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Exploring La Puna

A Tale of Two Gateway Communities

By Peter Keller

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SAN PEDRO DE ATACAMA, Chile–Pachamama knew how to impress me. She used her spontaneity and power as I have never before seen. Her beauty was overwhelming and immense. When I close my eyes I can still see her body flowing through the air. I remember staring in disbelief, speechless. Then suddenly, just as she began — without warning — she stopped. I wondered how I could show her my gratitude? An offering of wine was my only thought.

The indigenous people of the Atacama Desert, Los Atacameños, refer to mother earth as Pachamama. What she was kind enough to show me was an erupting volcano, which produced an ash cloud several thousand feet high. When the eruption first started I happened to be looking at the volcano through the truck window, but didn't realize it was an eruption. At first the small plume looked like a mountain peak. However, I had seen this mountain range before and never noticed this apparent peak, casting a long shadow to the north. "How strange," I thought to myself, "That mountain looks different from last time." Then, all of a sudden, I shouted to the driver: "Over there! Stop! Eruption!" We came to a screeching halt, jumped out of the truck and watched in awe as the cloud of ash grew larger. Within minutes the eruption had stopped and the strong, eastern wind swept the ash clouds away to Bolivia.

This was the first day of a two-week tour of northern Chile. Earlier that day

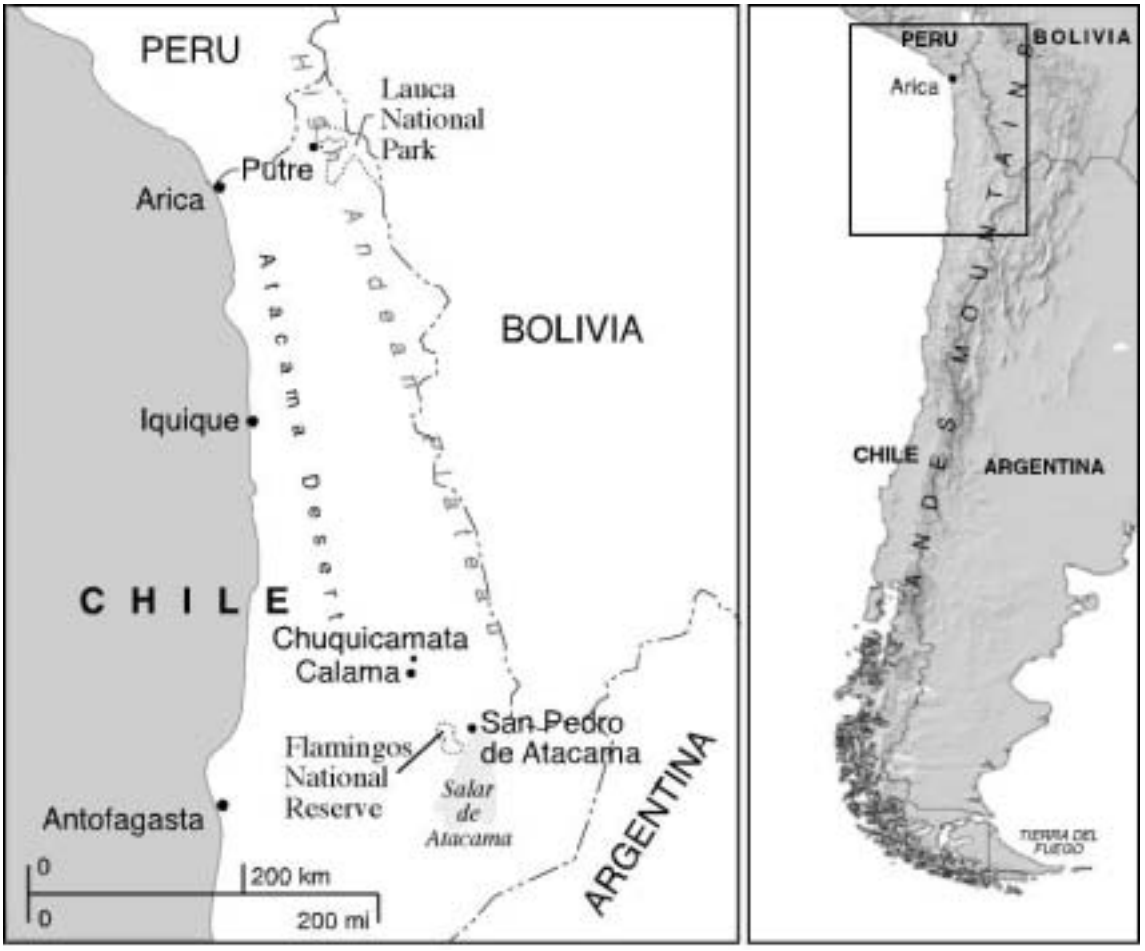
Volcano Lascar (5,154 meters above sea level) erupting.

