

THE HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE CENTRAL AREA OF LOS SALTOS DEL LAJA, CHILE: DUAL TOURIST LANDSCAPE ¹

LA CONSTRUCCIÓN HISTÓRICA DEL ÁREA CENTRAL DE LOS SALTOS DEL LAJA, CHILE:
UN PAISAJE TURÍSTICO DUAL

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La investigación analiza la construcción del paisaje histórico del Área Central de Los Saltos del Laja (ACSL), desde su configuración bajo el modelo socioeconómico hacendal, consolidado en el siglo XIX, hasta convertirse en un paisaje turístico dinámico y complejo. El objetivo principal es comprender cronológicamente las diversas etapas y perspectivas que han dado forma al paisaje turístico actual de ACSL, mediante la identificación de los factores físicos y socioculturales que determinan sus transformaciones. Se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo y exploratorio, que combinó la revisión de fuentes secundarias —fotografías aéreas e históricas, cartografías y documentos bibliográficos— con entrevistas semiestructuradas a actores locales, lo que permitió el levantamiento de datos primarios y su análisis narrativo posterior. La integración de diversas fuentes mediante triangulación metodológica permitió contextualizar la transformación histórica del paisaje en el ACSL, a partir de la identificación de quiebres y tensiones, evidenciados en las interacciones de las dinámicas turísticas del sector, como elementos clave en la construcción del paisaje.

Palabras clave: paisaje, turismo, diseño del paisaje, paisaje cultural, desarrollo rural

This research analyzes the construction of the historical landscape of the Los Saltos del Laja Central Area (ACSL, in its Spanish acronym), from its configuration under the consolidated 19th-century hacienda or landowner socioeconomic model to its transformation into a dynamic and complex tourist landscape. The main objective is to understand, in chronological order, the stages and perspectives that have shaped the ACSL's current tourism landscape, and to identify the physical and sociocultural factors behind its transformation. A qualitative and exploratory approach was used, combining a review of secondary sources—such as aerial and historical photographs, cartography, and bibliographic documents—with semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders, permitting the collection of primary data and subsequent narrative analysis. The integration of different sources through methodological triangulation made it possible to contextualize the historical transformation of the landscape in the ACSL, identifying ruptures and tensions evident in the sector's tourism dynamics as key elements in the landscape's construction.

Keywords: landscape, tourism, landscape design, cultural landscape, rural development

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of landscapes in Chile and their relationship with tourism has been approached from various perspectives, including those focused on understanding how the landscape and its tourism use in Chile have been used as tools to build and promote a national identity (Canihuante, 2005; Booth, 2024) and others, which explore how iconographic representations in tourism publications, have shaped Chile's modern territorial imaginary (Galeano-Ibaceta, 2013; Booth & Lavín, 2013; Cortés et al., 2016). This last analysis is based mainly on the publications of the *Empresa de Ferrocarriles del Estado: Guía del Veraneante* (1932-1962) (State Railway Company: Vacationer's Guide (1932-1962)) and the magazine *En Viaje* (1933-1973). It examines how the promotion of tourist infrastructure in these magazines contributed to building the image of "southern" Chile as a tourist destination and to creating iconic sectors, such as "Chilean Switzerland" and other resorts in the country's southern region.

Addressing the historical construction of the tourist landscape in the ACSL, using an analysis focused on the ruptures and tensions as critical elements of its transformation, opens new perspectives to study the urbanization of the rural through tourism operations, which dialogue with contemporary research that analyzes how tourism dynamics, driven by global policies, environmentally and socially affect rural landscapes, transforming the surroundings and, with it, the daily routines and the quality of life of their inhabitants (Lariagon, 2021; Lariagon & Salinas Arreortua, 2025).

Saltos del Laja, or the Laja Waterfalls, located in the communes of Cabrero and Los Ángeles, in the Biobío region, constitute an outstanding natural and tourist site, whose development as a tourist landscape responds not only to natural factors, but also to a cultural process linked to public policies oriented, initially, to extending the nation state, through a dominant hacienda model that defined the landscape's use and exploitation, which generated social inequalities and segmentation in access to natural resources. This article examines how the interaction among institutional devices, private initiatives, and forms of community organization has shaped differentiated landscapes in the ACSL, which in turn have shaped the place's perceptions and tourist dynamics.

