

# Current Trends in Latin American Commons Research

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## Abstract

Little is known, in a collective sense, about commons or commons research across the diverse regions and countries that make up Latin America. This paper addresses that knowledge gap by means of a review of communal land tenure data for the region, followed by a detailed analysis of international scholarly publications and conference presentations on Latin American commons, covering the period 1990-2012. We show that commons scholarship in the region, while growing, is focused on a relatively small number of countries. We speculate on the reasons for this, as well as identify the challenges that face commons researchers in Latin America as it looks to maximise the academic and policy impact of their work.

Keywords: *commons, Latin America, research, scholarship, land tenure reform*

## Resumen

A lo largo de las diversas regiones y países que componen América Latina existe escaso conocimiento sobre los bienes comunes, y la investigación sobre los mismos. Este trabajo se refiere a esta brecha del conocimiento mediante una revisión de datos sobre la tenencia comunal de la tierra en la región, seguido de un análisis de las publicaciones académicas y presentaciones en congresos internacionales durante el período 1990-2012. Se muestra que la producción académica en Latino América, si bien está creciendo, se encuentra concentrada, relativamente, en un pequeño número de países. Se especulan las razones para ello e identifican los desafíos que necesitan atenderse para que la investigación sobre los bienes comunes pueda prosperar en la región y maximizar su impacto académico y sobre las políticas públicas.

Palabras clave: *bienes comunes, América Latina, investigación, reforma de la tenencia de la tierra*

## Introduction

Despite burgeoning theoretical and applied scholarship on the commons, we know little about the specifics that define commons regimes in different parts of the world. Latin America is one such case.<sup>1</sup> Meetings and conferences tied to commons research, such as the global conferences organized by the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC), have always had some representation from Latin America, yet those working in the region have rarely come together to talk about their work on the commons. Consequently, we hold little substantive knowledge about commons or commons research across the region: neither the kind of studies being conducted, the obstacles facing those who work in Latin America, nor the similarities or differences that may exist between the countries found there. In this paper, the first of a series of articles on Latin American commons that feature in this issue of *JLAG*, we present and discuss data that may help to fill some of these knowledge gaps. The following questions guide our analysis:

- 1) How well represented is Latin America within international scholarship on the commons?
- 2) What can we say about Latin American commons research and publication over time?
- 3) What are the commons and thematic foci under investigation in Latin America?
- 4) Who is carrying out commons research in Latin America, and where are they based?
- 5) What are some possible barriers to research and publication?

In providing answers to these questions, we shed light on the state of commons research in Latin America, and speculate as to how research could be strengthened and its impact on policy increased.

However, we begin proceedings by providing brief demographic, bio-cultural, and socio-political information on Latin America and delving into the history and current status of communal tenure systems in the region. This gives context to the data presented in this paper, and thus helps draw appropriate conclusions from our study, but also sets the scene for the other articles featured in this issue.

## Background on Latin America

Latin America covers 19.93 million km<sup>2</sup> or a little over 13 percent of the world's land surface (IPCC 2001). It was home to 548 million people in 2010, with over half residing in just two (Brazil and Mexico) of the region's twenty member countries (United Nations 2010). While highly urbanized – four-fifths of Latin America's population now lives in cities – the number of rural localities remains high, with a cultural diversity rivaled by few places in the world (Campbell 2007). Latin America's indigenous population stands at approximately 48 million people, distributed unevenly across the region (Table

1) (IWGIA 2011; CIA World Factbook 2010; Stavenhagen 2001). In many countries, the majority of the population is *mestizo* (of mixed heritage or descent); proof that the richness of contemporary Latin American culture is very much a product of multiple influences in addition to those of pre-Colombian peoples. They include European colonial culture, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigration from Europe, Asia and Africa.

Country	Indigenous population (as % of total)
Mexico	13.0
Guatemala	60.0
Ecuador	13.9
Costa Rica	1.7
Panama	12.7
Colombia	3.4
Venezuela	2.2
Paraguay	2.0
Peru	45.0
Bolivia	55.0
Argentina	1.5

Table 1 - Indigenous populations in select Latin American countries<sup>2</sup>  
(Source: IWGIA 2011, CIA World Factbook 2010)

In ecological and geographical terms, Latin America is no less varied. It is home to arguably the greatest biological diversity on the planet and hosts several of the world's mega-diverse countries –Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru. The region accounts for approximately 27 percent of the world's mammals, 34 percent of its plants, 37 percent of its reptiles, 43 percent of its birds, and 47 percent of its amphibians (Rainforest Alliance 2008). Latin America's biogeographic regions mirror this diversity (Morrone 2006), with transition zones in Mexico and South America particularly significant because of the mixing of different biotic components, which throw up prime conditions for evolutionary diversification and ecological interaction.

Although home to under 10 percent of the world's population, by the turn of the twenty-first century Latin America accounted for 23 percent of the planet's arable land, 10 percent of its cultivated land, 17 percent of its pastures, 22 percent of its forests (including 52 percent of its tropical forests), and 31 percent of its permanently usable water (Chichilinsky and Gallopin 2001). The region is heavily dependent on its natural resource base for both securing local livelihoods and generating many of its primary exports (Ceballos *et al.* 2009; UNEP 2009). High rates of environmental degradation have been reported, with large-scale mining operations and the continued expansion of ranching and agricultural frontiers seen as major drivers of land use change (Alkemade *et al.*

2009). Recent data, however, suggest a reversal or slow-down in environmental degradation in some places (Hecht 2011) with forest resurgence reported in others (Robson 2010; Rudel *et al.*, 2005). At the same time, the delimitation of ecosystems, along with the species they are home to, will shift as climatic changes continue to have an impact (IPCC 2001). These will not only affect wild biodiversity but agricultural production and crop diversity also (Baethgen 1997; Jones *et al.* 2003).

### *Evolving Trends in Resource Use and Tenure*

Today's indigenous and *mestizo* groups are distant relations of the first peoples to settle the Americas 15,000 years ago. From their beginnings as predominantly hunter-gatherer societies, it is believed that the earliest agricultural practices in Latin America date to circa 6,500 B.C., when wild plants began to be cultivated for food in Mesoamerica and the Amazon Basin (Roush 1997). Further crop diversification became the catalyst for the establishment and settlement of village communities throughout the region. Along the coast, fishing helped to establish a primary source of food and the growth of coastal communities, with the development of irrigation systems further aiding the rise of agrarian societies (O'Brien 2005). Latin American environmental history suggests that territorial resources were often used and managed as commons, in accordance with locally derived norms (Miller 2007).