in San Pedro de Atacama (population 1,446) I met three employees of the U.S. National Park Service, a park planner for the Chilean park service (Conaf) and a *Fundación Chile* project manager. We had all come together to begin preparations for a gateway community workshop. Our schedule included several field trips in order to be familiar with local resources before the two-day workshop began. The volcano eruption provided an impressive start to our week in the Atacama Desert.

Gateway communities are better explained in practice rather than theory. Think of Bar Harbor, Maine, or Estes Park, Colorado. Each is the last stop and entryway to a national park, in these cases Acadia and Rocky Mountain National Parks, respectively. The challenges in a gateway community are distinct, since the economy is largely based on tourism and this, for better or worse, can change the fabric of the community. Two gateway communities in northern Chile are experiencing a growth in tourism, so I wanted to pay a visit to understand their challenges. How are they adjusting to their role as gateway community and what are their future desires? The two communities are San Pedro de Atacama and Putre, about 500 kilometers apart within the High Andean Plateau of the Central Andes, also known as La Puna. San Pedro de Atacama is a gateway to Flamingos National Reserve and Putre to Lauca National Park.

La Puna is a high-altitude (3,500 to 6,000 meters) geographic region shared by Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Peru. It is a cold, desert region with intense solar radiation and strong winds, which cause extreme temperature variations. La Puna is a Quechua term meaning "mountain top." Besides high elevation, La Puna is characterized by endorreic watersheds, rivers that do not flow to the sea, but rather are enclosed without exit. These rivers flow to *salares*, or salt basins, that are shallow lakes containing saline and hypersaline water. Some basins are up to ten times saltier than ocean water. A great diversity of wildlife is located throughout these wetlands of La Puna. Most notable are vicuña and three species of flamingos that inhabit the region.

Gateway-community planning workshops have been used in the United States to stimulate discussion between land managers and adjacent communities regarding common goals and opportunities for cooperation. Once before I had participated in a gateway community workshop. When I worked at Redwood National Park, we invited community leaders and activists to attend a gateway workshop. Communication was rigid at first, but after a while the dialogue opened up and currently the relationship is more productive than before. However, it was not easy and the work of maintaining the relationship still continues. The workshop in San Pedro de Atacama was the first time a gateway-community planning exercise had taken place in Chile, a country where community meetings are just beginning to carry more weight. U.S. National Park Service (NPS) employees were invited to facilitate this inaugural meeting. The opportunity to pursue cooperative ventures between the NPS and Conaf was initiated earlier this year when the two governments signed an agreement to develop



a cooperative relationship in the protection and management of national parks and other categories of protected areas.

Dagoberto Peña, Fundación Chile *project manager for the San Pedro gateways workshop*

I had heard of this workshop through a discussion with Scott Hall, a friend of mine in the NPS Office of International Affairs who works as a program officer for the Latin American desk. I wanted to be involved in the workshop, but we couldn't think of an official role. So I became known as the "in-country liaison." My role proved useful in explaining Chilean customs to my NPS colleagues, such as the reserved nature of Chileans upon initial encounters or dealing with such trivial matters such as the virtues of ordering a pisco sour or piscola with dinner. (Both drinks are made with pisco, a strong brew of alcohol made from grapes. The first is a mix of lemons, sugar and egg whites; the second is just cola with pisco.) The members of the NPS team selected by Scott included Martha de la Garza Newkirk, a community planner from Austin, Texas; Edmundo Nieto, an architect and illumination specialist from the Denver Service Center and Adrienne Anderson, a landscape architect from the same office. The Denver office provides planning and design services to all 380 parks nationwide. The other members of the core team included Eduardo Rodriguez, who's in charge of planning and special projects for the Conaf regional office in Antofagasta. Rounding out the team was Dagoberto Peña of *Fundación Chile*.

