



ORIGINAL

## Perceptions on neoliberal extractivist practices of the thermoelectric industries in the fishing community of Coronel

### Percepciones sobre las prácticas extractivistas neoliberales de las industrias termoeléctricas en la comunidad pesquera de Coronel

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#### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** in Chile, the neoliberal extractivist model has favored industries such as thermoelectric plants, generating serious ecological, social, and cultural impacts in coastal communities like Coronel. This system, sustained by privatizing legal frameworks, has led to territorial dispossession, socio-environmental conflicts, and community resistance to the loss of identity and rights.

**Objective:** to describe the perceptions of artisanal fishers and shoreline harvesters regarding the ecological, social, and cultural impacts of thermoelectric extractivist practices, identifying meanings, impacts, and forms of community resistance.

**Method:** a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach was used. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight people linked to coastal fishing and harvesting, and thematic content analysis was used. The process included open coding, clustering, and triangulation, allowing for a situated understanding of the lived experience.

**Results:** three main themes emerged: i) thermoelectric plants as a symbol of plunder and dispossession, ii) the emotional experience of territorial and environmental loss, and iii) the reconstruction of a collective identity based on resistance. The testimonies reflect a deterioration in living conditions, loss of marine biodiversity, emotional impacts, and a breakdown in the sociocultural fabric.

**Conclusions:** neoliberal extractivism has produced multidimensional dispossession in Caleta Lo Rojas. In response, the community has developed collective responses based on roots, memory, and environmental justice. There is an urgent need for inclusive public policies that recognize the centrality of the territory as a living space.

**Keywords:** Extractivism; Environmental Justice; Thermoelectric Plants.

#### RESUMEN

**Introducción:** en Chile, el modelo extractivista neoliberal ha favorecido industrias como las termoeléctricas, generando graves impactos ecológicos, sociales y culturales en comunidades costeras como Coronel. Este sistema, sostenido por marcos legales privatizadores, ha producido desposesión territorial, conflictos socioambientales y resistencia comunitaria ante la pérdida de identidad y derechos.

**Objetivo:** analizar las percepciones de pescadores artesanales y recolectores de orilla respecto a los impactos ecológicos, sociales y culturales de las prácticas extractivistas termoeléctricas, identificando significados, afectaciones y formas de resistencia comunitaria.

**Método:** se utilizó una metodología cualitativa con enfoque fenomenológico. Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a ocho personas vinculadas a la pesca y recolección costera, analizadas mediante contenido temático. El proceso consideró codificación abierta, agrupamiento y triangulación, permitiendo una comprensión situada de la experiencia vivida.

**Resultados:** emergieron tres ejes principales: i) las termoeléctricas como símbolo de saqueo y despojo, ii) la vivencia emocional de pérdida territorial y ambiental, y iii) la reconstrucción de una identidad colectiva basada en la resistencia. Los testimonios reflejan un deterioro de las condiciones de vida, pérdida de biodiversidad marina, afectaciones emocionales y ruptura del tejido sociocultural.

**Conclusiones:** el extractivismo neoliberal ha producido una desposesión multidimensional en Caleta Lo Rojas. Frente a ello, la comunidad ha desarrollado respuestas colectivas basadas en el arraigo, la memoria y la justicia ambiental. Se plantea la necesidad urgente de políticas públicas inclusivas que reconozcan la centralidad del territorio como espacio de vida.

**Palabras clave:** Extractivismo; Justicia Ambiental; Termoeléctricas.

## INTRODUCTION

In Latin America, the hegemonic development model has historically been structured around extractivism, an economic logic that prioritizes the intensive exploitation of natural resources for export, generally for the benefit of transnational economic actors and with negative consequences for the territories involved.<sup>(1,2)</sup> In Chile, this model has been reinforced since the military dictatorship (1973-1990), promoting the privatization of common goods and the liberalization of markets.<sup>(3)</sup>