Traditional ways of life, however, including the degree of control that such groups held over customary lands and waterways, changed dramatically as the Spanish, Portuguese, and other interests colonized and took control of the region from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Contact between people, plants and animals of the Old and New Worlds brought huge changes: new staple crops and domesticated animals; diseases that decimated many indigenous populations; and, new forms of governance, societal structures and norms. Colonial administrations typically forced indigenous communities to pay tribute to the Crown and relegated them to the bottom rung of the social, political, and economic ladder (Cardoso and Pérez Brignoli 1979). While existing common resource management structures persisted for a time (Miller 2007), the growing influence of rationalist and individualistic discourses was such that the dismantling of communal properties through privatization processes had become widespread by the end of the colonial period (Lana Berasain 2008). Indigenous land and resource rights were altered further in a post-colonial setting as newly independent countries subjected native peoples to laws and policies intended to assimilate them into 'national' societies.

A backlash to such policies did not emerge until the early twentieth century, with concerted efforts to restore indigenous and peasant (*campesino*) rights – a movement that continues to this day. Change began with the implementation of agrarian reform programs in a number of Latin American countries, which were intended to give extensive access to land to the rural poor, especially those groups with claims to long-standing customary areas. In Bolivia, Mexico, and Peru, reform enabled close to half of all lands to be redistributed,

although this was often a drawn-out and far from straightforward process (Bray, this issue). Such reforms either removed the elites (Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela) or effectively expropriated them (Mexico, Bolivia, Chile, and Peru) (de Janvry and Sadoulet 2002).

However, while this process reinstated communal property regimes in some countries, agrarian reform did not take place in many others (the Southern Cone countries of Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay prominent among them). Rather, for a number of countries, revisions to the laws and policies that govern rights to land and natural resources (examples of which are shown in Table 2) have only occurred in more recent times; often in response to the increased political mobilization of indigenous organizations and non-indigenous NGOs.

Country	New Policy or Law
Brazil	The 2006 Law on Forest Management aims to combat deforestation in the Amazon and provides for the demarcation of public forests including indigenous areas. The law also provides for concessions to local communities
Honduras	The 2007 Forestry Law provides for the participation of communities in forestry consultative councils, the regularization of forested lands with demarcation of areas of protection, conservation, and community management
Venezuela	In 2005, Venezuela's legislature passed a new law ( <i>Ley Orgánica de Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas</i> ) on indigenous peoples and communities which includes a provision ensuring the land and property rights of indigenous peoples and communities. The law also specifies the process for demarcating and titling indigenous lands, recognizing ancestral rights to forest lands and specifying the process for demarcating and titling indigenous lands
Nicaragua	In 2003, Law 445 of the <i>Communal Property Regime of Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Communities of the Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua and of the Bocay, Coco, Indio and Maíz rivers</i> was passed to support the communal rights of indigenous communities, and to legally protect them from third parties through the official recognition of traditional communal governance systems.

Table 2 – New or amended laws strengthening community resource use in a selection of Latin American countries (Source: Modified from Sunderlin *et al.* 2009)

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a raft of new constitutional articles and indigenous legislation that recognize local rights to traditional territories, lifestyles, and cultures. At an international level, Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO 169) is one of the most advanced and effective legal tools to support the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples. Latin American countries heavily promoted ILO 169, with the region (as of August 2012) accounting for fourteen of the twenty-two countries to have thus far ratified the Convention.

Pacheco *et al.* (2010) have written on the dramatic shift in how forest property rights across Latin America are granted and to whom, with indigenous groups, forest-dependent peasants, and migrant smallholders having all gained formal rights to lands at a scale “that was unthinkable in the past”. A number of factors have been identified as having driven the recent tenure reform process: grassroots social pressure, particularly ancestral claims for homelands; growing global conservation concerns that influence national policy decision making and recognize local people as necessary partners; and, a broader process of state restructuring with adoption of devolution and decentralization policies (Barry *et al.* 2010). Despite such advances, large-scale landholders and corporate actors will likely continue to apply pressure on lands granted through reforms in order to expand their logging and extractive activities (oil and mining) (Pacheco *et al.* 2010). The struggle against powerful economic forces is thus both evident today (the current conflict around the Yanacocha gold mine in Cajamarca, Peru, a prime example) and set to pose a significant challenge to local rights-holders in the future.

#### *Communal Resource Tenure in 2012*

Given this evolving and differentiated history of tenure reform, not only do individual Latin American countries each have their own story to tell, but it is no easy task to determine how tenure over the region’s lands and water bodies is distributed and thus the current degree of communal resource use and ownership.

In those countries with a long history of communal tenure and/or extensive community managed or owned territories, reliable data tend to be more readily available. This is the case for Mexico, Peru, Bolivia and Guatemala. In Mexico, for example, an estimated fifty-two percent of the country’s lands and close to seventy percent of its remaining forests are classified as village-owned properties (Bray *et al.* 2003; Barnes 2009). In Peru, White and Martin (2002) report that community and indigenous groups own or have use rights to nearly half of the country’s forestlands. Yet even in these countries, the available government data is insufficiently detailed to allow one to estimate the extension of many specific resource commons, such as rangelands, fisheries, groundwater, watersheds, irrigation, commonly owned and used agricultural land, or urban commons.

For most other countries, the situation is yet more difficult to ascertain, with data often inadequate, out of date, or simply unavailable (Herrera 2005; Lichtenstein, this issue), with few conducting the type of study or census that allows for characteristics such as size (area), type of tenure (private vs. common vs. state), title status (formal vs. informal), and land use (forest vs. agriculture) to be accurately measured. Information of this kind is beginning to emerge in some cases—in Central America, for example, where significant areas of forests have recently fallen under formal or customary common property regimes (Larson and Monterroso, this issue)—yet remains absent in many others.

A second difficulty inherent in determining levels of communal resource use and ownership is due to the different ways by which communal tenure can be considered. From the point of view of customary tenure, it is the people who live in and near forests and other natural resource commons that are considered their owners, and not the government. However, if the question is posed in terms of statutory tenure (determined by the state) then, for many Latin American commons, the presumption that they are the property of rural communities under customary norms is rarely reflected or endorsed in national laws (Sunderlin *et al.* 2009). The most tangible example of this is the millions of hectares of commons that have been formally withdrawn from the customary sector to make way for state-owned protected areas (Alden Wily 2011).

Despite these problems and restrictions, current data on statutory tenure across Latin America do show that government recognition of indigenous territories, community lands (including extractive reserves and (agro) extractive settlements), and social forest concessions in Latin America is increasing and leading to significant levels of communal tenure in multiple cases (Pacheco *et al.* 2012). In addition, the trend is towards an upturn in communal land tenure over time, with Sunderlin *et al.* (2009) showing that the area of forest land owned by a number of national governments declined between 2002 and 2008, with the shortfall accounted for, in most cases, by an increase in forests owned by or designated for the use of local communities and indigenous peoples<sup>3</sup>.

