rodriguez Waldron, a political science expert that works in the current city administration in topics related to memory, peace and conflict, he explained that: “one of the issues of the Medellin Embrace History project was that it tried to focus the memorialization only on the victim’s perspective, which is good to have. However, wiping out the perpetrators completely creates an awkward narrative, leaving the understanding of the events incomplete”. For example, he mentioned that the Museo Casa de la Memoria (the memory center of Medellin) also hardly mentions Pablo Escobar, which according to recent research was the most searched word on Google by tourists. While in Medellin, I also discovered that some tour guides that were sponsored by the government developed the “do not say the name tours,” focusing only on the narratives of the victims in places that hold violent significance by purposefully avoiding any mention of drug lords.

This absence of the perpetrator in the narrative has resulted in the lack of a deeper understanding of the narco-culture in Colombia. The narco phenomena have its roots as a process where there was an advance of a rural war to the metropolis. Thus, in a society with a very marked division where the poor have always been segregated from the social structure with a lack of access to education, housing, healthcare and basic needs, some individuals found in the drug business and criminality an expressway to climb up in the social ladder, with all the dramatic consequences that this eventually caused. Hence, narcotraffic needs to be understood also as a development of class struggle where the poor fight the establishment, its complexity goes beyond victim and victimizer as some memorials and tours are resembling the topic.

Paradoxically, the government obsession on obliterating the image and legacy of Pablo Escobar in the official discourse of memory has resulted in a tourist industry that on the peripheries has created its own narrative of the events. Where many stories tightly framed for time and space keep emerging with a variety of points of view that have been exploited to exhaustion by some members of the community and popular culture. Some of these voices are challenging roles of victims and perpetrators, where not only the official numbers of homicides have started to be questioned, but also several of the surfacing stories are causing discrepancies on social class divisions. What is true to some is a lie to others, where a hero and antihero or evil and god ambivalence has become the pattern. What these conflicts of perception show is that mediating narcotraffic related issues in Colombia is an undergoing process. Escobar is just a mythicized character, he did not start the business of drug trafficking and his death certainly did not end it, Colombia is still a violent country and the main producer and exporter of cocaine to the world.

4.2. Role of the Media on the Emergence of Narco-Dark Tourism

Since the Netflix series first season *Narcos* was launched with certain global success in 2015, the city of Medellin has been increasingly experiencing the appearance of narco-tours that keep emerging in different forms and shapes. Season 1 and 2 of the series are chronicles of the life of Escobar from the late 1970s when he first began manufacturing and exporting cocaine to December 1993, when he died after escaping La Catedral prison. The show portrays a turbulent period in the political and social environment of Colombia within the context of a rise of violence and Escobar's relationship to these events.

The first theoretical approach I will explore to correlate *Narcos* with an unusual rise in tourism in Medellín will be the concept that relates death, fear and dark tourism, which can be defined as “the association between a tourist site, attraction or experience and death, disaster or suffering” (Sharpley and Stone, 2009). Because dark tourism involves several theoretical

vectors of memory, history, difficult heritage, etc. In this section I will center my scope on perspectives that relate to the role of the media, the spectacularity of death, and theatricality and spectatorship. Lennon and Foley emphasized when they introduced the concept of dark tourism, on how there is a direct link between mass media, communications and technology with the phenomena:

“Our thesis is that global communication and technologies are inherent in the events which are associated with a dark tourism product and are present in the representation of the events for visitors at the site itself. Global communication and technologies have shaped the perception of what are the significant sites in the political history of the twentieth century. Undoubtedly some sites may possess significance, but have not received attention from cinematic or televisual media, the principal communicators of these messages to individuals worldwide” (Lennon and Foley, 2000).

In the quote above, the authors suggest that the influence of the media and technology upon public awareness and perception of events directly affects the consumption of tourism related to death and suffering by increasing the interest of visitors at a global scale. Hence, communications and technology have the power to contextualize events diverse in place and time providing a touchstone for a form of media commodity directly related to the rise of the dark tourism phenomena. As sites become newsworthy, with narratives that are also buzzworthy as the locations of dramatic deaths, conflict and/or suffering, the media can boost the interest of a place in popular culture. This perspective introduced by Lennon and Foley give us an insight on why places like the jail where Escobar was imprisoned, many of his properties, where he was killed, his hippos, and so on, eventually became tourist attractions.

4.2.1. Spectacularity of Death

While comparing contemporary and historical outlooks on mortality and pilgrimage, in “Dark Tourism in an age of spectacular Death” (Stone, 2018), the author analyses how humans construct socio-cultural processes that include rituals, ceremonies or “deathscapes” (memorials of war, cemeteries, shrines, battlefields, etc.) that have changed among history and cultures to try to make sense of the unknown, exposing how mortality was and still is an uninterrupted task of the living. For instance, religions developed a role to make death endurable in life creating an afterlife. However, in contemporary societies secularization has seen an increase because of vectors of consumption, technology and economy, where death has been sequestered, resulting in the appearance of contemporary deathscapes that are intrinsic to dark tourism sites where the death of others is commodified as spectacle.

