

Lithium fever dehydrates Andean wetlands

A ruling in Catamarca, Argentina, recognises for the first time that this type of mining has a direct impact on the environment

Leonardo Rossi / Aimée Martínez Vega

The recent [ruling of the Supreme Court of Catamarca](#) on lithium mining in the Salar del Hombre Muerto in Argentina takes on board the repeated warnings that various communities and people in different areas of research have been making: this new extractive advance is based on the collapse of bodies of water and is a threat to entire hydro-social basins. The ruling is only a very elementary acknowledgement from a high level of the state of the impending catastrophe in the salt flats and high Andean lagoons of Argentina and South America in the name of a false energy transition. While alarms are being raised in corporate and governmental sectors about the possible impacts on existing investments and those under negotiation, the underlying issue - the ecological crisis and the truly sustainable alternatives for life embodied by the plaintiff communities - are left out of the main debates.



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The lawsuit filed by the Atacameños del Altiplano community has gone through various instances since 2020. It is based on the observation that the Trapiche River valley had dried up due to the activity of the Livent mining company (now merged with Allkem) in the region. Faced with the attempt to build a new aqueduct over the Los Patos River and the growing advance of various projects in the area (it is estimated that there are currently seven companies with interests there), the community members, represented by their authority, Román Guitián, and the support of the PUCARÁ Assembly, which brings together collectives resisting extractivism in the province, filed an injunction. After going back and forth between the federal and provincial courts, on 13 March, the highest court in

Catamarca finally partially accepted the claim and demanded a comprehensive survey of the presumed cumulative effects of the various projects in the area. Although the ruling does not have an up-to-date argumentation in terms of scientific knowledge about this type of activity or post-anthropocentric views, it is a relevant precedent, given that the lithium boom has been advancing in the country almost unchecked by the various branches of the state in its different national, provincial and local instances.

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Adding lithium to the capitalist furnaces

In recent years, time and again, national and provincial governments of different hues, people linked to the media, corporations and scientific centres have defended Argentina's economic opportunities as an exporter of lithium in the face of global demand for this mineral. The argument is based on the supposedly substantial contribution to an energy transition underway that would combat accelerated climate change and in which this input would be key. In fact, lithium has seen a sharp rise in demand for electric vehicle (EV) batteries, 90% of which comes from the markets of the People's Republic of China, the United States and Europe. Far from being part of planned processes to improve planetary eco-justice and reduce hyper-consumption, the EV market is largely driven by owners of one or more units of different types of vehicles, with the highest value models often being the best sellers, as was the case with the Tesla Y during the first half of 2023 in both China and Europe, where it cost €52,000 at the beginning of last year. This is a new niche of luxury goods, while most of the world's population does not even own a conventional car.

Central in this context is the case of China, a world leader in EVs, with 60% of the current electric fleet and the most extensive EV charging infrastructure in the world, built with government support through substantial subsidies. However, the cost of this leadership is large areas in ruins in more than six cities, as well as the bankruptcy of multiple companies created in the early days of the EV boom for ridesharing, an obsolete project for a world that still relies on individuality. "A small ruined temple dominates a kind of graveyard: a series of fields where hundreds and hundreds of electric cars have been abandoned in the undergrowth and rubbish. Similar clusters of unwanted battery-powered vehicles have sprung up in at least half a dozen cities in China, though some

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have been cleaned up," [describes one newspaper account](#). In short, "they are a striking representation of the excess and waste that can occur when capital floods a burgeoning industry, and perhaps also a

bizarre monument to the seismic progress in electric transport in recent years".

Without even digging too deep, we see how the so-called energy transition implied by the demand for lithium from South American salt flats is a real accelerator of ecological catastrophe. This environmental time limit demands a radical reduction of human mobility and transport of substances and products, especially of those forms of mobility that are not part of collective designs for essential activities in pursuit of a sensible socio-ecological transition. Likewise, the entire fossil fuel-based energy chain that must feed these societies with massive consumption levels - which now also insert these new vehicles - is far from any realistic and just transition. On the contrary, [China continues to increase its consumption of coal](#) - the most polluting fuel - reaching record levels year after year, and the United States is making huge strides with fracking and organising the deployment of new frontiers of oil extraction, such as the controversial [Willow project](#).

Protecting wetlands from collapse

We observe how the high Andean wetlands and Ramsar sites –wetlands designated of international importance– are filled with dots on the maps of lithium mining projects (in Catamarca, there are at least 25 of the 50 proposals in Argentina with a direct impact on 600,000 hectares). In the territories, we find hydro-agro-communities that see their self-sustaining practices at risk, communities that should justly be a model of sustainability, so often banally stated by companies and governments. Likewise, a diversity of villages, hamlets and small towns are besieged by

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the shock of lithium investments and promises of development, progress and work. As we have been observing in our research, these projects not only alter the ecological and water cycles of the regions but also generate a real socio-cultural upheaval wherever they burst in, eroding pre-existing economies, breaking down community relations and introducing or

maximising problems that were previously alien to these landscapes (from vehicle accidents to problematic consumption).

Amid this severe climate crisis, the slightest thought is being given to the care and protection of water, the preservation of local biodiversity and the metabolic relationships necessary for these living spaces to conserve some of their basic properties for the balance of the planetary environmental humidity when investing in the extraction of vast tonnes of lithium. These are [issues that have been raised by research groups](#) and organisations that have listened to the concerns of the communities that ancestrally inhabit the area. However, the competent authorities have ignored these calls for attention for decades. "Water yes, lithium no", and "[Water is worth more than lithium](#)" are some expressions for which these people desperately and in unison clamour.

This ruling, the result of the struggle of the Atacameños del Altiplano community and supported by the PUCARÁ assembly, should urgently nourish the general debate on the so-called lithium fever. The most extended history of this type of mining in the country shows that this project alone has dried up a river, and a significant part of a basin inhabited and cared for by its inhabitants for thousands of years is at risk. Similar cases have already been recorded in Chile, with a longer history of extractive activity. The only fever that should be the focus of attention is that of the planet's temperature, and under no circumstances can this be solved by manufacturing electric cars and sacrificing wetlands and their inhabitants (human and more than human), essential life tissues for ecological and climatic regulation.

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