At first I was unclear about the role of *Fundación Chile*, but as the week went by I realized is was actually the catalyst for getting this workshop off the ground. *Fundación Chile* is an organization beyond categorization, but I will try anyway. It is a privately owned, non-profit corporation created in 1976 under a government decree that authorized an agreement between the Chilean Government and the ITT Corporation of the United States. The mission is to develop innovative businesses and programs through technological innovation. ITT Corporation controls 50 percent of the foundation and the Chilean government controls the other 50 percent. Areas of concentration include agribusiness, marine resources, forestry, wood products and special projects. Although the foundation employs fewer than 250 people, it is well known throughout the country. When I asked a friend of mine in the salmon industry if he knew of *Fundación Chile*, he nodded to me in disbelief, like I had asked him if he ever heard of Microsoft. The Foundation has been involved in the certification of salmon farms. They are also well known in the Chilean wine industry for laboratory certification of wines and marketing of new varieties to foreign markets. They have been successful in launching several subsidiaries, including Chevrita, which produces gourmet goat cheese, and American Impressions Inc., which distributes Chilean wood products to North American chain stores. The Foundation has now opened an ecotourism office to help develop business opportunities in gateway communities.

San Pedro de Atacama is the gateway to *Reserva Nacional Los Flamencos* and the special project area of El Tatio, a high-elevation geyser field. In preparation for the community workshop our group spent three days exploring the surrounding area. Our tour guide was Dagoberto Peña from *Fundación Chile*. As an accomplished mountain guide, before working with the Foundation he led over a dozen expeditions to the top of Aconcagua, the highest peak in South or North America at 22,825 feet. He was also part of a Chilean National Team that attempted to Climb Mount Everest, but they were turned back at 25,000 feet due to bad weather. He now works part-time for *Fundación Chile* and the other half of his time as a counselor for troubled youth. For the Foundation, he spends most of his time in the field getting to know the communities they are trying to help. He is currently working on two similar projects; one at La Campana, a park just northwest of Santiago, and the other along the upper Bio Bio River.

Besides visiting San Pedro de Atacama, tourists come to this area to see Flamingos National Reserve, which consists of seven geographically distinct sectors totaling about 74,000 hectares. After watching the eruption of Volcano Lascar we went to Laguna Chaxa for the evening flight of flamingos. Biologist and regional park planner Eduardo Rodriquez joined us to talk about one of his favorite sub-

jects — flamingos. After graduating from the University of Arturo Prat in Iquique he went to work for Conaf and has become the resident expert on flamingo biology. He attended a recent international flamingo conference held in Miami, and presented a paper on a four-country project to protect flamingos in La Puna. International grant-making organizations have assisted in funding the program thus far. When I asked Eduardo about the probability of receiving more grants to continue the work, he told me, "It is a sexy project and people like flamingos." They also like the idea of countries cooperating to protect wildlife.

Of the six species of flamingos that exist in the world, three are found in Chile. These include Chilean, James' and Andean flamingos. During the evening, as if cued by the setting sun, flamingos fly across Chaxa Lagoon, providing a perfect photo opportunity. Laguna Chaxa is the only sector in the park where an entrance fee is charged (U.S.$3), and the view is well worth the price. Over 25,000 tourists arrive each year to see flamingos at this site in the middle of Salar de Atacama. This area is one of a series of wetlands throughout La Puna that are critical to the life cycle of flamingos, also known as Parinas to indigenous Atacameñan and Aymaran people. I learned the importance of this word several days later during the workshop as I was presenting my impressions of the area. I made the mistake of saying "flamencos," and the group simultaneously corrected me in unison: "Parinas." Okay, I got the point.

Conaf biologist Eduardo Rodriquez showing our group one of his 'secret spots' within the Pujsa Sector of Flamingos National Reserve

At Chaxa Lagoon we stayed well beyond sunset and watched as planet Venus appeared in the eastern sky. Later that evening after dinner in San Pedro de Atacama (and an extra pisco sour for warmth), Dagoberto led us on a star-gazing expedition. We drove out of town beyond the reach of the streetlights and got out of the car. Earlier in the evening Dagoberto told us about past mountain climbing expeditions and how stars in the sky were almost like a low ceiling, so close that it felt as if his head was going to bump against them. We were only at 8,000 feet on this particular night, but we shrieked at the sight of each shooting star, almost ducking instinctively to protect our skulls.