However, while this news is encouraging for proponents of common property resource regimes, it is important to note that detected change in tenure has occurred in fewer than half of the twenty countries that make up Latin America. Across much of the region, reforms have either been non-existent or poorly implemented, highlighting how the transfer of land rights from governments to local communities and indigenous peoples has been slow and uneven. As such, while legislative changes and greater overall recognition of indigenous rights points to a more equitable future for the region's local and indigenous communities, the administration and enforcement of indigenous land rights vary considerably (Lauriola, this issue). While some indigenous communities have succeeded in regularizing or securing full rights to their traditional lands, other communities continue to struggle against complicated government bureaucracies, deeply engrained political obstacles, and the effects of widespread privatization in the region (Herrera 2005; Pacheco *et al.* 2012).

Even where land reforms have taken place, and communities have gained greater rights over lands and waterways, problems remain. In the case of earlier agrarian reform programs, policies have generally focused on access to land as opposed to the competitiveness of beneficiaries (de Janvry and Sadoulet 2002). In Bolivia and Peru, for example, post-revolution reform resulted in the distribution of land in haciendas to workers on these lands, but was not accompanied by rural development programs to support how those beneficiaries used that land. In Mexico, where land reform led initially to increased productivity among beneficiaries by means of large irrigation projects and institutional changes in support of the communal sector, this

process did not affect all regions and all communities in the same way, with assistance declining over time (de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2002; Bray, this issue). The result has been increasing numbers of commoners (beneficiaries) falling into stagnation and poverty, evidenced by the elevated rates of out-migration that continue to impact the country's rural areas (Robson 2010).

Warriner (1969) qualified as "incomplete" any land reform where access to land is not accompanied by a set of institutional reforms that secures the competitiveness of those in whom land and resources are vested. In Latin America, experience to date has shown that improving access to land has been easier than helping owner communities improve their wellbeing (de Janvry and Sadoulet 2002; Bray, this issue). Rural poverty remains a huge social problem. Except for Brazil, and very recently Chile and Mexico, the total number of rural poor has increased in every other Latin American country since the 1970s (World Bank 2010). In terms of human development, the latest data show that Latin America has the highest level of inequality in terms of salaries, education, health and other social, political and economic indicators among global regions (UNDP 2010). Such inequalities are as apparent among emerging markets as they are for the region's most underdeveloped economies, with indigenous populations often among the most disadvantaged sections of society.

Lastly, our understanding of recent processes of change cannot be complete without considering the three or more decades of neoliberal reforms that have sought to link rural sectors in Latin America more closely to global markets, and which have provoked a major restructuring of the region's economies and societies (Otero 2004). With that restructuring has come a host of profound changes that has led Latin American scholars and practitioners alike to talk of a *nueva ruralidad* (new rurality) (Kay 2008, Burkham 2012). Whether "new" or not, these changes—the diversification of rural activities, the importance of non-agricultural employment and non-agricultural incomes in the livelihood strategies of rural communities, the increasing feminization of rural work, growing rural–urban interactions, and the rising importance of international migration and remittances, among them—have all intensified under such reforms and processes, and provide both opportunities and challenges to commons regimes and the people around whom these systems function (Klooster, this issue).

### *Summary*

This section has highlighted how commons continue to play a key role in securing local livelihoods across Latin America. Yet, as can be expected in such a diverse region, individual country-level experiences with these kinds of resource systems appear to vary considerably. At the same time, commoners from across the region are faced by a new set of challenges under neoliberal and globalizing forces. With this context firmly in mind, the second half of this paper presents the results of a study of the research on Latin American commons conducted over the past two decades or so. These findings not only provide a snapshot of the types of commons and commons-related issues to



have been the focus of scholarly investigation in the region in recent times, including where that work is being carried out and by whom, but they also help us to identify the most important knowledge gaps, the possible barriers to research, and what this may mean, not only in terms of future commons research, but also with regards to a commons-friendly policy environment to emerge across Latin America.

## Study Methods

Data come from a web-based search using the following sources: (i) past global conferences of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) (1990-2011); and, (ii) articles published in fourteen international journals during the period 2000-2012.

First, we reviewed the archived papers presented at the global conferences of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC) during the period 1990-2011 (Table 3). It should be noted that the number of papers archived is generally a quarter to a third of the total number of papers actually presented at these meetings.

Year	Venue	Participants	Papers Archived
1990	Durham, USA	210	43
1991	Winnipeg, Canada	350	82
1992	Washington, D.C., USA	100	77
1993	Los Baños, Philippines	80	53
1995	Bodo, Norway	350	198
1996	Berkeley, USA	500	81
1998	Vancouver, Canada	500	176
2000	Bloomington, USA	600	367
2002	Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe	300	150
2004	Oaxaca City, Mexico	700	239
2006	Bali, Indonesia	500	266
2008	Cheltenham, UK	600	313
2011	Hyderabad, India	800	298

Table 3 – IASC Global Conferences (1990-2011)

IASC conferences are arguably the premier academic meetings for scholars working in the field of commons research, and as Table 3 shows, the number of delegates at these events has grown impressively over the years. The IASC describes itself as the “leading professional association dedicated to the commons ... devoted to bringing together interdisciplinary researchers, practitioners, and policymakers for the purpose of fostering better understandings, improvements, and sustainable solutions for environmental, electronic, and any other type of shared resource that is a commons or a

common-pool resource”. For earlier conferences (1990-1996), programs and book of abstracts were reviewed, while for later conferences (1998-2011) these same sources were used in combination with the conference papers archived online at the Digital Library of the Commons (DLC). The DLC (<http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/>) is a gateway to the international literature on the commons and provides free and open access to full-text articles, papers, and dissertations. Second, an exhaustive review was carried out of articles published (for the period 2000-2012) in the following journals: *Human Ecology, Society and Natural Resources, Environment and Development Economics, Environmental Management, Conservation Biology, Agriculture and Human Values, World Development, Land Economics, Ecological Economics, Environmental Conservation, Development and Change, and Ecology and Society*. These were the same journals used by van Laerhoven and Ostrom in their 2007 review of commons research globally; identified as having published five or more articles on ‘the commons’ between 1985 and 2005. These journals provide the data for many of our figures and their subsequent analyses and discussion. Supplementary data was also gathered from a search of the *Journal of Latin American Geography* over the same period (2000-2012), as well as a specialist commons publication, the *International Journal of the Commons*, which has been in circulation since 2007. The main findings from our analysis of these two publications are presented at the end of the paper.