In a similar line of analysis of death, Zygmunt Bauman theorizes “how we cope with death anxieties in a contemporary liquid modernity where a shift from a solid (past) state occurred. Mortality is then the greatest fear of all” (Bauman, 2000). Therefore, through social and cultural structures we have suppressed the potentially destructive features of death anxieties. Bauman argues that while we immerse more and more in an unattainable consumer culture, we suppress death anxieties by preoccupying ourselves with a consumption related conduct. Associated to these views, dark tourism sites and experiences have the power to reflect particular features in multiple cultures, where exploring sites of death, violence and trauma can release anxieties (past and present), but it can also relate to those new platforms or spaces to mourn, cope and deal with trauma in contemporary societies, as suggested by Bauman and Stone. While new forms of interaction with death that can be commodified and/or consumed surface, it remains important to observe and analyze closely the distinction of dark tourism sites to better

understand the complex associations between the sites, the tourist experience and the culture where they take place

The rise of *Narcos* on Netflix was interesting to see because the series not only opened death-related anxieties of violence that are attached to a whole generation, but it also unfolded spaces for discussion of historical memory (in positive terms) of that difficult past. Yet, after the boom of the tourist industry and the exchange of dialogues that were happening, some sectors of society started to try to control the narratives emerging. Although, Colombian television series “Escobar El Patron del Mal” and other documentaries brought previous attention to the period, *Narcos* placed the story on a global (spectacular) scale that made old wounds reopen and impossible to hide by the sudden surge of international visitors.

As a part of this spectacularization of death and tragedy in media platforms and tours in contemporary societies, dark tourism mediates death as a visual signifier of mortality and difficult heritage. The history of Escobar can symbolize a dissonant heritage of opinions, depending on different factors of class, education, or subjective perception of the events. While for some he was a type of Robin Hood that helped build houses and gave a lot to the poor, for others he was an evil figure and vicious assassin. Tunbridge and Ashworth’s conceptualizations of dissonant heritage and, subsequently, of dissonant heritage tourism become relevant to the current discussion. For the authors, “dissonance is a tension or conflict inherent to the nature of all heritage, which is caused by the simultaneous holding of mutually inconsistent attitudes and behavior among heritage institutions, heritage users and other stakeholders in the process of heritage production and consumption” (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996). Thus, the management or failure to manage (like the narco-tours emerging) of an atrocity site or narrative will impact not only the perpetrators, survivors and their families, but also the public memory of a tragic event. If we relate this theory with the narco-tours, it becomes clear that Pablo Escobar is a dissonant figure of heritage in Colombia, and as the authors explain, this is an essential natural feature of all difficult heritage, so basically those voices, narratives and perspectives that heroize and commodify his image will not disappear just because the government wants them to. His image has gone from promotion to an attempt of erasure and from a type of fascination to a denial. However, as an important piece of Colombian history, public entities are required to get involved in the management of the narratives to achieve some balance and to educate.

The significance of these sites to the community may change over time as a healing process progresses. The preservation of difficult heritage sites of violence is considered important not only for maintaining physical evidence, but also for the interpretation of the atrocities and the suffering. Therefore, allowing or not allowing spaces as “deathscapes” can somehow have an impact in a culture or society. Confronting “death anxieties” or consuming/visiting dark tourism “deathscapes” could help revive, rediscover and/or reinvent the social construction of death positively or negatively depending on the context this construction takes place.

4.2.2. Theatricality in Tourism of Violence and Suffering

Developing an idea of dark tourism that centers around the aestheticization and theatricality of death by involving an audience (the tourist) and the absent others (victims and/or perpetrators of violence-death). It has been argued that: “dark tourist sites shape a relationship with distant (sometimes closer) suffering by providing subjective perceptions that are manipulated by creating an atmosphere or ethos. Thus, the progress of the phenomena has the potential through a process of interaction to convey either self-serving voyeurism or socially responsible witnessing” (Wills, 2014). This ambivalence lies at the center of the often-controversial

development of different and multifaceted emerging forms of tourism that relate to suffering and violence, like the case study of this paper.

The contradiction of representing histories that often do not want to be presented (like the narco-tours that bring back a past that many Colombians want to forget in Medellín), is that the deceased (Escobar and often the victims) are given presence in multiple scenarios that might be very distant from reality and can take unimaginable shapes and forms (villain, hero, etc.). Therefore, through creating, affecting or pretending a dialogical environment where the dead are given presence, these tours activate a performance of phantasmal bodies through images, actors, props, stories, pictures, clothes, buildings, etc. Theatricality in dark tourism has then the capacity to unlock a sense of commemoration with ethical or unethical foundations towards tragic events. Through a constructed experience, the tourists can appropriate, re-interpret or reinvent pieces of history. Because of the particularity of this case study, where there are multiple suppliers, narratives and an absent government voice, the collective imaginary, the media and popular culture have played an important role in the transmission of the memories. The chronicles in this story are becoming increasingly ethically fragile, where heroizing the perpetrators of violence (as protagonists) has been common ground, with almost nonexistent direct representations of a relation between perpetrators and the victims in the official discourse. To understand the emergence of the narco-tourism trend in Colombia, it is important to also analyze how a narco-culture has permeated multiple sectors of society.

