

“The salt flats have much more to offer to the world than only lithium and copper” Interview with Ramón Morales Balcázar on the value of Chile’s salt flats

How is Chile affected by the high demand for resources critical for climate technologies?

Chile has substantial lithium and copper deposits. There is a high demand for both minerals due to the energy transition. Electric cars rely on these resources, especially for the manufacturing of batteries. Both minerals can be sourced in the Atacama Desert around the salt flats. At the moment, we have two major copper projects and two large-scale lithium projects in the area.

What does the extracting process look like and how is it affecting local communities?

The lithium in Chile, Argentina and Bolivia is extracted from saltwater. This involves pumping large quantities of water out of the aquifers. It is then allowed to evaporate so that the lithium carbonate can be extracted. Pumping out water affects the lagoons and wetlands around the salt flats and also reduces biodiversity in the surrounding area. In addition, the local communities are struggling to protect the water resources used for livestock, mainly llamas, sheep and goats. Water is vital for community livelihoods.

“Local communities are struggling to protect the water resources used for livestock.”

How can local communities benefit more from the extraction?

I think that local communities should be able to participate more in the decision-making process on what’s being done in their territory. In addition, they have the right to be compensated for the damage, not only by the state, but also by the companies. However, this is not really enough. We are not only talking about much-needed benefits for the communities; we are also talking about biodiversity. No amount of money can compensate for the loss of biodiversity. It is very important to understand that, and it goes without saying that it is the same with water. If the water resources are exhausted, we can never recover that with any amount of money. So the compensation can only be a short-term solution, of course. In the long run, we need to assess the possible damage through independent modelling and then decide which projects should be granted operating licences and which should not.

“No amount of money can compensate for the loss of biodiversity.”

What are the goals of your organisation?

The Tanti Foundation is a very small NGO. One of our main goals is to provide environmental education. In addition, we want to raise awareness on all issues related to sustainability. We are especially active in San Pedro, in the north of Chile. All of this work relates to agroecology and the practices that the indigenous communities have preserved since time immemorial. This includes sharing

the knowledge on living in harmony with nature and also making people aware how important it is to organise a community water management system, for example, or how to save local seeds to maintain food sovereignty. At the Andean salt flats observatory, we work with people from Argentina

“We want to share the knowledge and practices from the indigenous communities to live in harmony with nature.”

and Bolivia, including representatives of local communities, NGOs and academics. We focus mainly on the importance of the salt flats, wetlands and biodiversity for local communities and the rest of the world. The biodiversity of this landscape is quite unique, with a high level of endemism. It would be a loss for the entire world if it were destroyed. Also, the wetlands play a vital role as carbon sinks. So ultimately, we think the salt flats and the communities have much more to offer to the world than only lithium and copper.

Ramón Morales Balcázar

Ramón M. Balcázar is the founder of Tanti Foundation – an independent NGO created in San Pedro de Atacama, Chile. Ramón also is a member of the Plurinational Observatory of Andean Salt Flats, a collective of indigenous community members, activists and researchers from Chile, Argentina and Bolivia.



In his PhD he studies the so-called lithium triangle as a new Zone of Sacrifice derived from the energy transition, looking to identify the keys these territories – their ancestral communities and biodiversity – might provide to help the world to face the climate crisis through the construction of alternatives based on a new relation with nature, and the Buen Vivir.

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