The next day we had a full schedule and didn't waste time getting out to the field. Our first visit was to the twin Lagoons of Miscanti and Miñiques. These two lagoons at 13,000 feet are set at the base of mountains reaching 19,000 feet. This sector receives few visitors and Conaf along with Fundación Chile are considering developing a small hut to attract more visitors, thereby providing protection from the harsh weather. They would also like to reroute the two-track dirt road away from the lagoon shoreline to protect the fragile habitat from adventurous tour leaders that tend to wander off the path and make their own tracks in this barren landscape.

The road leading to the high-elevation lagoons weaves through the community of Socaire. It is a small pueblo dating back hundreds of years. Life hasn't changed here much over the centuries, except recently with the introduction of electricity and the use of non-native building materials. The newest steps in "modernization" appalled Edmundo, our resident architect and illumination specialist. Eddy, as we called him, knows lights and the attributes that can enhance or ruin a setting. At one stop in Socaire, while admiring the pueblo's oldest church he said, "Look at this. The vernacular is destroyed by these cobra heads." At another stop, the use of concrete blocks and metal roofs in the construction of new houses provoked more comments about the assault on the vernacular of the pueblo. In this sense the "v-word," as we began to call it, refers to architectural language — the details that give a place distinction and character. Government programs to assist rural communities — no matter how well intentioned — are lowering the common denominator throughout Chile. High-density sodium lights (a.k.a. cobra heads); concrete blocks and corrugated sheet-metal roofing are the materials of choice used by contractors selected by government officials. The lack of architectural-design guidelines is al-

lowing for systematic dismantling of the v-word.

In addition to the housing and lighting program, other governmental agencies provide specialized services to Socaire along with San Pedro de Atacama and nine other pueblos because they are within an "indigenous development area." A law passed in 1993 allowed for the establishment of areas of indigenous development. The government defines these areas as "...territories in which state organizations can focus actions that benefit the harmonious development of the indigenous people and their communities." In 1997 Atacama La Grande was declared a development area, and only two other development areas exist in the country. It was declared so because nearly 95 percent of the population within the greater San Pedro community are Atacameños with an extensive ancestral history in the area.

A church in Socaire surrounded by vernacular-intruding, 'cobra-head' street lights

Although tourism is an important part of the San Pedro de Atacama economy, by far the most important aspect of the regional economy is copper mining. To understand the economic, social and environmental impact of mining on the region we took a specialized tour of the largest open-pit copper mine in the world — Chuquicamata. The biggest human-made hole in the ground you'll ever see is only 108 kilometers from San Pedro de Atacama, but the environment is a different world. Entering the company-owned town of Chuquicamata the smell of parched air reminded me of Butte, Montana. While attending University in Missoula, I often passed through Butte on my way to somewhere else. Although I spent little time in Butte, the distinct smell of a copper smelter will never escape me. It is a mixture of dry air, dust, sulphur and arsenic. As I was to learn, not only is the smell the same but also some of the early history.

Currently the mine is a state-owned company managed by Codelco *(Corporación del Cobre)*. It also manages four other copper mines within the country. In Chile, industrial mining was begun in 1910 by the Guggenheim family of New York. Several years later they sold the mine to the U.S. Anaconda Copper Mining Company — the same company that extracted copper from the open-pit in Butte until it was closed several years ago. By the 1960s, Chile's three largest mines accounted for 60 percent of total exports and 80 percent of tax revenues. During this period the Chilean government gained control of a majority of shareholdings in larger Chilean mines. Then in 1971 the Chilean Congress approved nationalization of the industry. They also stipulated that 10 percent of the net income be directed to the military. According to our Codelco guide Patricio, this source of military funding has allowed Chile to become the strongest military force in South America. Today the Chilean economy has diversified to the point that Codelco copper accounts only for 18 percent of exports generated. Overall, including both public and private copper companies, Chile is the world's biggest producer and exporter of copper, accounting for 28 percent of global copper production. Copper is by far the number-one product Chile exports to the United States, easily surpassing the closest contenders, grapes and salmon.

Although Codelco is state-owned now, the influence of U.S. business is still evident. Our guide Patricio met us at the front gate and escorted us to the presentation room where we were fitted with steel-toed boots, hard hats, protective eyewear and gasmasks. We also had to sign a waiver dismissing Codelco of all responsibility during our three-hour excursion through the immense compound. After signing the waiver I wondered who would be responsible if a $2.5 million behemoth truck, operating on 18 pistons, carrying a 300-ton payload, accidentally hit me. However, Patricio assured me that the drivers of these trucks have more training than airline pilots, so I didn't have to worry about a truck diverting off course into a "crash landing." I doubt they have more training than airline pilots, but have no way of finding out more because most questions I asked were answered with the phrase, "I can't tell you that, that's privileged information." Not even the average salary of the truck 'pilots' was information he could divulge.