Information collection techniques included reviewing secondary sources for historical and descriptive analysis and conducting semi-structured interviews to obtain primary data, which were analyzed using a narrative approach. This made it possible to identify the physical and socio-cultural factors that have transformed the tourism landscape of Saltos del Laja.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The landscape: An unbreakable merger of nature and culture

The transition from the concept of landscape towards more encompassing approaches that recognize the inseparable relationship between nature and culture, which constitute a cultural construct whose meaning is reconfigured according to the historical, artistic, and social contexts in which it is inscribed (Maderuelo, 2007), understands landscape as a category in permanent resignification, shaped by diverse views that condition its interpretation and valuation over time.

From this perspective, the landscape is not only understood as a physical or visual space, but as the result of a continuous process of interaction between natural environments and human practices, something close to the concept of "naturculture", proposed by Donna Haraway, who approaches this inseparable relationship, arguing that nature and culture are not opposite categories, but processes that co-constitute each other (Araiza Díaz, 2021).

The landscape, understood as a dynamic social construct that, in turn, shapes the life and interactions of society (Lindón Villoria, 2007), implies that it not only arises from a harmonious relationship between nature and culture, but also is configured as a scene of dispute, the place of our social struggles, inequality and land exploitation (Carnevale in Rojas Valencia, 2020, p. 148). These disputes show the diversity of perceptions that fall on it, questioning traditional representations by making visible the power relations implicit in the historical construction of the landscape.

Tourism as a social phenomenon: Regional implications and transformations

Since its inception, tourism has been promoted as a driver of modernization and economic growth, especially in the Global South, for its ability to generate income and diversify economies. However, at the end of the 1950s, it began to be analyzed as an integrated social phenomenon (Mauss, 1971), as its influence across multiple dimensions of social and cultural life became evident, alongside criticisms of developmental approaches that ignored its negative effects in vulnerable contexts.

From this critical perspective, dependency theory questioned liberal approaches that promoted tourism as a motor of uniform development. In this context, the tourist enclave is consolidated as a model in which transnational capital exploits the natural and human resources of regions with high landscape value, by commodifying their landscapes and deepening asymmetric power relations and negative effects on the surroundings (Cordero, 2003; Franco, 2019, in Cantú Martínez, 2022, p.37)

Tourism, driven by the uniqueness of places, becomes a catalyst for the commodification of space. As Lariagon (2021) suggests, this phenomenon redefines landscapes and regions, transforming them into products for tourist consumption. Spaces previously linked to cultural practices, traditional uses, or ecological values are reorganized to maximize their potential as destinations, which generate tensions between economic development and the preservation of local values. In this sense, it is connected with what was proposed by Cohen (Benedí-Artigas et al., 2025, p.2), who interprets that the postmodern tourist, in a context of global homogenization, accepts the loss of authenticity and seeks a sophisticated cultural consumption that combines the familiar with the local, and that in turn increases their own cultural capital.

Tourist landscape: Approaches for its interpretation

The tourist landscape can be understood as a complex and dynamic socio-spatial construct, the result of interactions among the natural environment, cultural practices, and the economic logics of tourism. At the same time, it is shaped by the gaze of visitors and host communities, who, according to their own interests, stage the landscape (Bertoncello, 2009).

In this sense, the landscape becomes a symbolic commodity (Hernández Ramírez, 2006), selected, represented, and marketed within the tourism system. In this process of valorization, as Suden (2023) points out, certain exceptional attributes are promoted through tourist images, while other everyday aspects are ignored.

In this way, the tourist landscape selects elements that, due to their aesthetic or symbolic qualities, are attractive, often conditioned by power relations that regulate access, use, and how these landscapes are appropriated and lived (Cantú Martínez, 2022).

In line with this, Cordero's proposal (2003) offers an interpretative framework to analyze how global, national, and local dynamics affect the configuration of the tourist landscape, through three models: a) enclave, characterized by the predominance of transnational capital, the expropriation of local spaces and the hiring of unskilled labor; (b) local participation, where the offer of services managed by local actors and access to spaces of landscape value prevails; and c) combined, which combines elements of both.

