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A vision of Latin America and the Caribbean countries

27 March 2024

Weekly Newsletter covering Latin America and the Caribbean issues. A Project between Green Zone Foundation and Telesur.

Lake Titicaca, a Natural Wonder.

The governments that share the lake, Bolivia and Peru, recently held meetings at the highest level to implement a plan for the conservation and restoration of the lake's biodiversity.

Lake Titicaca, located between Bolivia and Peru at 3,800 meters above sea level, is the highest navigable lake in the world.



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The tundra plain known as the altiplano extends to the south and was the site of Tiwanaku, the capital of one of the most important Andean cultures during the first millennium AD. The lake was also considered the center of the cosmos and the origin of the sun, the moon, the stars and humanity and, consequently, was one of the most sacred settlements of the Inca civilization.

The area around the lake was first settled around the middle of the 2nd century BC. The earliest ceramic artifacts were found at Chiripa, on the southern shore. As in other later cultures, the llama, vicuña, and alpaca were a source of wool, transportation, and, if necessary, food. The lake provided fish and totora reeds that were used to make boats, roofs, and mats (a tradition that continues today). Potatoes, quinoa and coca were also grown (corn could not grow at the altitude of the altiplano) and metals such as gold, copper, and tin were extracted from the nearby mountains. However, the freezing climate and lack of trees were constraints on development, factors that would eventually require population movement to the warmer, more fertile south.

One of the civilizations that left the greatest mark around the lake was the Inca. Lake Titicaca became an important location with the rise of the Inca Empire during the 15th and 16th centuries. The Incas were immediately attracted to the altiplano as a possible area of expansion, but it took them some time to conquer the Titicaca basin and its local cultures, the Lupaqa, Qolla and Ayaviris.

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The first expansion into the area occurred in the reign of Viracocha Inka in 1425 and then again under Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui (1438-1471). However, the decisive victory was at the Desaguadero River running from the lake on the south side, which finally secured Inca control and brought merciless reprisals on the local chiefs: their heads were displayed on poles and the skins of their bodies were used for drums. The Qolla leader was reportedly taken to Cuzco and, in a grand ceremony, beheaded for his troubles.

Today it continues to harbor an astonishing diversity of both human and wildlife settlements. Today its valleys are used to promote tourism and attract income to the inhabitants who reside in its meadows. Interestingly, Lake Titicaca is the only navigable water source in Bolivia, a country that is landlocked and therefore excluded from world navigation.

But not all is good news for South America's largest lake. Recently, alarm bells have been ringing because of the severe drought it is going through. Each year it is more intense to the point of endangering the entire biotic ecosystem. This is how a local journalist narrates it in a chronicle: Where before there was water, now there is cracked earth; where before the boats entered with ease to leave merchandise and people, now they juggle to avoid running aground; where before there was green and abundant vegetation typical of the area, now everything is yellow and dry.

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According to Peruvian authorities, last year the most affected part of the drought had dropped 60 centimeters in height from April to the last week of September and would have dropped about 90 centimeters in December. Another phenomenon affecting the lake is mining, both illegal and government-controlled, which often does not comply with approved regulations.

The loss of water in the lake is a catastrophe. Given the altitude at which it is located, rainfall tends to be scarce, although the constant cold, formerly allowed the water does not evaporate, currently by the warming of the atmosphere is no longer the case. The waters withdraw more and more every day, with the usual tragic death of millions of microscopic beings that sustain the balance of flora and fauna. In this way, the inhabitants are affected, fishing volumes decrease, fish die or species that have lived there for millennia disappear.

The governments that share the lake, Bolivia and Peru, recently held meetings at the highest level to implement a plan for the conservation and restoration of the lake's biodiversity. Fortunately, recent reports from February of this year gave a glimmer of hope for the highest navigable blue spot on the planet. The rains returned and with them came life.

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The First Health Ministry in the World

Although Cuba was the first country in the world to have a ministry of health, it was not until the arrival of the Cuban revolution in 1959 that the service became free and universal, allowing the poor to access quality care.

At the beginning of the Republic, and after the end of the second North American military occupation, one of the institutions that created the new state was the Secretariat of Health and Welfare, thus marking a milestone in the world history of medicine.



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On January 28, 1909, Dr. Matías Duque Perdomo took office as Secretary of Health and Charity, after the homonymous Secretariat was established in Cuba, thus becoming the largest of the Antilles the first nation in the world to establish an institution that will ensure public health at the ministry level.

In this way, our public health organization remained unified, independent and elevated to ministerial status so that Cuba would have the priority of doing so throughout the world, since other countries achieved it years later. Thus, Austria raised its own in 1917; Czechoslovakia, in 1918; Great Britain, in 1919; France, in 1920; Dominican Republic and Lebanon, in 1921 and Turkey, in 1923, among the first.

It was composed of two national directorates, one for Health and one for Charity, and a National Board of Health and Charity. The Directorate of Health, in turn, consisted of 6 Negotiated: Central; Health Services of Havana; General and Quarantine Services; Special Hygiene; Statistics, Correspondence and Archives; and Personnel, Goods and Accounts.

Thus the Secretariat will be maintained until the entry into force of the 1940 Cuban Constitution, at which time it will be given a new structure and renamed the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, until the creation of a state agency that would allow free and universal access to public health during the Revolutionary government.

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The one chosen to occupy that portfolio was the doctor Matías Duque Perdomo, former member of the Army Libertador Mambí, known as one of the most important doctors and scientific researchers of Cuba during the first half of the twentieth century.