Besides the large trucks and hole in the ground — which

A `mid-size' truck at Chuquicamata, the world's largest open-pit copper mine

measures four kilometers long, two kilometers wide and nearly 700 meters deep — the smelter is the most impressive operation. Tours of the smelter are no longer open to the public, but as invited guests we were able to see the production of copper from a red-hot liquid to solidification in the form of 99-percent-pure copper panels. It was here that we wore our gasmasks to protect our fragile brain cells from the harmful chemicals used in the smelting process, such as sulphur and arsenic. The plant operates 365 days a year, 24 hours a day. Copper panels, known as cathodes, are sent all over the world for a variety of uses including copper roofing and electronic products. The irony is not lost on Chileans that the same copper they ship to Japan they buy back in computers, telephones and stereos they purchase. The way they see it, and rightly so, other countries take their copper, while they lose out by not manufacturing value-added copper products.

Several days later this became crystal-clear to me. I had taken a night bus from Calama to the far northern port of Arica, near the Peruvian border. The bus had a TV and those awake, such as myself, spent the early morning hours watching the bronze medal Olympic soccer match between the United States and Chile. We arrived in Arica's bus terminal before the game was over, so continued the fanfare in the lobby along with 20 or so Chileans. For the first time in my seven months in Chile everyone automatically knew I was from the United States. I might have given it away because of my gasping sound when Chile scored its first goal. The identity of my nationality was sealed when I marched out of the room after Chile scored its second goal. The Chileans were kind to me, and consoling, once their victory was assured. They were very happy and content; for once they had been able to take something from the United States. Later that evening in the newspaper I read a hilarious cartoon that wrapped up this sentiment in two lines.

Our group returned to San Pedro de Atacama more educated in the ways of copper, but still filled with apprehension on the outcome of the workshop that was set to begin the next afternoon. By the day of the workshop we had met only a few participants and hadn't set aside time to tour the community itself. Since the workshop was scheduled for 2 p.m. we set out that morning to explore the streets and hopefully find the Hotel Explora, a high-class hotel and recent arrival on the San Pedro landscape. The hotel offers one rate, a three-day package for U.S.$1,300 that includes all meals and excursions. Built two years ago on the outskirts of San Pedro, Hotel Explora was designed by Spanish architect German del Sol. He now lives in Santiago and it is rumored that he never visited the site before designing the 50-room hotel, which is supposed to resemble a boat — a white boat in the middle of one of the driest deserts in the world. Each room has a jacuzzi and a showerhead that disperses water like a heavy rain storm. The outer courtyard has four large swimming pools and a

After Chile beat the United States in soccer for the Olympic bronze medal this cartoon appeared in a local newspaper. It says, "It would have been terrible to lose to the United States in Sydney. Imagine it. Before, they took our copper, and now they almost took away our bronze.

Five-star Hotel Explora near the pueblo of San Pedro de Atacama

sauna for each one. Yes, I can believe he never visited the site before designing the hotel.

After a glimpse in what could be the direction of San Pedro's future, we were anxious to start the workshop so we could learn what the citizens of the community desire as *their* future. We arrived at the community building a few minutes late and were surprised to find half of the room already occupied by participants who arrived on time. A half-hour later we were ready to begin and everyone was present — except one, the opening speaker, Conaf Regional Director Juan Pablo Conteras. During the wait the group was very quiet and I began to wonder if they were harboring ill thoughts toward us outsiders who had come from Santiago, Antofagasta and the United States to guide them through their community-planning process. Finally, silence was broken when the Conaf Regional Director arrived. His opening speech was meant to set a tone of enthusiasm for the workshop. "An open dialogue to interchange ideas, this is best for all involved," was how he concluded his kick-off pep talk. However, the postures around the room hadn't changed from the earlier furled eyebrows, smile-less cheeks and crossed arms.