For both conference papers and journal articles, the following keywords were used to ensure as complete a search as possible: *commons, common-pool resources, resource institutions, Latin America, South America, Central America, Ostrom, community-based, collective action*. Each hit was analyzed in terms of country focus (single or multiple), type of commons being studied, thematic area, discipline, along with nationality and institutional affiliation of first authors. Papers were divided into case studies, policy papers, theoretical papers and methodological papers.

While we use IASC conference presentations and papers published in select international journals as a proxy for commons studies in Latin America, we acknowledge that this is a limited sample of possible sources, and fully aware that it misses out on grey literature, papers presented at conferences other than IASC, and, perhaps most significantly of all, national and regional publications in Spanish and Portuguese.

## Results and Discussion

*How well represented is Latin America within international scholarship on the commons?*

In terms of Latin America’s rank alongside other world regions (Figure 1), the number of papers from Latin America presented at IASC Global Conferences (1990-2011) stood at 12.06 percent, which is slightly below the number from North America (13.7 percent) and Europe (13.03 percent). However, the region is well behind the number held in the DLC that focus on Asia (35 percent) or Africa (22 percent), which combined account for 57 percent of all archived papers.

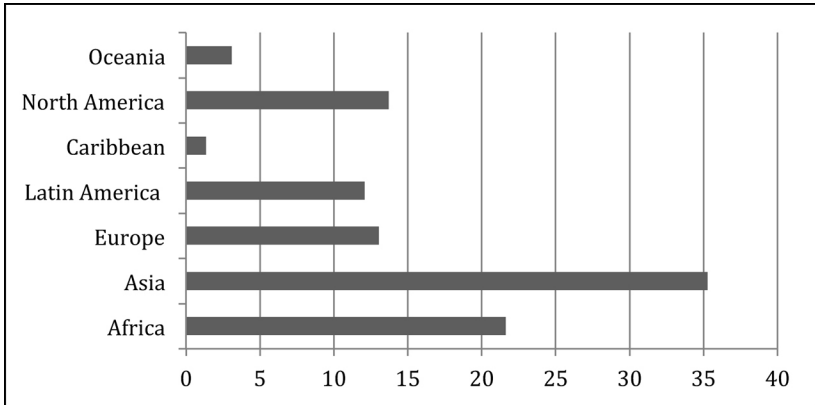


Figure 1. Conference papers held in the Digital Library of the Commons by world region (as % of archived papers).

If we look at IASC conference participation (Figure 2), Latin America was poorly represented (accounting for between one and six percent of total papers) during the Association's early conferences (1990-1996). However, Latin American participation has improved since then, with 9-15 percent coverage for the period 1998-2002, and a massive upsurge (34 percent) when the conference was held in Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2004.

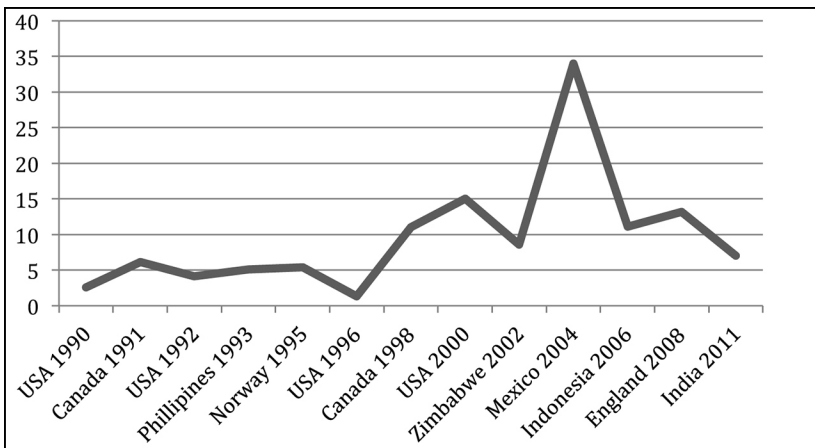


Figure 2. Papers presented at IASC Global Conferences (1990-2011) with a Latin American focus (as % of archived papers).

Over the past six years, coverage has fluctuated between 11 percent in 2006, 13 percent in 2008 and 7 percent at the last meeting in 2011; the fall likely a reflection of the distant venue and cuts in travel funding support from long-term donors (IDRC and Ford Foundation, among others).

Similarly, the trend for international journals (Figure 3) shows a general increase over time in the number of published articles with a Latin American focus. Two peaks stand out. The first, in 2005, points again to the influence of the IASC Conference held in Oaxaca, Mexico, the previous year. The second has been the impressive increase over the past two years (2010–2012), with the number of Latin American commons papers published internationally at an all-time high. The reasons for this remain unclear, although it does follow a period of tenure reform across Latin America and thus an increase in community rights over resource commons. It should be noted that commons papers and presentations representing other global regions also increased over the same time period (van Laerhoven and Ostrom 2007).

#### *Latin American Commons Scholarship: A Country-by-Country Analysis*

In terms of a country-by-country analysis, for archived IASC conference papers (1990–2011), Mexico and Brazil are out in front, accounting for well over half of the total (Figure 4). The Andean countries of Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, along with the Central American countries of Costa Rica and Guatemala also stand out, albeit with a much smaller number of hits.

The country coverage for articles published in international journals (Figure 5) sees a similar spread with one key exception; that of Brazil, with a number of hits that, while significant, is much reduced from the proportion of conference papers that it accounts for. This suggests that although many commons researchers working in Brazil present papers at IASC (and perhaps other international conferences), far fewer are publishing their work in the English-language journals we analyzed. For both conference papers and journal publications, one sub-region that is particularly under-represented is the Southern Cone, with the exception of Chile.

A number of factors may help explain why Mexico and Brazil, and to a lesser degree Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, are well represented. These include an above average indigenous population among Latin American countries (with the obvious exception of Brazil—see Table 1) and/or the extent of communal tenure rights over lands and water bodies. Indeed, if one was to map these variables cumulatively, regional hotspots of ethnic diversity and communal land tenure would correspond with many of the countries (Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Guatemala) that our study shows are among the most prominent for commons-related research in Latin America.