4.3. Narco-Culture

The reconstruction of a memory of the violence caused by narcotraffic in Colombia has been a very difficult process, mostly, because it is a narrative that has been tried to be excluded from Colombian history, and also because it is a traumatic period that has not been dealt with, so the wounds are still open. To a great extent the problem is the silence created around narcotraffic. Unlike other armed conflicts in Colombia there is not an organization of the victims of narcotraffic, like for example the victims of the paramilitary or guerillas groups.

In January 2022 I interviewed Omar Rincón², an academic and television critic that has written extensively on the subject. We discussed why the narratives of the “narco” in Colombia need to be extended and not prohibited. For Omar, the main issue has been that we have intended to vindicate the “narco” as the axis that creates all that is bad in our country. And, we constantly try to deny to ourselves that the “narco” not only marks our history but also defines and divides many aspects of our society.

Researcher Question: Colombian society has a great challenge, particularly on how to construct a memory around all that is part of the narcotraffic events, what do you think is the best approach and what elements are important to consider?

Omar Answer: Constructing memory is a complex process because there is never a certainty, it is a clash of narratives, often a production of fiction. Until now, what we have tried is to contend what is “narco” as an esthetic narrative, as a tale of Colombian dignity, as a story of Pablo Escobar, as a saga of the poor accessing the capitalist system, as a tale of the young finding a way of life, as a tale of an extreme excess, like removing the story that tell us everything under any circumstance is valid no matter the consequences even if is violent. We want to exclude those stories from Colombian history and we want to justify the narco as the

²Omar Rincón is a lecturer at the University of the Andes in Bogota Colombia. He has a PhD in Human and Social Sciences from the National University of Colombia and is a television critic for: El Tiempo newspaper.

only ill element: There are not paramilitary groups, there are narcos, there are not guerrillas, there are narcos, there is not corruption, there are not bad politicians, there are narcos. So, what we have is a bipolarity that is very complicated, because for all our problems what is narco works as a scapegoat, but for all what it means to build a new country and future, it is not.

Then, what we have is an official story of what is narco, fabricated by the police, by the government. And, what this official story tells us is that whatever is related to the “narco” is to blame for everything that is ill in Colombia. On the other hand, we have the story of the narco constructed by the popular culture, narco-dramas, literature, art and music where the narco starts to be a popular hero that managed to defeat the class structure established by the capitalist system, despite the exclusion of the system. We have this popular tale of the narco as the hero of the suburbs, it gave work, money, and made possible the cultural consumption. I think what we have to do is to amplify and expand the narratives beyond these two scenarios. We need more journalists, academics, entrepreneurs, women, etc. We need to explore storylines on the subject in every possible layer.

I think that the current intention to monopolize the narratives around narco-culture and history is a problem, not only because it doesn't work, but also because it kills the possibility of finding many issues that are alive. There are many discourses and perspectives to be explored, and the best way to move on is to acknowledge that the narco-culture not only marked our history, but also determines many aspects of our society, for example on how it linked us to the world on a global scale and the capitalist system.

R.Q: Do you think that what we assume as “narco” in Colombia has turned out to be a marketing slogan that is leaving out other sectors of society that are also part of criminality? I mean the word narco emphasizes the traffic of narcotics, but by blaming everything on this issue we are censoring other criminalities from the truth, and even sectors of society that are supposed to be on legality but benefit from this typecasting of narcos as the only problematic that the country has?

O.A: What is narco has many biases, is an adjective of class. In Colombia we have adopted the terminology to describe something or someone that has bad taste, of a lower class, poor, criminal, illegal, paraco (paramilitary); there is a sense of otherness from them and me, because I'm honest, the good guy of the story. From that emerge terminologies like narco-movies, narco-tours, narco-zoos, narco-architecture, narco-women, narco-everything. Thus, is an adjective to catalog negatively that “other” and it reproduces a classist system that has marked Colombia historically. A system that allows some to believe that they are the good ones because of their social rank, and just because of that, they can classify others as bad people, which as you and me know is more than often very distant from reality.

R.Q: How can we transform the narrative of what is narco to a positive scenario of the peace that we are trying to achieve?

A.O: The current discourse is mostly constructed for the media and divisive, bipolar, dualistic of the good and the bad. First, I think that in Colombia we all should assume some layers of goodness and badness in this problematic. Basically, we need to amplify the narratives. The only option we have is that of not forgetting and expose the variety of stories that inhabit our past. Second, deconstruct the “Subjective” truths as the absolute facts. Thinking that other actors don't have other realities that deserve to be heard is a mistake. Third, inhabit all the ambiguities of this part of our story. Fourth, we need to start looking for different mechanisms

of expression. Fifth, create a collective dialogue in our society where we can start to recognize everyone as a part of the story and the public dialogues. Importantly then, by having public dialogues and a diversity of narratives, we can start to assume collectively what we have constructed as a society (the good and the bad), which would eventually take us to finally accept that what is narco, the war and violence inhabit us. With regard to peace, we need to assume that this is a narrative of a future that we need to build. Then this is a story that is not just about the past. Peace needs to be about new stories of a collective coexistence.