By the end of the workshop the attitudes had changed and there was a sense of hope. However, I couldn't help thinking that I had just witnessed a public meeting like so many others I had helped put on in the United States. The process was pretty much the same: A round of introductions explaining your background and expectations for this meeting. Then several rounds to identify the attributes that define the character of the community, develop a shared vision focused on the values important to the community, develop a strategy. And finally, identify actions needed to realize community goals. Or simply put: who are we, what do we want to be and how do we get there? The caution, suspicion, enthusiasm and ebb and flow of energy was no different than what I have seen in other community "vision quests." However, in this case the community leaders had already been through the initial steps and had developed a vision: "To be a leader in the integral development of the community, preserving the Atacameña identity." They developed this in January 2000 and now, after numerous public meetings, they were losing their patience with more discussions and were eager to put words into action.

* * *

Please bear with me as I take a slight detour; I promise to stay on course. During ICWA's 75th Anniversary meeting in New Jersey, former fellow John Robinson, now author John Robinson, gave me an insightful piece of advice, although I have not heeded it to date. He said, "To be a writer you have to give away every thought." I have never desired to be a writer or ever thought of myself as a writer — although lately, that has been changing. Nevertheless, even without giving away my every thought, each time I write I have fear. Fear about how my words will be interpreted. Fear about whether they will curtail any future employment opportunities. Fear about whether my facts are correct. Fear about whether people will over-analyze. So perhaps you can imagine the fear I would have if I actually gave away every thought. In the spirit of John's advice this next section is an initial step toward giving away my thoughts.

I have been to enough public meetings to begin to typecast participants. As I write about these common characteristics I fear that anyone I have ever met at a public meeting will think I am writing about them — for better or worse. To them I say only one thing: If you think it is true, then it probably is. The role-players in this performance include (in no particular order) the doubter, the mayor, the mayor's sidekick, the quiet listener, the talker, the credible speaker, the person who speaks little although carrying a big stick, the land manager and staff, the inside activist, the outside activist, the cultural specialist and the home-firster. This is quite a lineup so I won't provide commentary on each one, but just the star performers.

The land manager and mayor share many common characteristics. Both are stressed for time and carry a burden of demands from all directions. Neither has the time or patience to sit still for a two-day meeting that hashes over everything they already know about their community or the resource they are managing. They like to hit the high-

lights of the meeting: the opening speeches, evening reception and closeout session, where conclusions are given and (hopefully) praise will be delivered for their excellent leadership.

Sometimes roles are shared. For instance the Talker and the Mayor/Land Manager sidekick can often be the same person. Since their boss is not always present they feel the need to pick up the slack and add two cents wherever possible — whether needed or not. They often pretend to speak for others, with phrases like, "I know the Superintendent supports this idea and I think we should proceed," knowing full well the two have never discussed the subject, but feeling he/she could convince the boss during their next private meeting.

The Home-Firster believes that whoever has been in the community longest (more than likely his or her relatives) should be the one dictating the future of the community. In his mind exists a strong connection between seniority and authority. Other cross-pollinators are the Doubter and the Outside Activist. By an outside activist, I mean a person who doesn't work through the system of internal channels to achieve the action he desires. This person is part of the five percent of any group that will never be happy with the outcome. Actions include disrupting meetings and filing (or threatening) superfluous lawsuits without regard to the probability of winning. The Doubter/Outsider can usually be seen talking to the land manager/mayor after meetings with arms crossed and a snickering smile. Okay, I have probably done enough damage for now in my characterization of public meeting participants, so I will return to the San Pedro workshop.

* * *

One aspect of the community gateway-planning meeting held in San Pedro that was different from my experiences in the U.S. was that patience prevailed. All participants were calm and did not raise their voices or their fists. They listened to each other completely without interrupting and everyone was respected for what they brought to the table. All of them brought ideas, biases, hopes and doubts — but they were all accepted as equal.

However, on the second day of the workshop the tranquility was almost broken during a field trip to the Valley of the Moon. Nearly all of the 35 tour operators in San Pedro visit this site. It is by far the most popular attraction because of the moonscape setting, easy access from town and beautiful sunsets overlooking Salar de Atacama, the third-largest salt flat in the world. On a previous occasion I had visited this Valley and trekked to the prime viewing ridgetop, where I joined 70 other tourists draped with cameras and awe of the array of colors. Looking down at the Valley floor, I could see large passenger vans scattered within the barren desert crater and driving wherever they pleased. During the workshop field trip, participants gathered here eagerly, hoping to add their suggestions on how to better manage visitors and protect resources before the situation really got out of control. All were excited to be a part of the idea-generating process.