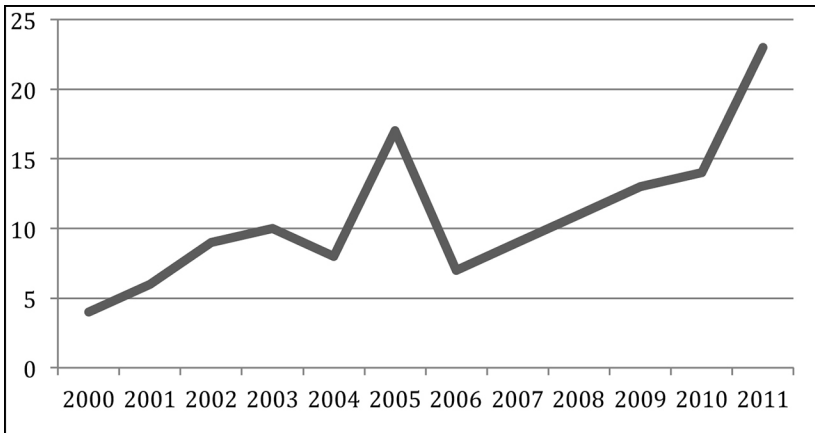


Figure 3. Commons papers with a Latin American focus published in selected international journals (2000-2011) (as number of papers).

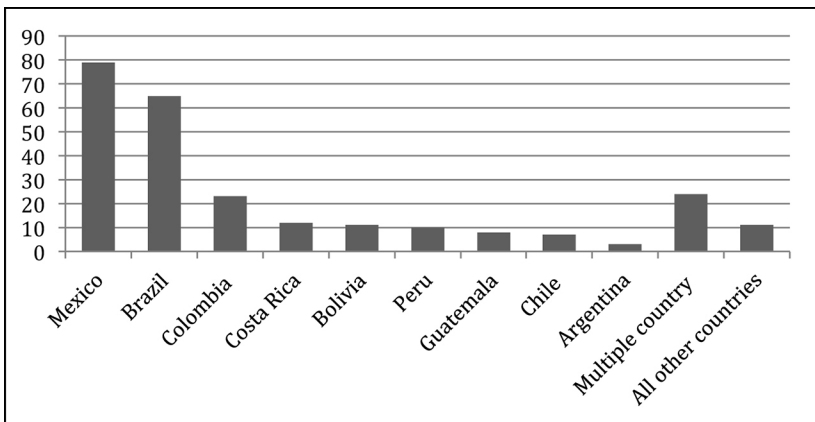


Figure 4. Number of archived IASC conference papers (1990-2011) by country focus (as number of papers).

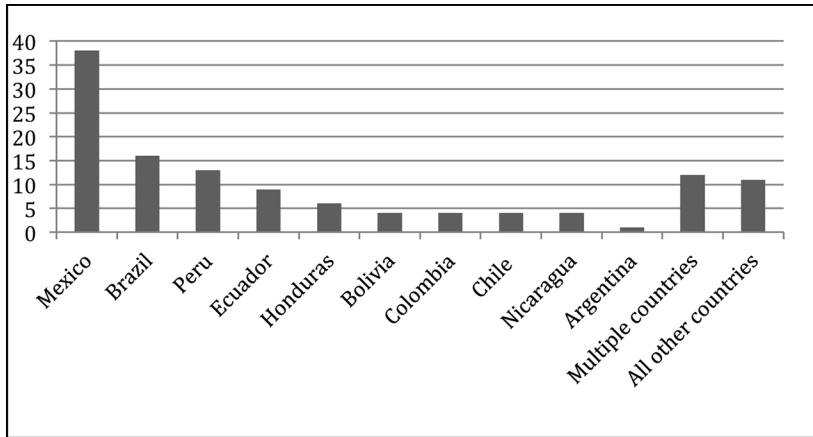


Figure 5. Number of journal articles (2000-2012) by country focus (as number of papers).

Access to universities (and well-funded research community) in the US, Canada and Europe is also likely significant. With greater funding available to study the commons, Latin American students in a position to study for a Ph.D. abroad are often better placed to successfully carry out and complete research projects and to get their work published in English-language journals. Mexico and Brazil, for example, both have educational policies and grants in place that encourage students to study abroad at the masters or doctoral level. Indeed, over half of the Brazilian commons researchers identified by Seixas *et al.* (this issue) received their Ph.D.s in another country, with the majority graduating from US institutions. For other regions of Latin America, the barriers appear greater. Larson and Monterroso (this issue) note that few Central Americans have attended “graduate programs at the University of Indiana to study under or work directly with Elinor Ostrom –founder of the common property school and Nobel laureate– or her former students”. As such, many of the “published academic articles on the region that use a common property perspective have instead been produced by a handful of mostly US scholars who have studied or taught at Indiana and who work in Honduras, Guatemala or Nicaragua”.

When it comes to IASC conferences, the level of Latin American participation could be due to language barriers as much as funding limitations. Apart from the IASC meeting held in Oaxaca, Mexico in 2004, where simultaneous translation was available, all other conferences have been conducted in English only. These events are thus more attractive to those with a good level of English, and thus favor those with access to higher-quality education in their home country or who have spent time abroad studying a higher-level degree at an English-language institution.

### *Types of Commons Under Study*

In terms of the type of commons being studied, it is clear that forests are the most studied among the Latin American research community, accounting for 37 percent of all the papers reviewed (Figure 6). This is followed by fisheries (inland and coastal combined), which account for approximately 20 percent of all papers, multiple (territorial) commons (13 percent), biodiversity commons (9 percent), and water/irrigation commons and agricultural commons (both 7.5 percent).

There were very few papers on digital and information commons, urban and peri-urban commons, climate commons, or intellectual property rights as commons. Indeed, whether one looks at papers presented at IASC conferences or published in the journals we selected, traditional resource commons still account for the overwhelming majority of papers.

These findings contrast somewhat with those of van Laerhoven and Ostrom (2007), whose study of global trends in commons research, while acknowledging the dominance of the “big five” (fisheries, forestry, irrigation, water and pastoral commons), noted the growing importance of several new fields of scholarly interest (climate change, intellectual property and copyrights, and especially commons related to computers, software, and the Internet). Our analysis shows that such commons have yet to make a mark in Latin American commons scholarship. Among the categories of “new” commons, only *biodiversity* emerges as a front-runner from Latin American scholarship; a reflection no doubt of the region’s profile within global conservation circles and discourse. Of course, it should be acknowledged that data come from a limited number of sources, and likely fail to capture the work carried out by others in the research community who are either unaware of, not interested in or unable to present their work at IASC meetings, or who choose to publish their work in journals other than the fourteen we used for this study.