III. CASE STUDY

The site of Los Saltos del Laja, located 37 km north of Los Angeles, is configured around four waterfalls that have given rise to a space recognized as an outstanding site for tourism

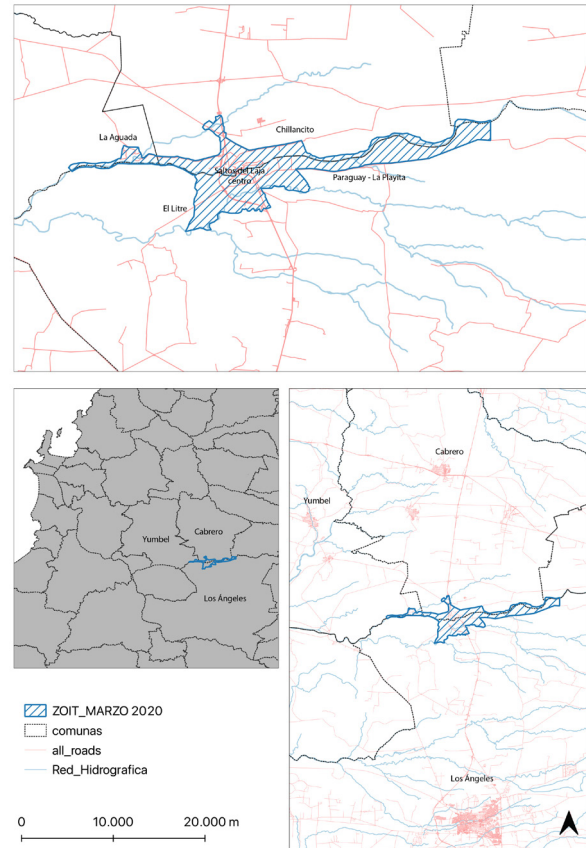


Figure 1. Location - Saltos del Laja ZOIT. Source: Preparation by the Authors.

since the 1930s, consolidating itself as a "gateway" to the south of Chile thanks to its recognition in publications such as the *Guía del Veraneante* (Vacationer's Guide) and *En Viaje*. These initiatives marked the beginning of a tourist history deeply linked to the valuation of its natural landscapes as an emblematic tourist destination.

Its administrative boundaries have historically been complex. Before regionalization, the Laja River marked the natural border between the communes of Yumbel and Los Angeles. After the 1978 reform, part of the area came under Cabrero's jurisdiction, while a segment of the ACSL remained under Yumbel's jurisdiction. Currently, the territory is divided among three communes: Cabrero, Los Angeles, and Yumbel, a situation that led to the formation of the Association of Municipalities for Tourism Development (AMDT) in 2012 to provide an integrated approach to the destination's management.