However, that quickly died when the Conaf Regional Director dropped a surprise "bomb." He said they already had plans for the area and have developed designs for a parking lot, constructing an official trail to a vantage point overlooking the Valley known as Mirador and building a campground. Not even *Fundación Chile* representatives knew about these plans; they were surprised as anyone to hear this comment. Perhaps Juan Pablo thought this would be good news and would demonstrate that Conaf was on the ball. However, the reaction by the group was just the opposite. They began to wonder why they were present — were they just a stamp of approval without the ability to affect the decision? The next three hours were spent backtracking from this "foot-in-mouth" statement. By the end of the workshop Juan Pablo agreed to have a follow-up workshop for public review and comment on the Valley of the Moon Management Plan. One would hope that the participants' comments will be considered, and next time, citi-

A congregation of tourists waiting for the perfect sunset photo overlooking Valley of the Moon.

Volcano Parinacota and Lake Chungar in Lauca National Park.

zens will be invited to participate before the plan is written.

After the workshop ended I made my way north toward Arica, just 20 kilometers from the border with Peru. My first day in this port city was spent sightseeing and meeting fellow travelers. During this week Arica had become a campground for travelers wishing to go north or east, but were unable to due to roadblocks at both the Peruvian and Bolivian borders. In Peru trucks had blocked the Pan-American Highway in protest against President Fujimori. In Bolivia a massive strike was taking place by transportation workers in response to water shortages, taxes and the price of fuel. My intent was to enter Bolivia so I could learn about the Sister Park to Chile's Lauca National Park. However, with the border closed I adjusted my plans to focus just on the Chilean side.

The gateway community to Lauca National Park is Putre, a village of 1,203 people, 15 kilometers west of the park, perched on a hillside at 11,400 feet with Mount Umaxa looming overhead. Lauca is a high-elevation park ranging from the plateau of 14,000 feet to the mountain peaks of 20,000 feet. Putre is a central resting spot for acclimatizing to the altitude for a day or two before continuing on to the national park. My first day in this northern most part of Chile was spent walking around Putre (slowly) looking for a tour company heading to Lauca the next day.

I went into a small market to buy some water for my parched throat. A local customer asked me where I had come from hoping to hear good news about the border crossings. I disappointed her by saying San Pedro de Atacama, and she replied, "Well, at least we have not become like San Pedro." Later on, while eating ice cream outside the same shop, I overheard two German tourists lament that they had hoped to find Putre's type of tranquility in San Pedro. In reality, San Pedro is still a quiet desert town where the stores close for a midday break and all the locals know each other. However, the feelings provoked are different. In Putre, the cobblestone streets and central plaza are unoccupied most of the day. Only four or five tour operators exist and trendy restaurants and gift shops cannot be found. Nightlife in Putre is watching the 9 o'clock news at the corner restaurant and then strolling through the lonely streets before going to bed at 10:30. In San Pedro seems every night was a festival night, and you were never far from an Internet Café, Artisan shop or tour agency, whereas Putre is nearly opposite.

By the end of my first day in Putre I still had not secured a guide or transportation for my trip to Lauca National Park. There weren't enough people to make an organized tour profitable, so I decided to set out on my own the next morning. Putre is five kilometers from the main highway and since few cars divert toward town I started walking to the highway intersection. One kilometer from the crossroad a van stopped to give me a ride, but just to the highway. The van continued west and I waited for an eastbound vehicle. I had better luck here, and found a ride within minutes from a park ranger heading to his post in Parinacota, at the center of the park. After an hour we reached the Puna plateau and he dropped me off at the intersection to Lago Chungar, my destination. As I stood at the edge of the road waiting for any vehicle to appear, the

windswept grasslands were rich with animal life. I could see vicuñas off in the distance coming my direction. Twenty minutes later they crossed the road just in front of me and still no cars had come past.

Vicuña feeding along the shores of Lake Chungar

In 1970, Chile established the 138,000-hectare Lauca National Park primarily to protect the endangered vicuña. At that time barely 1,000 existed; now, 30 years later, over 17,000 thrive in the Puna region. By all means the recovery of the vicuña, a wild relative of the llama, has been a wildlife conservation success story — and establishing Lauca as a National Park had a great deal to do with it. In the central Andes four species of these "New World camels" exist. The domesticated llama and alpaca are used for food and fiber, and the other wild species, beside vicuña, the guanaco, ranges from the central Andes to Tierra del Fuego.