Chile is recognized as one of the laboratories of neoliberalism worldwide, a model strongly established during the civil-military dictatorship (1973-1990) with the support of the “Chicago Boys” and maintained by subsequent democratic governments.<sup>(3)</sup> This model is characterized by the privatization of public assets, economic liberalization, and a subsidiary role for the state, which has favored foreign investment in strategic sectors such as energy, mining, and fishing.<sup>(4)</sup> In the energy sector, this resulted in the proliferation of thermoelectric plants and other infrastructure without adequate environmental impact assessments or public consultation. Thus, a weak and permissive environmental institutional framework was consolidated.<sup>(5,6,7)</sup>

The case of the municipality of Coronel, located in the Biobío region, is paradigmatic in this context. Its strategic geographical location and marine biodiversity have turned it into an industrial enclave characterized by the presence of multiple thermoelectric plants that operate with coal and other fossil fuels.<sup>(5)</sup> These facilities have caused air and marine pollution, with severe impacts on the ecosystem, the health of the population, and economic activities linked to the sea, such as artisanal fishing, shore harvesting, and seaweed farming.

The expansion of thermoelectric power plants in Coronel responds to the logic of energy extractivism, characterized by the centralization of electricity generation in large infrastructures, with little consideration for territorial impacts and without proper consultation with the affected communities.<sup>(9)</sup> The promises of modernization and development that accompanied the installation of these industries have, in many cases, resulted in processes of dispossession, loss of territorial identity, and deterioration of the local social fabric.<sup>(4,10)</sup>

Critical literature defines these dynamics as extractive neocolonialism, in which the center-periphery relationship is reproduced within nation-states, disproportionately affecting impoverished, racialized, and politically underrepresented populations.<sup>(11,12)</sup> In this sense, Chilean extractivism not only involves intensive exploitation of nature, but also a reconfiguration of territorial power and the social order.<sup>(1,13)</sup>

In recent decades, extractivism in Chile has generated socio-environmental conflicts that have led communities to defend their territories and common goods, denouncing pollution, loss of access to natural resources, and lack of citizen participation in decision-making.<sup>(14,16)</sup> In places such as Caleta Lo Rojas, the collective memory is marked by pain, resistance, and the search for environmental justice in the face of environmental degradation.<sup>(2,17)</sup>

In Chile, towns such as Tocopilla, Huasco, Quintero-Puchuncaví, and Coronel have been recognized as sacrifice zones. These territories have seen systematic violations of human rights, especially the right to health, a healthy environment, and effective citizen participation.<sup>(9,16)</sup> The concept of “sacrifice zone” has been used by social movements and academics to describe territories highly impacted by industrial activity, where the local population bears the environmental and health costs of national economic development.<sup>(7,15)</sup> The situation in Caleta Lo Rojas, in the municipality of Coronel, is part of this problem. The installation of thermoelectric power plants has profoundly transformed the marine ecosystem and the way people live in the territory,

affecting the cultural and economic practices of its communities. The perceptions of the inhabitants reflect a daily experience of dispossession, but also forms of resistance, community organization, and the construction of territorial memory

From a critical perspective, authors propose recovering the epistemologies of the South to understand socio-environmental conflicts from the knowledge and experiences of the affected communities. This view emphasizes the need to decolonize knowledge and build alternatives to development that respect collective rights, biodiversity, and local ways of life. Likewise, the environmental justice approach allows for the analysis of the unequal distribution of environmental impacts, access to information, political participation, and cultural recognition of vulnerable groups.

This research is framed within this context and aims to analyze the perceptions of artisanal fishermen and shore gatherers regarding the neoliberal extractive practices promoted by thermoelectric industries in Caleta Lo Rojas. Using a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological approach, we explore subjective experiences, everyday impacts, and forms of re-signification of the territory, contributing to a situated understanding of the processes of dispossession and resistance.

## **METHOD**

### **Methodological approach**

This study is part of the qualitative paradigm with a phenomenological approach, whose purpose is to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of individuals immersed in complex social contexts. This approach is relevant when seeking to investigate the perceptions, emotions, and meanings that people attach to specific phenomena, such as communities affected by extractive practices.<sup>(20)</sup> In particular, we worked with artisanal fishermen, shellfish gatherers, and seaweed harvesters from Caleta Lo Rojas, in the municipality of Coronel, who have directly experienced the effects of energy extractivism.