This section of the paper has systematically explored theories and perspectives that provide a better understanding behind the emergence of narco-tours that have been taking place in Colombia. I have presented different key concepts with regard to tourism of tragedy and violence. In particular, I consider the role of the media as a spectacle by exposing how Narcos the series opened up an unwelcome past of an important historical period. While Medellin and Colombia made a lot of progress in the last decades, the city and the country still face violence, drug production and trade that are still a reality. Therefore, I suggest that the disclosure of these tours is the result not only of the impact of technology and communications in popular culture, but is also a way of coping with death anxieties related to past traumatic events in the community that are unresolved.

As I have shown, the narco-culture in Colombia has developed into many complex dark tourist (difficult heritage) forms that pose a variety of issues and challenges in the construction of memory towards an unwanted difficult past. While the legacy of Pablo Escobar has filtered multiple dimensions of Colombian society, unexpectedly, some of the illegal actions that he took on the 1990s, would also radically impact (negatively) in the coming decades the ecosystems of Puerto Triunfo Antioquia. The following section will explore how and why the “so-called” narco-culture has evolved as dark-eco tourism, showing that in this particular case, the difficult heritage left surpassed the human dimension and also permeated non-human animals and the natural environment.

4.4. The Cocaine Hippos: Unnatural Terror or the New Tourist Attraction?

At the height of his power, Escobar acquired a large piece of land in Puerto Triunfo (Antioquia Department) covering 20 km² (8 sq mi). Located approximately 150 km east of Medellin and 259 km northwest of Bogota, the property worked as a strategic point for the drug trade business. Tucked between mountains, Pablo’s Estate (Hacienda Napoles) included an enormous Spanish colonial house, a sculpture park, a soccer field, dinosaur statues, artificial lakes, a bullfighting arena, a classic car collection, tennis courts, an airstrip, and a private zoo of illegally imported animals.

Including giraffes, rhinos, camels, elephants, kangaroos, hippopotamus and other exotic animals, the zoo safari was open for public access and soon became a very popular tourist attraction in the 80s and 90s in Colombia. After Escobar’s death in 1993, the property went on a decline and most of the animals were confiscated and sent to zoos in Bogota and Medellin. However, “some of the animals stayed in the land, and most importantly four hippopotamuses (one male and three females) that were too unwieldy, too heavy and too dangerous to move, eventually escaped into the wild and have since reproduced to an uncontrolled scale of approximately 80 to 120” (Lopez, 2021). In 2011, The National Geographic Channel launched the TV series *The Cocaine Hippos*. Describing that the natural habitat of the animal is limited to sub-Saharan Africa and how they had become an invasive species in Colombia, also explaining that as the third largest terrestrial animal and being very territorial, hippos are

extremely dangerous and aggressive towards humans. The documentary got a lot of attention in Colombia and not only alerted people of the possible dangers it represented for those living in the surroundings, but it also brought to the spotlight ecological issues that presented the animal as a threat to native species and ecosystems.

In 2006, some of the locals had already started to report the authorities of the free wanderings of the hippos that had escaped Hacienda Napoles, but the first efforts to contain them were unsuccessful. “By 2009, the then environmental minister Carlos Costa started to consider what to do, at first relocation of the hippos was considered. However, finding a new home for such a large number of big mammals with a limited budget became an impossible task. Thus, the government decided to hire a hunter to kill them. The large male (Pepe) was the first one to be shot and a further necropsy of the animal showed that this hippo had also been the target of the locals (they found several bullets of caliber 22 and shotgun on the corpse), the analysis also revealed that the animal was a disease carrier and had been exposed to leptospirosis, posing a threat to public health and the local fauna” (The Cocaine Hippos, 34:49).

Although the authorities claimed that the necropsy of the corpse showed that they took the right decision, when word got out to the public about what had been done, furor arose. Days later a picture filtered in the media showing soldiers around the dead animal with a victory look, provoking a greater opposition in Colombian society that stopped further hunting of other hippos. Eventually, the magnification of the event in the media created an environmental movement that gave these hippos so much attention that they achieved a kind of “celebrity status” that ultimately turned them “again” into a tourist attraction.