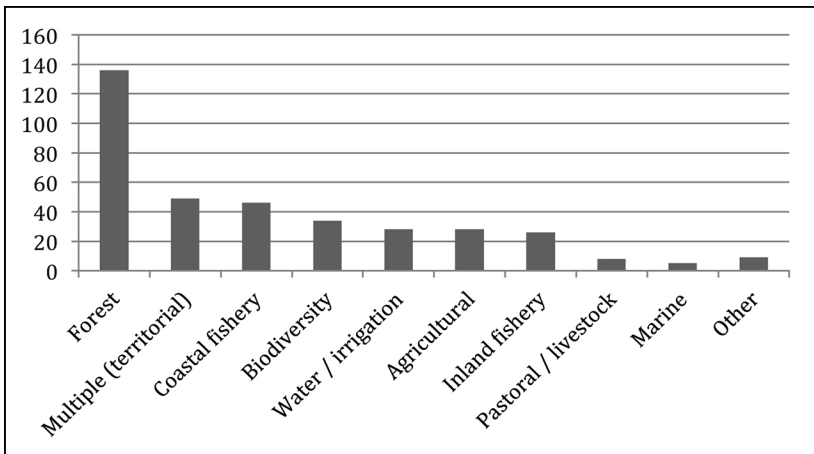


Figure 6. Types of commons featured in IASC conference papers (1990-2011) and journal articles (2000-2012) (as number of papers).

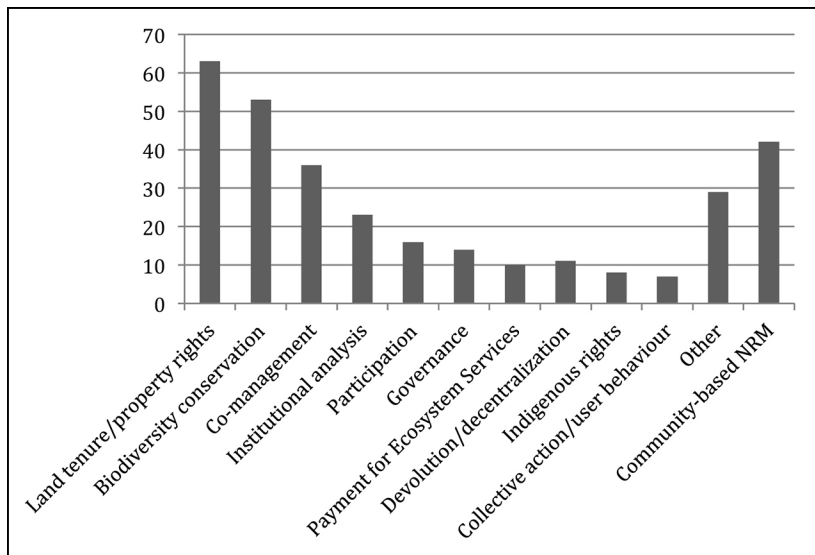


Figure 7. Thematic foci of IASC conference papers (1990-2011) and journal articles (2000-2012) (as number of papers).

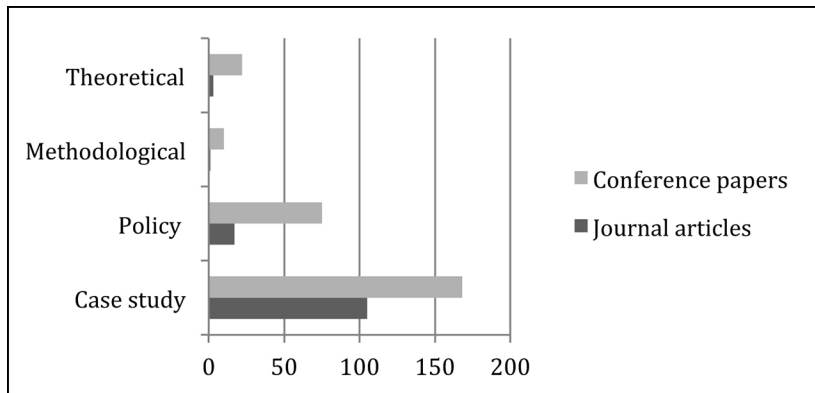


Figure 8. Type of paper for IASC conference papers (1990-2011) and journal articles (2000-2012).

*Thematic Foci and Type of Paper Written*

Figure 7 provides information on the thematic foci of the papers analyzed. Issues surrounding land tenure were very popular, as was the theme of biodiversity conservation. There was also a relatively large number of papers that cut across broad themes and some of these were captured under ‘Community-based natural resource management (NRM)’. Again, we observed only a handful of commons papers and articles that tackled key contemporary issues such as urbanization and climate change.



In terms of the type of paper written –case study, policy paper, methodological paper, or theoretical paper– Figure 8 shows the division between journal articles and conference papers respectively.

While journal articles on the commons are dominated by case studies, with far fewer policy papers and almost no articles that take a methodological or theoretical focus, the spread is more even for conference papers. This is perhaps indicative of the more open format that conferences offer to participants, the difficulty in getting policy papers published as journal articles, and the fact that many practitioners who attend conferences produce grey literature rather than “academic articles”. However, the paucity of methodological and experimental papers that cropped up in our analysis remains surprising given the work of high profile Latin American scholars such as Colombia’s Juan Camilo Cárdenas (2009a, 2009b, 2011), who is known for using game theory, experimental economic techniques, and environmental valuation to explore the rationality of people’s behaviour in common-pool resource management scenarios. Again, this may be indicative of the small number of journals surveyed and the types of studies that they most readily publish.

#### *Who Conducts Commons Research in Latin America?*

If we look at who is publishing Latin American commons research in international journals, the evidence shows that the vast majority (over 87 percent) of first authors are university affiliated and, of these, over four-fifths were based at non-Latin American institutions at the time of publication; with most found in the USA (Figure 9).

However, it is worth noting that for hits corresponding to Latin American universities, close to half (11) of the 24 articles were published in the past two years (2010-2012). This suggests that higher education institutions in the region are now increasingly interested in commons-related issues, have faculty more adept at publishing in international journals, or a combination of these factors is at play. Prominent among the Latin American institutions that featured in our analysis were the Universidad de los Andes (Colombia), Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (Mexico), Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, and several in Brazil also mentioned by Seixas *et al.* (this issue).

This trend is even more apparent when analyzing participation at past IASC conferences (Figure 10). Although universities continue to dominate (accounting for 72 percent of papers analyzed), Latin American institutions are the front-runners rather than those from North America or Europe. This is even the case when discounting the impact of the IASC conference held in Oaxaca, Mexico, which had very high Latin American participation.

Our analysis reveals that Mexico, Brazil, and to a lesser degree Colombia and Peru, are home to a number of well-established universities and research institutions where faculty/staff are using a commons framework for their research. This is not to say that similar patterns could be emerging in other Latin American countries, but rather that the study data clearly point to a

handful of countries leading the way in terms of domestic research institutions funding research on the commons, and that their presence has increased over the past 5-10 years.