### **Data collection design and techniques**

The main technique used was the semi-structured interview, which allows for a basic structure to be maintained across interviews, but with sufficient flexibility to delve deeper into relevant issues that emerge during the dialogue with participants. This technique was chosen because it combines the systematic approach needed to ensure comparability between accounts with the flexibility to explore emerging issues relevant to the study in depth.<sup>(21)</sup> An interview script was designed to analyze perceptions of the impacts of thermoelectric industries, transformations in the territory, and forms of community resistance. This instrument was validated by expert judgment, including four academics with experience in socio-environmental studies and qualitative methodologies. The prior review by specialists with experience in the subject matter and qualitative methodologies provides an external perspective that enriches the construction of the instrument, increasing its content validity and the credibility of the results obtained.

The interviews were conducted in person in safe spaces for the participants, ensuring the confidentiality of the information and informed consent, in accordance with the ethical principles of social research.

### **Sample and selection criteria**

The sample was non-probabilistic and intentional, with criteria of accessibility and voluntariness, consistent with the inclusion criteria. Statistical representativeness was not sought, but rather the richness and diversity of perspectives. Eight people (men and women over the age of 18) participated, all permanent residents of the municipality of Coronel, specifically linked to traditional economic activities on the coast: artisanal fishing, shellfish gathering, and seaweed harvesting. Direct or past experience in these activities was considered an inclusion criterion, as it gives them legitimacy to reflect on the effects of the extractive model on their daily lives. This type of sampling is consistent with previous research on socio-environmental conflicts in sacrifice zones in Chile, where local experiences are central to the analysis of territorial impacts.

### **Analysis of the information**

Data analysis was carried out using thematic content analysis, focusing on the identification and coding of emerging units of meaning in the interviewees' discourse. An inductive strategy was used, allowing the categories of analysis to emerge directly from the empirical material, without imposing predefined frameworks.

The process was carried out in several stages: complete transcription of the interviews, exploratory reading, open coding, thematic grouping, and analytical triangulation. This procedure ensures a rigorous interpretation of the meanings attributed by participants to their experience in a territory transformed by neoliberal extractivism.

### **Ethical aspects**

All participants in this research signed an informed consent form in accordance with Law 19.628 on the

protection of privacy and Law 21.719 regulating the protection and processing of personal data in Chile, and the provisions of the Helsinki Declaration.

## RESULTS

Two main networks were identified within the discourse of the interviews: the first, neoliberal extractivist practices, and the second, collective meanings and subjectivities (figure 1).