Between January 1909 and October 1910, Duque Perdomo was in charge of the secretariat, until he was relieved of his post by Manuel Varona Suárez. He then served in other public offices, such as four years in the House of Representatives (1914) and also his participation as a delegate in the Constituent Assembly of 1928.

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Exploitation and Future Prospects for Lithium Industry in Latam

In Latin America the largest reserves are found in brines, which are large natural deposits where salt and lithium accumulate, generally at considerable heights above sea level.

One of the essential minerals for the energy transition that humanity needs is lithium. This mineral is of vital importance for electric vehicle batteries, but also for cell phones and energy storage batteries.



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Until 2022 Australia was the largest lithium producer on the planet with an estimated volume of 55 thousand metric tons. In Latin America, the largest producer is Chile, followed by Argentina, Mexico and Bolivia. Unlike lithium found in other regions of the world, which is extracted in hard rock quarries, in Latin America the largest reserves are found in brines, which are large natural deposits where salt and lithium accumulate, generally at considerable heights above sea level. Bolivia, Peru, Chile and Argentina have the largest deposits with these characteristics.

It is estimated that by 2050 an annual production of 11.2 million tons of LCE (Lithium Carbonate Equivalent) will be needed. In view of this immediate future, Latin American countries that have considerable proven reserves of the coveted mineral are preparing to be at the forefront of world production. They are also planning to start the production of batteries and other accessories in their territories in order to go beyond the export of the raw material.

Precisely following this trend, the President of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, said that he intends to launch a call for U.S. and Canadian companies to participate in the construction of infrastructure to exploit the country's lithium. "Lithium already belongs to the nation and in all cases there must be an association between the public company and private parties," said the Mexican president.

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This same trend is being followed by Bolivia, one of the countries with the largest reserves of the mineral and which is currently partnering with Chinese companies to begin the industrial exploitation of the quarries. Recently, the current government of Luis Arce signed an agreement with the Chinese consortium Catl Brunp and Cmoc (CBC). Consolidating the lithium industrial project is one of the main objectives, according to Bolivian authorities.

Argentina has an ambitious project to become the world's second largest lithium producer by 2030.

The president of Chile, Grabiel Boric, referring to the lithium boom said: "It is an opportunity for economic growth that is unlikely to be repeated in the short term." Undoubtedly, the authorities of these countries know that they have the opportunity to obtain substantial business opportunities and want to keep their distance from the historical way in which underdeveloped countries have managed resources. They seek to manage win-win alliances between their economies and large international companies by attracting foreign investment to provide the necessary technology to start up the exploitation of large reserves. So far, the country that has benefited the most from these proposals is China, which maintains a win-win international policy in its companies, betting on mutual benefits. As a result, the Asian giant is now the largest producer of batteries and accessories in the global electric car industry.

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But is Latin America prepared to take advantage of the economic opportunity to exploit the mineral and at the same time take care of the ecosystems that are home to these reserves?

With the exception of Mexico and Peru, lithium reserves are located in salt flats where biodiversity is as fragile as it is unique, and the eventual increase in lithium mining is of concern to communities, scientists and conservationists. So far, the process to obtain lithium involves the evaporation of millions of liters of water putting these ecosystems at risk. Although expectations are directed towards direct extraction technologies, there is still no convincing evidence that they effectively reduce environmental damage.

Globally, lithium is already playing a major role in electromobility and energy storage. Lithium plays a key position in the global energy transition and so far there is no technological substitute, so there is a global race to secure its supply. We do not know how long this race will last, but it will not be short. Latin America is more than ever in an advantageous position, with every indication that it will not let up in its efforts to win the lithium rush.

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Horror in the Caves: The Vengeful Screams of the Chinese

"The Union" to this day remains the resting place of souls abandoned under the mine

Cuba's history is rife with legends, myths and fables, yet many fairy tales are based on a reality darker than the same fiction at times



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Among the most horrific stories of the Cuban camps is the Union mine, in Pinar del Rio, the tomb of an entire community of Chinese culies, who were exterminated by the exploitation and greed of the colonizers.

More than 150 Chinese worked in the Union, who had fled the wars in Asia, these people did not possess identity under the laws of the time. They were illegal migrants so it was common for them to be exploited in past works almost as slaves.

"The Union mine was the closest thing to a prison of forced labor, the Chinese being foreigners, poor and not even having basic means to live were confined to an almost slavery in the caves", said Enrique Pertierra Sierra, historian of the municipality of Mantua and one of the oldest researchers on the subject.

The business was going well, but changes in the mining market would force the mine owners to incur almost unpayable debts. For this reason, they resort to smuggling and trafficking of Chinese in slave ships.

Drowned in debt and fearful that the Spanish authorities would know about the smuggling and trafficking of people carried out there the owners of the mining company "Suárez Agudín y Compañía" decided to dissolve the association in 1865 and close the cave in 1868.

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The end of the culies

The decision was already made: they would blow up the mine so as not to leave traces of business or the culies after all, the Chinese came from the other part of the world and were more slaves than workers. Foremen and others of confidence placed the explosive charges, and at sunset, when the workers continued in the galleries, they detonated them.

"Thus, were buried the culies workers, far from their homeland, among the fumes of dynamite, rarefied oxygen and the furious and useless blows of beak that only served to weaken them and accelerate the inevitable".

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