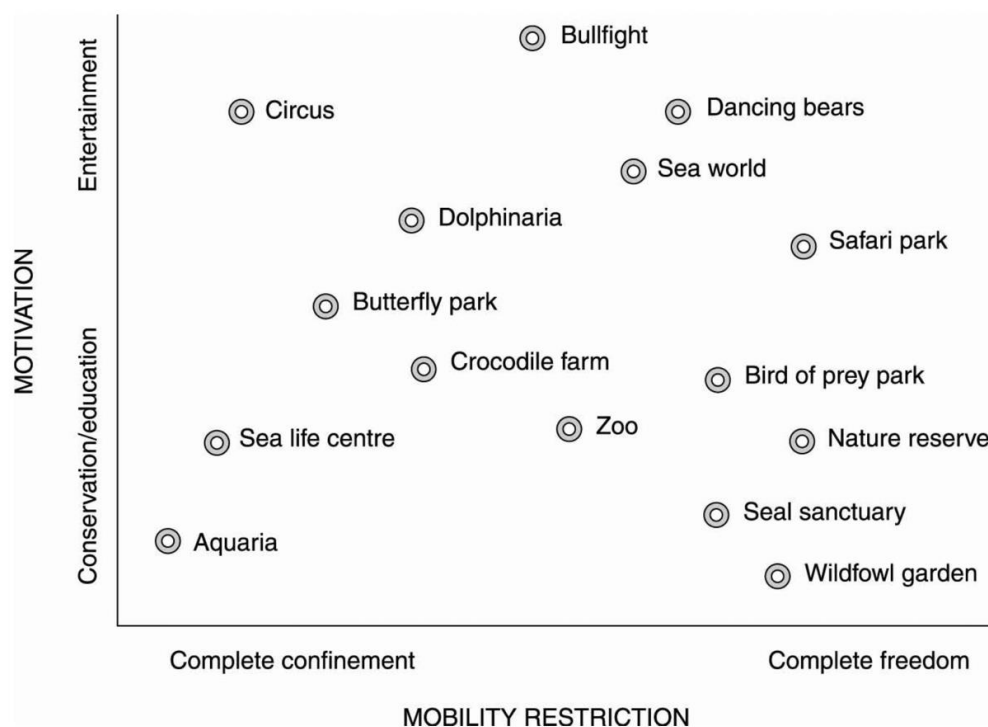
Ironically, the hippos brought illicitly by Pablo Escobar to Colombia became also a tourist product that was influenced by the mass media. The similarities between “Pepe” (the male hippo hunted) and Escobar are impossible to ignore: both escaped a confinement (jail-zoo), both were hunted by the authorities, and equally the public perception of them still represents a binary contradiction of love and hate. Importantly then, this paper will now analyze how these hippos have been a part of a dark-eco tourism industry in two different stages. At first, the animals were smuggled illegally to Colombia to be confined in a zoo. Later, they escaped and remained free in the wild and practically unnoticed until they achieved fame, an event that paradoxically not only put them in between life and death but also as a daily product of the tourist gaze.

The aim of this section will be to analyze two roles of these hippos in two different periods that relate them to tourism as an industry. “The variety of these tourist forms range from those that offer no freedom, to a complete freedom in an association with those that have a conservation and education mandate contrasted with those that are purely for entertainment” (Fennell, 2012).

The figure 1 presents a division and categorization of the animals that humans capture to later present in a variety of different forms to the public for tourism. Thus, if we locate the hippos first role in the tourism industry in this spectrum, we can conclude that when they were at the zoo, the animals were in a position where they had a moderate mobility restriction with layers of education and conservation but also of entertainment. However, after some of the hippos escaped to the nearby areas, they changed their position into a wildlife viewing category. This differentiation becomes important because the Hippos went from a situation where they were safe and fed (but enclosed) to one of freedom and vulnerability, as these hippos in the wild have suffered not only the aggression of the government but also of some of the locals that live nearby because they fear them. By exposing this division, I do not aim to define one position

as better than the other one, since the recent tourist attraction role of wildlife presents many dangers for the animal and (as some ecologists point out) also for the environment. A current of authors have started to express concerns about “animals in tourism, where there are many areas that need to be further explored like welfare, ethics, education and conservation” (Mullan and Marvin, 1987; Mason, 2005). In fact, some have started to question the idea that watching animals in captivity is a form of ecotourism, establishing some forms of analysis where the frequency and severity of animal-human contact with negative consequences can be determined.

Figure 1. Classification of tourist attractions displaying animals in captivity.



Source: Shackley, 1996.

To identify different degrees of harm to the environment and the animals, scholars have discussed the implications of tourism (human-animal-environment) interaction as a way of consumption and non-consumption, where non-consumptive forms of tourism are supposed to be morally superior, as these experiences lead to increased education without harming the ecosystems, being hunting the one nature-based activity that seems unquestionably more consumptive. Consequently, “consumptive use is the use of resources that reduces the supply. For instance, removing water from a source like a river or lake without returning an equal amount. Non-consumptive use may be taken as a use of a resource that does not reduce the supply of the target species or feature of the environment, there is no net loss to the environment as a result of our actions” (Fennell, 2020). While discussing hunting as a consumptive or non-consumptive activity in tourism, some justify the activity because in some contexts: “there is an ecosystem integrity, especially when introduced species have devastating effects on native flora and fauna” (Craig-Smith et al., 2008). This relates with what happened in 2009 with the cocaine hippos, when it was considered that the removal of the animals was in fact the best course of action in terms of the long-term well-being of the ecosystem in Doradal.

However, some considered non-consumptive activities like birdwatching also have some degree of negative impacts on flora and fauna, complicating even more the issue of “any”

animal related tourist activity. Some research suggests that “wildlife ecotourists are more concerned with the minimal impact of their activities on species, and also tourists feel uneasy with the possibility that the animals were suffering as a result of their involvement in tourism” (Fennell, 2020), providing why this type of tourists might be better on the engagement and interaction with animals. To the scope of this section is then to debate the position of zoos, as a representative of “non-consumptive ecotourist activity” (Tremblay, 2001). “Zoos are public parks which display animals, primarily for the purposes of recreation and education” (Jamieson, 1985). Animals are usually taken from their natural environments, then forced to spend their lives in conditions that more or less compromise their ability to live a filled, natural life, and in many cases to reproduce.