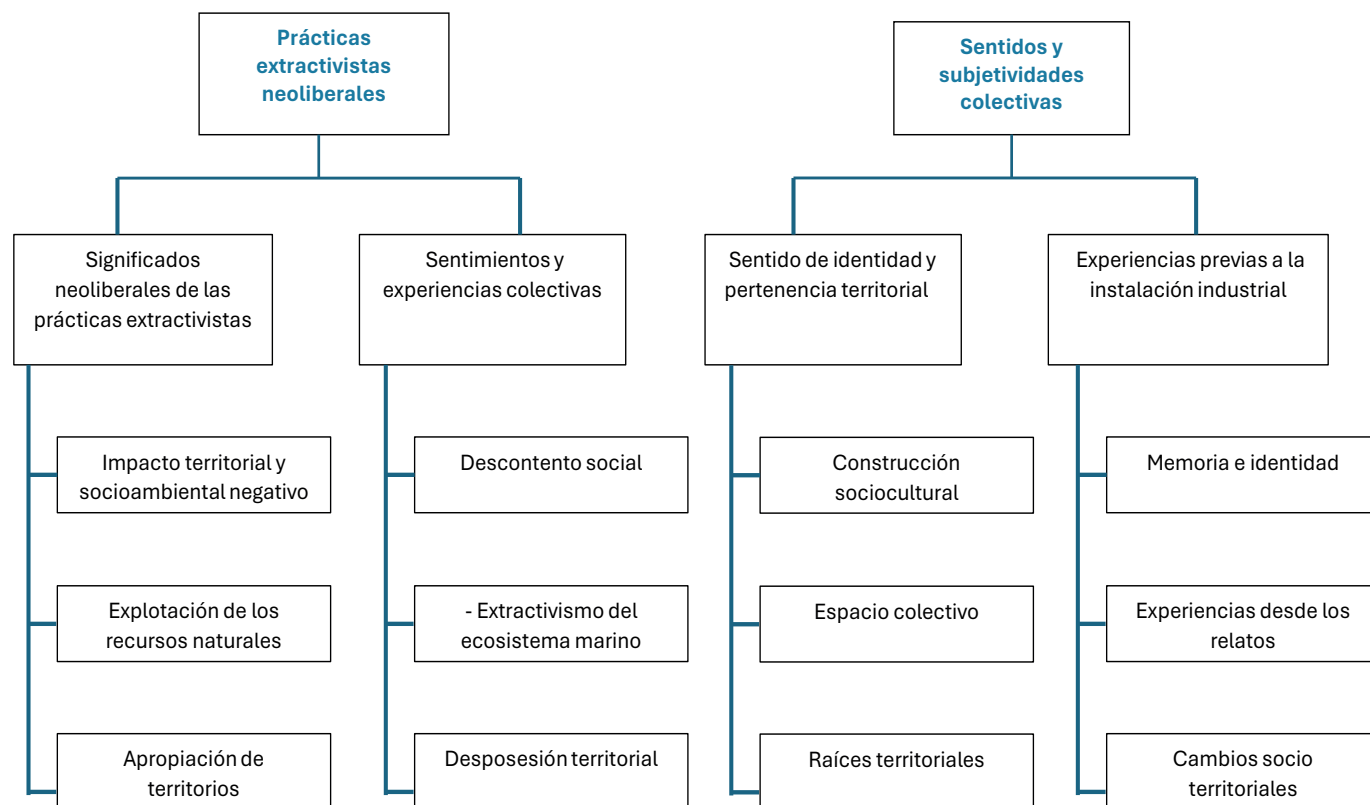


Figure 1. Discussion networks

### Meaning of neoliberal extractivist practices

Eight elements emerge from the meaning of the subnetwork of neoliberal extractivist practices, which will be addressed based on the various discursive fragments that emerged from the interviews conducted with fishermen and shore gatherers in the Lo Rojas cove in the municipality of Coronel. In the elements evidenced in the coding cycles, it is possible to observe that in the subnetwork, the meanings of neoliberal extractive practices are understood by the interviewees as an expression of the capitalist system, based on the plundering, clearing, and appropriation of natural resources and territory.

The actors who own their spaces give meaning to neoliberal practices, interpreting them as having a negative territorial and socio-environmental impact on the territory, exploiting its natural resources through practices of plundering.

An excerpt that represents the current subnetwork is:

*"They took away the space where we could fish with the installation of the thermoelectric plants. Because everyone says it's not the burning of coal, but the damage that causes us the most harm is the suction of water, where the Colbún thermoelectric plant was installed, which killed all that area that could be used for shellfish gathering, diving, you could go out and throw the barrier, all that was lost, everything was lost. And, on the other hand, Enel expanded its system where it sucks up more water, where it kills more biomass. There is no more biomass there, and they pollute more and more because they dump more chemicals into the sea and into warmer waters, and most of the fish are cold-water fish."* (P.A.E.8)

A second element that emerges from this sub-theme refers to the economic system, represented as:

*"Imagine when they went to see where they could locate the industries, let's say, the mayors who were there at the time were in Peru, they were looking outwards and wondering why here in Chile they put them so close to people when in Iquique they are also close, in Valdivia, in Puchuncaví. All those things, then, why? Because maybe they are not (...) That is more the benefit of large companies."* (P.A.E.7)

The accumulation model arises from the individualistic and capitalist market logic of private profit, which requires the extraction of primary goods. In this case, it involves the exploitation of the flora, fauna, natural resources, and social fabric of Caleta Lo Rojas in the municipality of Coronel, since the installation of thermoelectric plants in the territory meant profits for industries and expropriation for fishermen and coastal gatherers, as they explain, appropriating the territories for the benefit of the same industries.