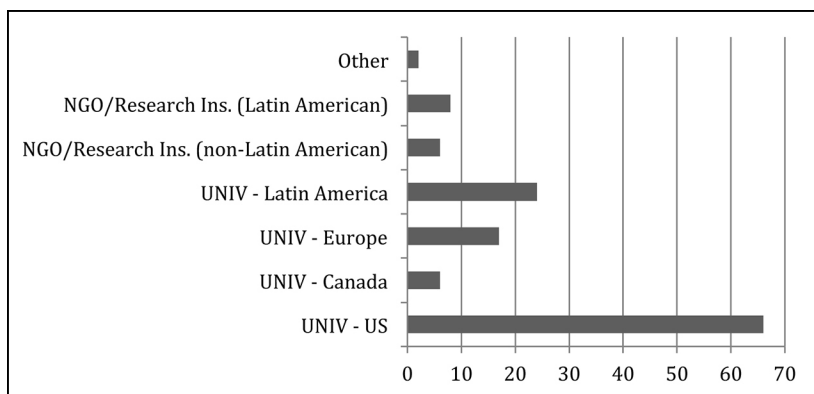


Figure 9. Affiliation and location of first author of journal articles (2000-2012) (as number of papers).

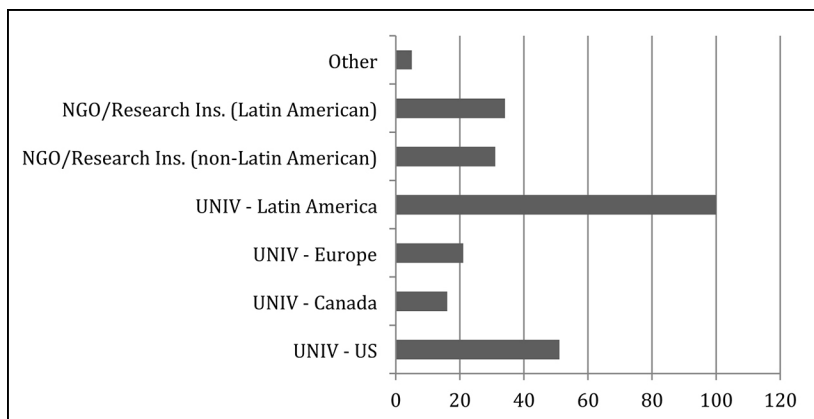


Figure 10. Affiliation and location of first author of conference papers (1990-2011) (as number of papers).

If we look at the nationality of those scholars and practitioners publishing internationally, our best guess (given that identifying the nationality of someone based solely on their name, location and a rapid Internet search is far from an exact science) is that around sixty percent (and certainly over half) of first authors (of journal articles) are non-Latin American. However, we found that the reverse was true for conference papers, where 57 percent of first authors were of Latin American nationality. In addition, if one looks at the data over time (Figure 11), the past decade of IASC meetings (2000-

2011) has seen Latin Americans begin to spearhead the research presented at these conferences; a finding consistent with the increased prominence of Latin American universities and research institutes within international scholarship on the commons.

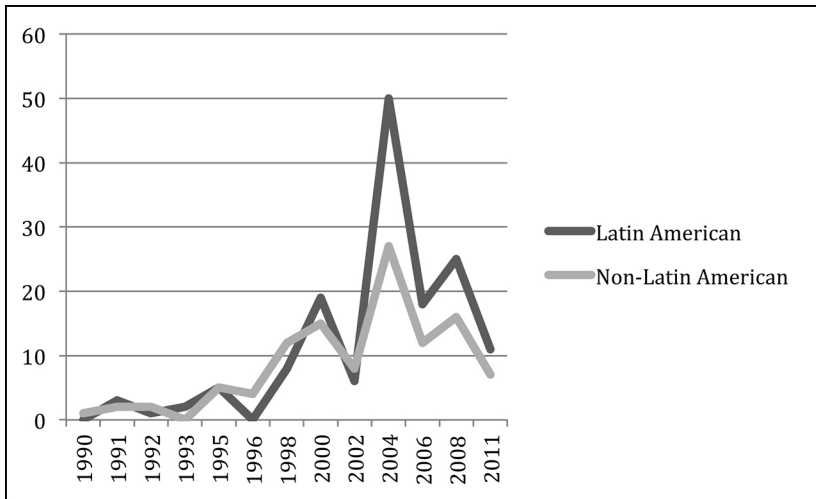


Figure 11. Nationality of first author of IASC conference papers 1990-2011.

Finally, while our main analysis of peer-reviewed journals focused on the twelve English-language publications that van Laerhoven and Ostrom (2007) selected for their study of commons scholarship globally, we also surveyed the *Journal of Latin American Geography* (JLAG) and the *International Journal of the Commons* (IJC), the latter of which specializes in commons research. For *JLAG*, we found that eight (or 5.7 percent) of the 140 papers that the journal published between 2000 and 2012 had a clear commons focus. It is worth noting, however, that all eight were published after 2005, suggesting that commons-related issues may be of increasing research interest to geographers and other scholars working in the region. For the *IJC*, which has only been in circulation since 2007, 12 of 94 papers were based on research conducted on a Latin American commons. This equates to coverage of 12.76 percent, which mirrors the percentage of IASC conference papers (1990-2011) that focus on the region (Figure 1). While neither sample is big enough to draw any firm comparison, the distribution of focus countries, type of commons, paper type, thematic area, discipline, and researcher nationality for both *JLAG* and *IJC* articles roughly corresponds to the trends identified in our main analysis.