Others have argued that “such a link is tenuous since zoos fail to contribute to genuine sustainable tourism because of the mistreatment of animals, and because captivity in general is the antithesis of what ecotourism ought to represent” (Wearing and Jobberns, 2011). Besides, if non-consumptive means not reducing supply of the species, zoos can still have high degrees of consumptive actions because of the type of organization that controls the number of animals in an unnatural way, especially in those that are illegal like the one established by Escobar.

After discussing the complexities that exist in some captive portrayed ecotourism and wildlife tourism along the path of consumptiveness, it becomes clear that the wide spectrum of activities on tourism related to animals has a variety of implications where animals can be exposed to more or less suffering and in some cases death (dark-eco). The cocaine hippos have proved to be a paradoxical product of the tourism industry because they disrupted the non-consumptive paradigm of supply when they escaped into the wild to reproduce to outrageous numbers and became a target of violence and adoration at the same time. Yet, since they were smuggled illegally into Colombia their existence has been conditioned by anthropomorphic practices, the future of the species has been at crossroads for almost two decades. Recently, the government and the tourist industry have engaged in a variety of actions that deserve consideration, which will be further explored in the coming section.

Researcher notes

In January 2022 I went to Colombia Doradal region to do fieldwork. While I was there, I had the opportunity to visit Hacienda Napoles and to take a tour in Puerto Triunfo with “True Colombia,” a travel agency that focuses on wilderness tours of different kinds that show natural wildlife and settings, for example: birdwatching, rafting, hiking and other “ecotourist” activities that, according to Benito the tour guide, “it focuses on giving the tourist the real Colombian experience.” Benito mentioned to me that they decided to open the hippos tour because they noticed a big demand, it was the last addition to the company itinerary. He said that most of the tourists are foreigners because locals usually go instead only to the Hacienda Napoles which also has now an amusement park that has some protected hippos. (I confirmed what he said, I was the only Colombian on the tour, there were three Canadians, a French couple and one more British tourist).

The tours with this agency are overpriced in my opinion, they are obviously targeting foreigners that don't feel much the currency pressure when exchanged. We sailed early in the morning in a medium-sized boat, they sold us an “ecotourist” package to make sure there were no complaints I suppose, as the hippo's sightings could not be guaranteed. But we were assured to see many birds or crocodiles. Transportation and food were included.

While on the boat, the tour guide explains that the narrative of the tour focuses on a separation of the hippos from that of Pablo Escobar, which I found awkward because he is obviously a main character in this story. I later found out that this relates to the recent government policies and a trend that divides the market, where those tours that are connected to Escobar seem as illegal or with a lack of taste, like if by mentioning Escobar the tour would be less or more “ecotourist.” Benito explicitly mentioned that this tour is not about Pablo. As the only Colombian on the tour, I felt I had the right to ask, why is that? He said that “since this is an ecological tour, focusing our attention on Escobar would be very painful and disrespectful to the local community.” I said that I didn’t know that Colombians are that sensitive, so he changed the subject. I couldn’t help but wonder if his boss had instructed him to avoid talking about Escobar. It is a sunny hot day and the driver of the boat seems to know exactly where he is going.

Benito continued: The trip is about the hippos, we value these hippos in this community because of how they have integrated to their new environment, a phenomenon that he described as “very interesting and a surreal piece of modern history,” he then acknowledged that the hippos are an invasive species and could potentially be a problem, but so far, he does not see any reason to not include such magnificent creatures on a trip devoted to animals and nature. Benito also specified that in Colombia hippos have the perfect environment (without droughts they always have food, the area also lacks large predators that would attack them) so he thinks that is why perhaps the animals have evolved to be calmer here.

I asked the tourists about their interest in taking this tour, they all mentioned more or less that this just seems to be a strange experience and that if they have the chance to see hippos once they are here, why not. The British guy is a birder. He came to Colombia because it is the highlight ecotourist attraction in Colombia. As we talk, we spot a group of about 10 hippos, these huge creatures are just there eating in some kind of little island in the river. As we get closer, I notice other boats with more tourists, they are all Colombians and I suspect they probably paid half of what I did. The boat stops, Benito explains to us that they don’t want to get too close as to be respectful with the animals, he also says that as we can see there are other boats around and our presence can make them nervous, so our safety is their priority. As a matter of fact, the hippos have attacked tourists, he tells me that if I want, I can later google a crazy video on YouTube to see how a male hippo got aggressive to a group of tourists. I didn’t see any crocodiles.

As I finish the tour, I can’t help to think that this was a bizarre experience, indeed “surreal in modern history” affirmation that I found absurd before. Yes, the animals are imposing and somehow beautiful and awkward. Yet, after googling the mentioned YouTube video, I have many unanswered questions with regard to safety, ethical implications and the ecological position of these animals in the region.

According to a study in The Journal of Biological Conservation Group published in the beginning of 2021, the animals need to be culled, otherwise the hippos could lead to deadly encounters between animals and humans. The research also suggest that hippos pose a major threat to the area’s biodiversity, concluding that “if nothing is done hippo numbers could reach around 1,500 by 2035” (Castelblanco et al., 2021). Although scientists have warned about the possible aggressive behavior of hippos for almost a decade and that hippos account for more than 100 human deaths a year in Africa, in Colombia the animals have never killed anyone, despite the already mentioned frightening situations with some tourists, fisherman and farmers.