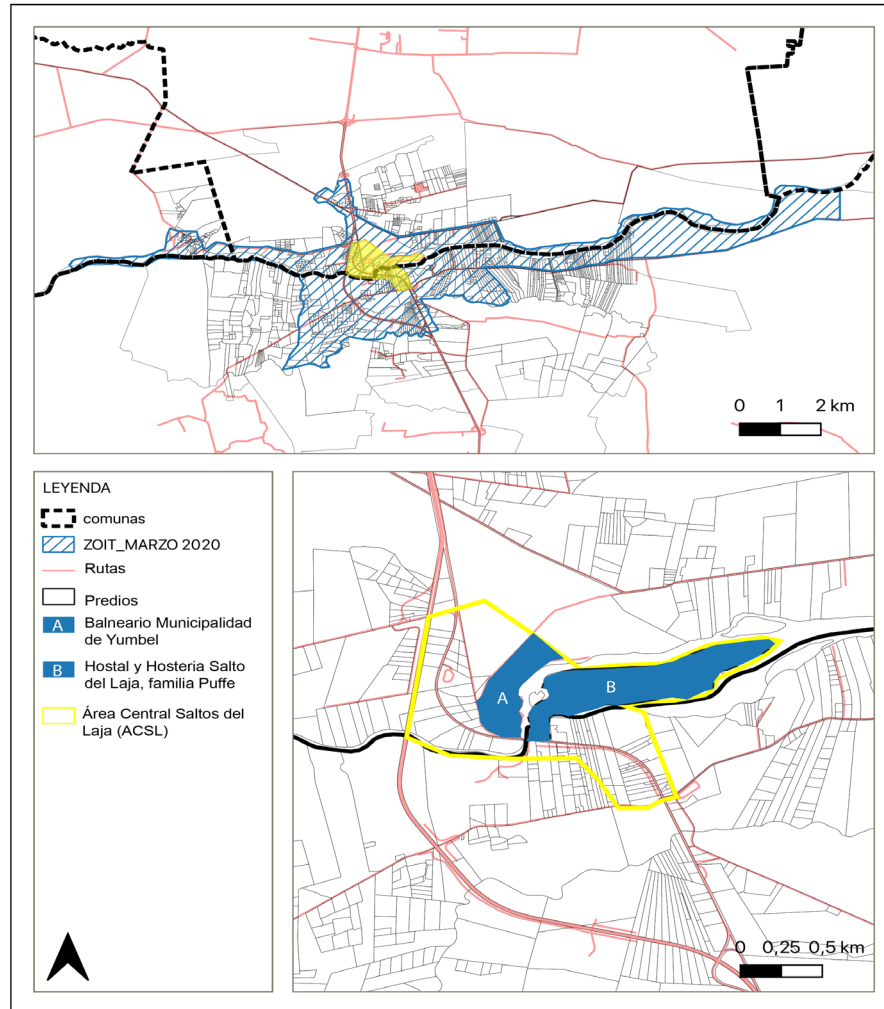


Figure 2. Location and characteristic elements of the ACSL. Source: Preparation by the Authors.

In this way, in 2015, the Zone of Tourist Interest (ZOIT, in Spanish) was established (Figure 1), which covers sectors such as Paraguay-La Playita, El Litre, Salto del Laja Centro, Chillancito, and La Aguada, with a population of 4,182 inhabitants (INE, 2017), within which the study polygon is located.

The study area of this research covers the ACSL (Figure 2), defined by three criteria: a) the location of the central waterfall, the main tourist attraction; b) the concentration of tourist services; and c) the history of the place and its first tourism-based businesses.

Within the polygon, two large, old properties stand out and have spurred tourism in the sector: on the north bank, the Municipal Resort of Yumbel, a former industrial branch of the old El Salto estate; on the south bank, the Salto del Laja Hotel, founded by the Puffe family in the 1950s.

IV. METHODOLOGY AND TECHNIQUES

The research has been conducted using a qualitative, exploratory approach, appropriate for little-studied phenomena such as the tourist landscape of Saltos del Laja (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A narrative approach is privileged, understood as a strategy that enables the understanding and re-signification of local actors' experiences in the tourism sector through their stories (Kohler Riessman, 2007).

To collect information, an exhaustive review of secondary sources contributing to the historical and descriptive analysis of the landscape was conducted, including aerial photographs, cartography, historical photographs, and bibliographic documents. On the other hand, semi-structured interviews were conducted

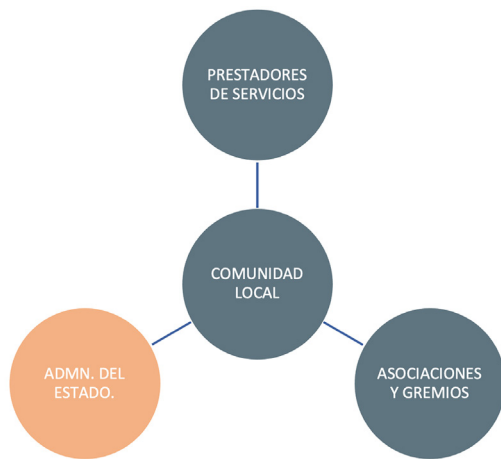


Figure 3. Interviewed stakeholders from the ACSL. Source: Prepared by the Authors based on the National Tourism Strategy 2030 (Undersecretary of Tourism, 2022).

with local actors (Figure 3), drawing on the guidance of Hernández-Sampieri and Mendoza Torres (2020), who discuss the usefulness of interviews for expanding perceptions and meanings.

To contrast the findings, methodological triangulation was applied (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2010), understood as the integration of diverse techniques and information sources to better, more broadly, and more nuancedly understand the dynamics that shape the tourist landscape in the ACSL.