## Conclusions

After providing background information on the region, and detailing the moves made across Latin America to restore tenure control and resource rights to indigenous and peasant communities, the remainder of this paper has presented and analyzed data on commons research conducted in Latin America since 1990. While our analysis is limited in its scope,<sup>4</sup> we believe that the major findings are both insightful and significant:

1. As a global region, Latin America occupies a middle ranking in terms of international conference presentations and journal articles on the commons. While it trails well behind both Asia and Africa, Latin America has shown a trend towards increasing representation over time.
2. Scholarship is distributed unevenly across the region, with Mexico and Brazil responsible for a disproportionate number of studies, followed by Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia and Chile, and the Central American countries of Guatemala, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Other nations –Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Venezuela, Panama, and El Salvador, among them– hardly feature at all.
3. Latin American commons scholarship is still dominated by the study of traditional resource commons, in particular forests and fisheries. Studies focusing on global commons and “new” digital or “knowledge” commons are conspicuous by their absence.
4. A handful of broad themes –land tenure, biodiversity conservation, and community-based resource management– account for well over half of all research and scholarship. Contemporary issues such as climate change and urbanization have yet to make their mark.
5. Non-Latin American institutions and non-Latin American scholars are significant players in Latin American commons scholarship, dominating international journal publications in particular. However, Latin American institutions and scholars have begun to enjoy a greater presence within the international research community, and now account for the majority of Latin American presentations at IASC conferences. Our data point to a growing number of researchers from the region, as well as domestic universities, NGOs and specialist institutes, that utilize a commons framework in their work.
6. The significant increase in the number of “home-grown” papers and presentations that followed the IASC conference held in Oaxaca, Mexico, suggests that the hosting of international and

regional meetings in Latin America can have a significant impact on the region's presence in commons scholarship, particularly if these are bilingual events that reduce linguistic barriers to participation. Following this reasoning, we anticipate a much-reduced representation at the next IASC conference in Japan in 2013.

These last two findings point to the traditional obstacles to research and publication faced by Latin American scholars; namely, a lack of adequate funding in their home countries and the language barriers that inhibit the presentation of their work outside of a domestic setting. This is certainly a reason why non-Latin Americans have so often been the international 'face' of research conducted in the region, or why so many Latin American first authors have been based at non-Latin American institutions at the time of publishing in high-impact English-language journals. It also offers a possible explanation as to why Latin America, as a global region, is overshadowed (in terms of number of papers) by both Asia and Africa, places where English is more commonly spoken as a second language.

However, the shift that seems to have taken place over the past 5-10 years, with both Latin Americans and Latin American institutions gaining more of a foothold in the arena of international commons scholarship, is a significant development. At the same time, it is important to note that most of these domestic institutions are found in a very select group of countries, namely Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, and to a lesser degree Peru and Chile. As such, it will be of interest to see: (i) whether the body of Latin American commons scholars can continue to grow over time; and, (ii) whether institutions and researchers from countries with less of a history in this field begin to feature.

We would certainly expect homegrown commons scholarship to increase its profile given the tenure reforms that have taken place across the region, which have resulted in greater local-level rights over shared resources and thus the emergence of researchable scenarios where a commons framework could be used. In addition, the establishment of Latin American-born commons scholars, often educated with Ph.D. from outside the region but now returned to their home countries and training a new generation of undergraduate and graduate students (Seixas *et al.*, this issue), bodes well for the future. Support may also come from Latin America's burgeoning economy, with possibly more funding available to domestic universities and research institutions. Lastly, the Nobel committee's recognition of Elinor Ostrom's pioneering work raised the international profile of commons research and this can be expected to have a very positive global impact.

Yet the financial and linguistic barriers, while reduced in some cases, remain and can appear immovable in certain instances, especially for those countries not part of the vanguard of commons scholarship in Latin America. In this sense, there are several things that domestic commons research efforts could benefit from, and we list just a few ideas here:

- i) The creation of text books on the commons in Spanish and Portuguese, either translations of seminal works from international scholarship on the commons or (preferably) local work with a focus on a region or country of Latin America;
- ii) An increase in the number of open access journals, such as the *International Journal of the Commons*, that could be accessed by university libraries and students without the means to pay for expensive print journal subscription fees;
- iii) A commitment from the Digital Library of the Commons (DLC) to capture more work in Spanish and Portuguese;
- iv) Regular IASC regional conferences to be held in Latin America, and a commitment from the Association to hold a Global Conference in the region on a periodic basis; and,
- v) Commitment and funding to foster academic exchange between North, Central and South America, perhaps through institutional agreements linking commons research programs and departments in different countries of the Americas.

A second issue apparent from our study is that despite growing interest in the commons among the region's research community, the focus of most studies in Latin America remains traditional resource commons and their management. We were surprised to see so few papers that dealt with new commons (*e.g.*, knowledge, genetic, intellectual property) or contemporary issues such as urbanization or the impact of climate change on commons management—findings also reflected in the study of Brazilian commons research by Seixas *et al.* (this issue). The lack of a focus on urbanization was particularly puzzling given how powerful a process this has been in Latin America in recent times, and which continues to convert rural commons into increasingly peri-urban and urban ones. Of course, one must account for the limited nature of the search criteria, which in the case of our study did not capture the work of commons scholars who are not members of IASC or who publish in journals other than the fourteen we selected for review. A recent book, *Who Owns the World? The Rediscovery of the Commons* (Helfrich 2009), provides one example of current thinkers from Latin America whose work often has little to do with traditional natural resource commons and whose insights have rarely featured in IASC circles. Again, it will be interesting to see if these alternative commons themes begin to feature in Latin American scholarship in the coming years. We can only hope they do, given the pressing nature of many of these issues.

Finally, we end with a word or two about policy and what some of our study findings may point to. Specifically, our hope is that as the profile of the commons and commons research builds across Latin America, it will translate into government (at multiple levels) being better informed by local-level realities and thus more supportive of local-level efforts. The potential for commons research to impact policy and on-the-ground realities has been clearly shown by Seixas *et al.* (this issue) in the case of Brazil, Lichtenstein (this issue)

for Argentina, and Larson and Monterroso (this issue) for Central America. In addition, some of the region's recent land tenure reforms have no doubt been influenced by findings from earlier research on commons-related issues (Larson and Monterroso, this issue). All such lessons suggest that if research of this kind can be promoted and strengthened and begin to reach all corners of Latin America, and stronger links forged between the region's academics and practitioners, scholarship on the commons can continue to influence policy decisions, make more "complete" (after Warriner 1969) ongoing tenure reform processes, and direct much needed support to the stewards of Latin America's vast and diverse common-pool resources.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While Latin America is often combined with the Caribbean to form a distinct global region, our focus here is solely on the twenty countries that make up mainland Latin America.

<sup>2</sup> The data shown in Table 1 should be viewed with some caution, given that they correspond to national-level census, each of which has been carried out in accordance with its own methodology and over different time periods.

<sup>3</sup> The obvious exception being Brazil, where there has been almost a 200 percent increase in private forest lands.

<sup>4</sup> To be expanded, the study would need to identify the Latin American researchers who are publishing in non-English language titles and in grey literature, presenting papers at national and regional-level commons conferences, or publishing in disciplinary journals other than the ones featured here. The study by Seixas and colleagues (this issue) provides the type of detailed country-level analysis that is needed to properly identify the challenges faced by today's commons researchers. Such analysis was beyond the scope of our study, but it constitutes the logical next step in efforts to paint a more complete picture of commons research across the region.

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