

## **Overview**

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### **Activity Title:**

Multidimensional Ethical Dilemmas: Sacred & Commoditized Water in Atacama

### **Activity Summary:**

Background: In 2003, I had the opportunity to interview an Atacameño, whom I will call Pablo, about his particular view of the canal cleaning ritual, sacred mountains and their relation to water. He said:

*Mountains are alive like people. You can have a conversation with a mountain. Mount Quimal is a tutelary mountain. I will tell you a story so you can understand what I mean. One of the most beautiful fiestas we have is the cleaning of canals. For us it is a pact we made with the Earth Mother when, eight thousand years ago, we became sedentary peoples, and settled in this desert. Then we made a pact with the Earth Mother to bring the mountains and have mountains provide water for the people. We see canals as equivalent to human veins. If we do not take care of our diet, we get ill with high cholesterol, our veins will get clogged. There will come the time when clean blood will not be able to flow through our veins and we will suffer an imbalance in our body. The same occurs in the cleaning of canals. What we are doing is complying with a millenary pact of cleaning our veins so our culture continues to reproduce and so the blood can flow through the veins so we can water the roots of our plants, but also our roots as humans.*  
(Interview, Calama 2003)

For native Atacameño water is sacred. They engage in an annual ritual called the canal cleaning ceremony, to secure the wellbeing of the community and the environment. In this ritual they make offerings to the Earth Mother and ask for water. Atacameño live in a nation-state that disregards this sacred view and defines water in legal terms. Mining corporations adopt the nation-state's water code that allows for the commoditization of water.

In this activity students will be asked to write a reflective essay to think about how native Atacameños manage to keep water sacred in spite of and in the midst of its commodification for the advance of mining and tourist industries in the region. As part of the assignment students will also need to turn in all associated field-notes written in the process of this assignment.

## **Course Context and Learning Goals**

### **Context:**

(1) This activity will be used in the study abroad course: ‘The impacts of Mining and Tourism on Indigenous Peoples and the Environment in Northern Chile’.

(2) To complete the activity all students will have to read the manuscript titled: “Mining Uncertainties: the Social Life of Water and Indigenous Peoples in the Atacama Desert, Northern Chile.” (forthcoming)

In addition to the above article, each student will be asked to identify one or two additional peer-reviewed article in one of the local regional journals (*Estudios Atacameños* or *Chungara*). They will select a case study addressing some of the strategies Atacameños have employed to deal with mining and other extractive encroachments that make it difficult for them to protect the sacred character of water and or their culture and environment as a whole.

A native ritual specialist in charge of leading the canal cleaning ceremony will offer a formal talk about the importance and the meanings of the canal cleaning ceremony. As part of this talk, students will have to engage in a 3-hour hike in the village of Caspana, that will follow the path of the ritual and will culminate at the place where Atacameño make their offerings to the Earth Mother. This hike will give students the opportunity to ask specific questions to the ritual specialist and visualize the place where the ceremony actually takes place.

### **Learning Goals:**

(1) Concept goals for this module:

- Students will learn that there are competing cultural logics about water in the Atacama Desert.
- Students will learn that indigenous peoples face serious challenges to maintain the sustainability of the environment and their culture.
- Students will learn about the manifold ethical dilemmas faced by communities struggling to keep their culture, but also to make a living thus facing tough decisions regarding troublesome offers made by extractive industries.
- Students will learn about the manifold ethical dilemmas faced by corporations and how they deal with them or fail to deal with them in the advance of their business.
- Students will understand that the winners and losers that result from multidimensional ethical controversies are defined by the decisions of very concrete and specific human beings.

(2) Higher order thinking skills:

- Students will learn ‘to see’ society: how to identify the role that society at large plays in the resolution of these socio-cultural, economic, ecological and ethical dilemmas.

(3) Multidisciplinary analysis:

- Students will understand that complex problems may never be answered from single disciplinary lenses.

(4) Other skills goals:

- Students will learn systematic documentation of field observations.
- Students will learn to compare and contrast data from a variety of different sources (written, conversational, experiential, observational).

### **Description and Teaching Materials**

#### **Description:**

If another faculty member would like to teach or modify this course activity, they could do so successfully in the context of a course that was field based and they had strong connections with natives that were willing to give a talk to the students about particular sacred practices and places. If not possible, then they would have to base their activity on secondary sources that describe ritual practices challenged by competing cultural hegemonic logics imposed by nation-states over minority groups.

#### **Teaching Notes:**

This activity has not been tested out yet, however, as soon as it has been used during the January 2015 version of this study abroad course, full notes with tips and what worked or did not work will be included under this heading on teaching notes.

### **Assessment and Resources**

#### **Discussion:**

Students will have to give a 10-15 minute presentation to the group and will be asked to address one or two of the following issues:

- Who pays the price for mining and tourist development (Tourist? Corporations? Nature? Natives?)
- Should mining companies take advantage of their economic power?
- Whose duty is it to defend the weak from corporations that take advantage of their power? (The government, Chilean society, United Nations, the Church, NGOs, etcetera).
- Economic pressures may lead certain communities to sell or lease water to mining or tourist corporations. What are the social and ecological implications of such transactions?

#### **Writing Assignment:**

Students will write a 2-3 page single spaced essay discussing the following questions: How does the commoditization of water affect its sacred character (anthropology)? How does the commoditization of water affect the environment (biology)? What are the ethical dilemmas of imposing a legal view of water over a sacred view?

More specifically, a successful assignment completion will be assessed based on the following rubric:

- (a) Identifies a social problem;
- (b) Asks a question(s) that can be responded to with evidence;
- (c) Provides evidence from a variety of source types and perspectives;

- (d) Ideas are well organized and clearly written;
- (e) Clearly establishes difference between own opinion and what the evidence says;
- (f) Demonstrates curiosity and initiative in completing the assignment.

Broadly speaking, we are assessing whether students were successful in describing the ethical complexities of the impacts of the mining industry on indigenous communities and the environment drawing on a multidisciplinary perspective.

**Resources:**

--Home Page of Journal *Estudios Atacameños*:

[http://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?script=sci\\_serial&pid=0718-1043&lng=es&nrm=iso](http://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?script=sci_serial&pid=0718-1043&lng=es&nrm=iso)

--Home Page of Journal *Chungara*:

<http://www.chungara.cl/>