I interviewed Nataly Castelblanco in February 2022, a conservation biologist that has studied the case and has been following the developments closely and counseling the government.

Researcher Question: What are the main issues these hippos are presenting?

Nataly Answer: Well, basically the hippos are reproducing without any control, I think that this is one of the most challenging situations in the world with regard to invasive species. These hippos are native to Africa where they are known to be ferocious, aggressive and territorial. Over the last decade large debates have been held about what to do to make the animals stop reproducing without hurting them because after the first hippo was sacrificed the public opinion turned against that strategy, but that was more than 10 years ago and the problems are still there. Some studies have shown that the hippos in Colombia are becoming sexually mature at an earliest age in comparison to the ones in Africa and this is a big problem.

R.Q: Some think that the hippos need to be culled and a sterilization process has started. What do you know about this and what is your position?

N.A: The strategy of culling the herd has already drawn a lot of criticism and I think this will continue, but eventually this might be the only option. Many of the locals have started to take care of the animals and grew a connection with them, in part because they are bringing a lot of tourist dollars to the area. However, some naughty encounters between fishermen and the hippos already happened. Years ago, there were some reports of people attacking the hippos and vice versa. After a lot of debates between scientists, conservationists, the government and the public; in October 2021 the CORNARE (Corporacion Autonoma Regional de las Cuencas de los Rios Negro Y Nare) started a sterilization process. From the hippos registered in the area by the environmental authorities 24 were sterilized with a vaccine, the name of the medicine is GonaCona a drug produced in the United States and considered a more practical procedure than castration.

R.Q: Some ecologists and environmentalists believe that the animals represent a threat to the local fauna but others have an opposed perspective, what is really going on?

N.A: I think that there is already an overall agreement on the potential threat that the non-native population of hippos present to Colombian people and the local ecosystems, the choices and strategies have been very controversial and proper action has been delayed way too long. This has been partly because of the difficulty to communicate to the general public the urgency on controlling this exotic population. Also, there is not an official decision by the Colombian authorities to include this invasive species in the National Invasive Species Act. Overall, I think that we can't let these hippos keep reproducing, which is what they have been doing because they are in very fertile lands and waters. Some studies found that the animals' feces are changing the quality of the water of the most important river in Colombia (Magdalena), which could potentially affect species like the Antillean manatees. Sterilizing a hippo is a very complex and expensive matter and I am afraid that the current efforts might not be enough.

R.Q: What do you think of the hippo's current role in the tourist industry?

N.A: Well, I think that they could potentially hurt someone and I believe that a lot of these tours are not regulated by any entity, but I think usually people are already aware that they shouldn't get too close. But that is a part of the problem because many people in the community are making money on these animals, but they also seem to love them and they are watching closely the sterilization process, making sure that nothing bad is done. However, we had other invasive

species that have undergone a normal protocol, but if you speak about culling the hippos you will be pictured as a murderer so this particular case has been just too complex.

“Ecotourism as an alternative has been used as a strategy or an attempt to minimize the perceived negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts of people at leisure that is different to the conventional tourism strategies” (Wearing and Neal, 2009). Yet, as seen in the previous hippo tour, described as “ecotourist” by the agency, the reality is that the tour wouldn’t fall under the scope of ecotourism because it lacks cultural, educational, scientific and/or conservation efforts. Therefore, I could locate the tour in a dark tourist category or an adventure category more appropriately. On the “Animal Dark Tourism Prototype” (Fennell and Bastian, 2021), we can uncover the role of the hippos in the tourism industry (in two different periods) to determine the distinctive levels of suffering they have been exposed (when they were in the zoo and when they escaped).

While in the zoo the status and settings were: Captive live animals in built in environments, animal representations in semi-built settings (there were souvenir shops and sculptures). The sources of suffering were originally human induced when the animals were taken illegally and later environmentally induced. The roles of the animal were entertainment and education as they were used primarily for the pleasure and profit of humans. The scale of suffering is unknown as this happened in the past and I have no data on how the animals were treated in that zoo. The subjective/normative nature of the animal-human relationship is that of indifference as natural and normalized emotions and attitudes to the animals are part of the tourist attraction. Yet, the negative-positive state of handlers is unknown.

As tourist attractions in wildlife settings, these hippos have been (live and dead animals in wild settings). The sources of suffering and death have been human induced, as the government tried to hunt them and the locals had conflictive encounters, but also of natural causes. The role of the animal has been nature/pest: Free living in nature but also seen as a detriment to the ecosystem and social related existence. Entertainment, science and research emerging roles have kept them alive and in controversy. The animals have suffered a subjective nature of animal-human relationship that has been marked by negative interactions with humans with emotions and attitudes of hatred, fear or disgust of the animals as pests. But also, of positive emotional states of reverence.