I was beginning to think no cars would be coming, so I began to walk the 15 kilometers to Lake Chungar. Luckily, ten minutes later a tour van from Arica (three hours west of the park) stopped to pick me up. When I got on board the passengers looked at me as if I was from another planet. They couldn't figure out why I was just standing there on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. Some tour groups have no sense of cohesion with fellow travelers; this one was approaching that twilight zone. Most on board kept to themselves, except the two Chileans, who wanted to hear about my experiences in Chile. I was happy to oblige — and happy just to be in a moving vehicle. When we finally reached the lake, thin air at 14,700 feet caused one passenger to faint. Fortunately each tour company is required to carry oxygen tanks and after several minutes' breathing in bottled oxygen, our light-headed companion was fine. From our viewing point, only seven kilometers from the Bolivian border, we could see the two prominent Volcanos in Lauca, Parinacota and Pomerane, both reaching over 20,000 feet. The lake and the nearby lagoon serve as feeding and nesting grounds for the three species of flamingos in Chile. Our Conaf guide in San Pedro, Eduardo Rodriguez had begun his Conaf career here in Lauca National Park studying flamingos. Since that time he had been a strong advocate for protecting habitat along the central Andes corridor to ensure the survival of these elegant birds.

On the way back to Arica the tour bus dropped me off in Putre. That afternoon I visited the Birding Alto Andino tour agency, owned by Alaskan Barbara Shipton. The village is very small so we had seen each other around town, but had not yet exchanged greetings. When I stepped into her shop classical music was playing and she was working at the computer. She stopped her work and looked up at me from her desk, "You're Peter, aren't you?"

"Ya, and you're Barbara, right?" I responded.

She replied, "You work for some kind of foundation, don't you? I hope you are not here working on some project that will fund another tourism seminar or train more guides; that is just wasting money."

"No," I assured her, "The foundation I work for doesn't give away money to projects, they give fellowships."

With a curious face she then said, "Well then, what are you doing here?"

After I told her more about my work and showed her examples of my newsletters she was more at ease and apologized for her abrupt greeting. Barbara, a resident of the area for the past six years, explained to me that various governmental and non-governmental organizations from Chile, Belgium and Germany have been involved in ecotourism projects throughout the region. One of her pet peeves is that these groups organize capacity-training seminars, but don't continue on to the next step of helping local tour companies develop business plans and marketing strategies — or, even better to become active in promoting small, homegrown businesses. Her advice to local tourism entrepreneurs is to adapt and find a niche no one else is providing. Barbara doesn't agree with the "San Pedro" model, as she calls it. This involves having a storefront, buying a van, packing people in it every day and taking them to the sites for a photo shoot-and-go. According to her, Putre just doesn't have the volume of visitors to sustain an operation

A common street scene in San Pedro de Atacama.

like that, even though several are trying to make a business out of it.

Instead, she recommends that local guides lead hiking trips or specialized tours of resources unique to this community. Her favorite example is a local Aymaran named Freddy. He lives five kilometers from Putre down a dirt track that is inaccessible by vehicle. At his country home he grows vegetables and raises goats. He also has something out of the ordinary — several ancient cave paintings. The brochure for the cave excursion shows the trail to his house. Once visitors arrive he takes them on a tour of the cave paintings for a price of U.S.$6. To Barbara this is the perfect "ecotourism" venture because the overhead is almost non-existent (except for printing brochures) and Freddy gets to stay at home every day and show people treasures made by Aymaran people centuries ago.

During my last afternoon in Putre I walked outside of town and sat in a field just to hear the sounds of the landscape. It was a Sunday afternoon, which is a particularly quiet day in rural Chile — almost a ghost-town atmosphere. I could hear the slight down-slope wind blowing through the trees and the sound of a farmer working in a distant field with his wheelbarrow. Behind me I could hear water running through a small irrigation ditch destined to feed thirsty corn growing under a deep blue, cloudless sky. From toward town came the faint sound of children laughing as they played behind concrete fences, obscuring their location. And, of course, the sound of ever-present dogs could be heard barking in a trademark South American pitch I have grown accustomed to 24-hours a day. The scene was a timeless moment that held me there like the force of a magnet. I thought about the future of each community, San Pedro and Putre, sensing that each was on a different path in an attempt to garner a piece of the new economy while trying to maintain authenticity and a sense of identity. Each community will continue to evolve; this is certain, but their futures are not. Nevertheless, opportunities still exist to control their own fates, which are directly dependent on how well they work together to define and achieve common goals. ❑

The central plaza in Putre.

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