### **Collective feelings and experiences of neoliberal extractive practices**

This theme contains eight elements that will be addressed in depth, based on and using the different discursive fragments that emerged from the eight coded interviews. Based on the interviews conducted, the participants briefly allude to the collective feelings and experiences of neoliberal extractive practices in Caleta Lo Rojas in the municipality of Coronel, expressed in the following account:

*"I don't know how many they've found, cans of marine products there in the thermos, which you can't see, which they go and throw away, I don't know where. All dead (...) I think they must have some kind of sieve to remove everything that comes from the sea, whether it's seaweed (...), the little pigs you used to catch when you were a kid, you'd make little holes and pull them out, now you go and walk along the beach and they're all there, rows and rows of dead pigs, that's all there is, and I think they suck them all dry. Therefore, it's a necessary evil." (R.O. E.2)*

Based on the discourse fragments, it is possible to describe that the participants, from their collective experiences and feelings, express that the installation of thermoelectric plants generates emotional distress, social discontent, and territorial dismantling among those who live and work in Caleta Lo Rojas, as a consequence of the extractivism of marine resources. This is reflected in the following excerpts from the interviews:

*"There is emotional resentment both for economic reasons and because of our attachment to the cove and the coast, because before we could swim and enjoy the sea and now we can't. So there are some feelings against both the economic side and the other side, so to speak" (P.A.E.8)*

*"By wanting to ensure their production, they are hurting us, but in full view of everyone. They wanted to cover it up with modernization, but modernization came too late. They should have thought about it at the same time; they should have mitigated the damage a little." (P.A.E.3)*

On the other hand, it is clear that the thermoelectric plants were installed based on ideas and promises of modernization, understood as the occupation and usurpation of territories by the company, restricting the freedom and daily life of the subjects, affecting the feelings, customs, and culture that the community has historically shared. Perceiving from the emotional exercise of the fishermen and shore gatherers who show how the power structures and their suppression have damaged Caleta Lo Rojas.

### **The meanings and formation of collective subjectivities**

An emerging element identified by the senses and the formation of collective subjectivities emerges as a large network, from which two sub-themes refer to the sense of territorial identity and belonging and to the experiences prior to the installation of industries in Caleta Lo Rojas.

The first sub-theme of the emerging network meanings and the formation of collective subjectivities, identified by the sense of identity and territorial belonging, will be presented below.

#### **Sense of identity and territorial belonging**

From the subnetwork of identity and territorial belonging, seven elements emerge that will be addressed based on the discursive fragments that emerged from the interviews conducted with fishermen and shore gatherers in Caleta Lo Rojas in the municipality of Coronel.

Several elements emerged from the interviews that converge in the sub-theme of sense of identity and territorial belonging, which are sociocultural construction, customs and traditions, territorial roots, and elements of collective action that symbolize a common challenge for La Caleta Lo Rojas. This can be seen in the following excerpts from the interviews:

*"I was born here, in my house, and I'm still in my house, my whole life, 57 years (...) A working cove, a cove of effort, a cove of fishermen who are, well, united, very united, and you see everything here because you go out to the beach." (R.O. E.2)*

*"I've been a fisherman all my life. Fisherman, fisherman, when I'm not fishing and I'm at home, I get bored at home because I don't know how to do anything else but fish, fisherman, fisherman. My life, yes, a small-scale fisherman until I die (...) Now I'm 63 years old, all my life at sea, all my life as a small-scale fisherman." (P.O.E.5)*

From the discursive fragments, elements emerged that allowed and facilitated the formation of a collective

sense of belonging and territorial roots based on a set of values and beliefs that shaped territorial belonging. Expressed by the interviewees as:

*“59 years old, born and raised here (...) A lot, a lot. Because there is a source of work or jobs, I like it and I was also raised and born here, for me it is something very big, wonderful for me, and they gave us a lot of work. When we needed it, there was always work here in Caleta Lo Rojas, so we had no problem growing up and studying.” (P.A.E.7)*

*“48 years old, born and raised in Coronel. Mmm, source of labor. Everything, because it’s also a fondness, an appreciation, an attachment to the cove. Feelings.” (P.A.E.8)*