This section of the paper examined the structures and dynamics of these hippo’s role in tourism. An important question mark remains in the air towards what is the future of the animals in Colombia. The fact that different sectors of society have varying ethical-legal and scientific postures makes their position even more problematic. “Last year a federal U.S. judge granted interested person status to the descendants of Pablo’s Escobar hippos in Colombia, in what is said to be the first time the American judicial system has recognized the legal personhood of a non-human” (Cheng, 2021). Although this decision has no legal effect in Colombia, the symbolic influence of the ruling might take more mediatic forms in the future. Colombian courts categorized the animals as “sentient beings” which puts them into a position of having some rights in our legal system. In 2018, a court granted legal protection to a large part of the Amazon rainforest, a breakthrough decision that forced the government to stop the region's deforestation that had accelerated in recent years. Importantly then, the cocaine hippos have opened an optimistic space of debate for the protection of natural resources and animals in Colombian courts, where some steps forward on environmental protection have started to take place from that perspective.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper analyzed the narco-tourism trend in Colombia by interweaving dark-eco tourism theoretical standpoints that are linked to the actions and history of the rise and fall of the drug lord Pablo Escobar. While I started to dig into the subject of the narco-culture in tourism, different layers of complexities that relate to an undergoing process of social and ecological resilience started to emerge, exposing the many vulnerabilities that Colombia is experiencing in a period of transition.

When the tourism industry was peaking, public stakeholders and government entities made great efforts to try and wipe out Pablo Escobar’s legacy from Antioquia by implementing a variety of restrictive regulations. Yet, visitors are still interested in what happened to try to understand the past and the present. The prohibition of the tours appears somehow hypocritical and counterproductive because the demand and supply of the tourist practice remain. The problematic of having one narrative manipulated by the government that focuses only on the side of the victims, has caused an oversimplification of the real problematics behind narcotraffic in Colombia. Hiding also other problems that the society has. For example, class divisions, segregation, corruption, violence, a weak justice system, etc. Where a division of the good and the bad has blocked the possibility of a real analysis in a process of memorialization that needs to take place with a wider perspective of narratives and actors.

By blocking the perpetrators of violence side of the story in official museums and memorials that belong to government agencies and should be establishing spaces for a collective dialogue. New voices on the margins and popular culture have emerged with commodified and altered versions of the story that complicate even more the phenomena of the narco-culture-tourism. While I do agree with the actions taken towards some of the actors in the tourist industry that have participated actively in the narco-conflict as perpetrators (like for example the brother of Escobar) because clearly the discourse was taking forms that commodified and heroized his legacy, the government strategy of silence has itself provided the grounds for the disclosure of these voices that not only appear because there is a demand of this side of the story, but also because a sector of society in a position of vulnerability believes that they also have a story to tell. Therefore, since Colombia has not completely overcome violence and drug trafficking, accepting a multi perspective rhetoric could be a better approach to understand crisis to confront the past and undergoing processes linked to tragedy that could lead a way to negotiate a better future. In particular, policy makers need to be able explore different strategies of response, this may involve developing appropriate crisis communication strategies that could help to facilitate spaces where the local communities and their voices (from all walks of life) can have a better understanding, especially if the recovery strategy is to have some deliberate association with this past of violence and conflict.

On the other hand, the foregoing discussion with regard the cocaine hippos as a dark-eco-tourist product in two different stages, has helped me to identify a number of complexities and issues that exist with regard the lines of consumptiveness of the animals. While the Hippos life’s have been conditioned by their relation with humans, where they have been captured, forced, confined, deprived, sterilized and killed, their future still remains uncertain and again conditioned. Progress in the investigation has exposed how these hippo’s have had different levels of suffering in their roles on tourism, posing great ethical implications on the developments of the animal as a product.

Importantly, the power of the role of the media and popular culture in dark tourism emerged also in the case of the hippos. Where a binary of perceptions of the public has put them in

danger and safe. Yet, as an ecotourist product, the hippos were first put in an illegal zoo where they were taken care of for the tourist gaze and entertainment. To later escape and find freedom, remaining calm and unnoticed for more than a decade, until they started to reproduce way too fast, situation that turned them into the new wildlife tourist attraction. Thus, the geographic position of these animals has intersected with that of humans in ecotourism in two stages; first on a supposed conservation cultural role that more or less justified the mercantilization of the animals into what some authors have described as “zoo-slavery” (Lopez and Vanegas, 2021).

Later, as a wildlife tourist attraction their existence has turned into a complex “wait and see” matter because the hippos represent a threat to the local ecosystem and the community. Putting the animals in a limbo that is now dependent on how their relationship with the flora and fauna, other species and the tourists evolve in the coming years. It is worth emphasizing that this section of the work represents an attempt of critical perspectives towards how animals are being used in the service of the tourism industry, and although animal welfare can differ greatly from region to region, animal cruelty is still a reality in the industry in every corner of this planet. Therefore, my intention here is to encourage an awareness on the matter not only of scholars, but also of the critical thinking of the common citizen as a tourist. Where often practices like animal circuses, selfies with tigers, bullfights, deer parks, cockfights, swimming with dolphins and poor welfare zoos, are only some examples of the many practices that still remain naturalized and legalized in tourism. Thus, it becomes vital that we realize the type of stress, suffering and abuse that often animals have to endure for our own benefit and pleasure. As active actors in the activity of this kind of tourism that so frequently is disguised as “ecotourism,” we often know that we play a disruptive role in habitats and the population of species, but we tend to normalize some activities because of already organized legal and social structures. Yet, deserve to be questioned.

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