From the fourth cycle of content analysis focused on the meanings called interpretation of the meanings that emerged from the units, it can be seen that the sense of identity and territorial belonging comes from an emotional attachment and a work ethic, since the interviewees say they have been fishermen all their lives and most of them were born and raised in the fishing village. For them, before the installation of the thermoelectric plants, the fishing village was a dignified place, located and inhabited by the workers themselves. Now the thermoelectric plants have taken over their space, giving it a totally different meaning.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this research reveal a clearly critical perception among artisanal fishermen and shore gatherers in Caleta Lo Rojas regarding the neoliberal extractive practices promoted by thermoelectric power plants. This perception is part of the framework of neo-extractivism, understood as a phase of global capitalism that generates structural dependence on the exploitation of natural resources, deepening socio-environmental inequalities and conflicts.<sup>(1,2, 27)</sup> The installation of these industries has not only caused severe ecological damage, but also profound alterations in the social, cultural, and emotional fabric of the community, reproducing dynamics such as “accumulation by dispossession.”<sup>(13)</sup> One of the most relevant findings is the direct relationship between the territorial transformations caused by thermoelectric plants and the deterioration of local living conditions. This relationship has been widely documented in studies on sacrifice zones in Chile, where a systematic pattern of fundamental human rights violations has been observed, especially in towns such as Coronel, Puchuncaví, and Huasco.<sup>(5,6)</sup> Various studies show that even the progressive governments of the so-called *pink tide* maintained or intensified this model, causing systematic processes of dispossession in favor of transnational capital.<sup>(28)</sup> The persistence of the extractivist model, regardless of the political orientation of governments, has led to human rights violations, the criminalization of community actors, and the progressive erosion of the social fabric.<sup>(29)</sup> In this scenario, the analytical category of “planetary mine” allows us to understand how, in countries such as Chile, coercive forms of extraction are reproduced and even intensified, generating population displacement and irreversible transformations in the territories.<sup>(30)</sup>

From a methodological point of view, the use of a phenomenological approach made it possible to capture the subjective density of these processes, highlighting how people experience extractivism not only as a material loss, but also as a fracture in their ways of inhabiting the territory.<sup>(21)</sup> This is in line with the approach of environmental justice and epistemologies of the South, which argues for the need to understand socio-environmental conflicts from the voices of the affected communities, valuing their knowledge, memories, and struggles.<sup>(11,18)</sup> These approaches are linked to a political ecology that seeks to make local knowledge visible and legitimate in decision-making.<sup>(31)</sup>

This dimension has been highlighted in previous research on socio-environmental movements in Chile, which has documented how collective memory, deep roots, and local cultural practices operate as forms of resistance to dispossession.<sup>(14,16,30)</sup> By linking ecological damage to the loss of identity and feelings of uprootedness, the interviewees’ discourse highlights the symbolic dimension of extractivism. It is not just a question of sea or air pollution, but of the radical transformation of the landscape and the meaning of the place. This transformation has been imposed without effective citizen participation, reinforcing criticism of Chile’s weak environmental institutions, as already pointed out in previous studies.<sup>(4,15,27)</sup> Likewise, the experiences prior to the installation of the thermoelectric plants, recounted with nostalgia, contrast sharply with the deteriorated present, reinforcing the idea of a loss of collective future.

## CONCLUSIONS

Neoliberal extractive practices in Caleta Lo Rojas have had profound ecological, social, and cultural impacts. The testimonies collected reveal a multidimensional experience of dispossession that affects the daily lives, sense of territorial belonging, and physical and emotional health of the inhabitants. This experience is part of a broader logic of accumulation by dispossession, where extractive capital radically transforms the territory without considering the rights or voices of local communities.

Community responses are a fundamental basis for building alternatives to the extractive model, appealing to approaches of environmental justice and epistemologies of the South, which place local knowledge

and experiences at the center of social transformation. Reaffirming the importance of incorporating local perspectives into the evaluation of industrial projects and the formulation of public policies, recognizing the centrality of the territory as a living space, and not just as an exploitable resource. The transition to sustainable development models requires not only political will, but also an ethical and epistemic reconfiguration that places the dignity of communities and the integrity of ecosystems at the center.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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