Thus, considering that the landscape is understood as a social construct interpreted through narratives (Lindón Villoria, 2007) and configured as a scenario of dispute (Carnevale in Rojas Valencia, 2020, p. 148), the analysis was structured to identify ruptures and tensions as ACSL's landscape was being shaped. The ruptures allow recognizing transformations in its historical configuration, while the tensions reveal the disagreements and negotiations among stakeholders over the modes of use and appropriation of the landscape. These categories guide the reading of historical and cartographic sources and the stories of local actors, permitting an understanding of the socio-temporal aspects in the configuration of the ACSL's landscape.

V. RESULTS

Hacienda landscape: The transition to tourism development (before 1954)

Before its tourism development, Saltos del Laja was dominated by a consolidated hacienda model in the 19th century, with large estates such as El Salto, El Zarzal, Santa Rosa, and La

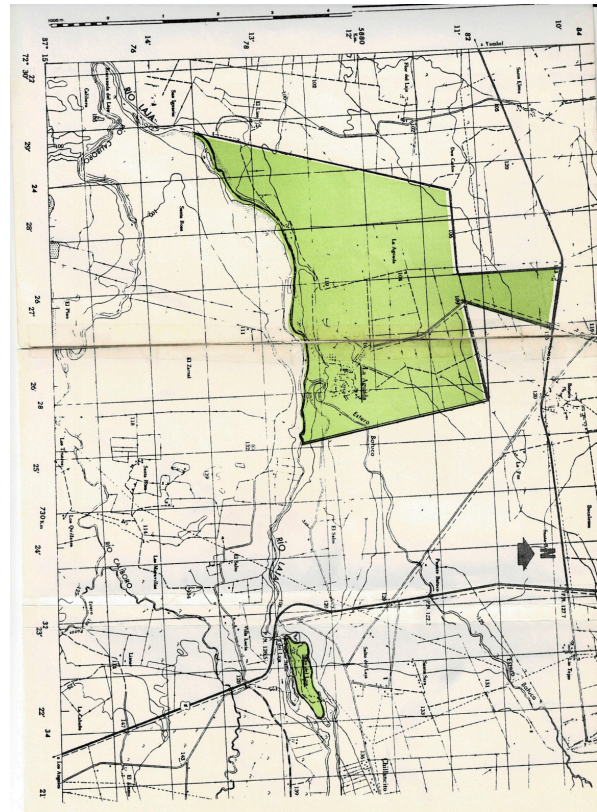


Figure 4. Location of Saltos del Laja, considering the large estates and the La Aguada Hacienda. Source: El Laja un río creador (Recart Novion et al., 1971).

Aguada (Figure 4), among others. These properties supported an economy based on agriculture and livestock. At the same time, at the margins, rural life was organized around subsistence farming, strengthened by community practices such as the *mingacos* (community projects) and *trillas* (threshing).

During this period, the landscape was mainly shaped by the productive infrastructure owned by large landowners, with the La Aguada hacienda standing out for combining agriculture, livestock, and industry, including mills, dairies, and irrigation systems that irrigated up to 900 blocks (Recart Novion et al., 1971).

In contrast, the inhabitants of the farms' interstices perceived the landscape as a sparsely inhabited space in which natural elements were an integral part of everyday life. The waterfalls, although amazing, were not seen as resources to be exploited, but as part of an affective relationship with the surroundings. Local commerce had a key role in everyday life, functioning as a space for supply and interaction.



Figure 5. View of the Old Bridge from the southwest bank, 1930s. Source: Puffe Family Archive.



Figure 6. Salto del Laja Hotel works sign, 1950s. Source: Puffe Family Archive.



Figure 7. View from the Salto del Laja Hostel's terrace, the 1950s. Source: Puffe Family Archive.

Tourism was not perceived as such by the inhabitants, since the visits were daytime and were led by travelers arriving by vehicle from the Yumbel train station. Despite the lack of tourist infrastructure, the State Railway Company (EFE) promoted the destination in its publications, which highlight the walks to the waterfall and the traditional photograph on the old bridge (Figure 5), iconic infrastructure of the ACSL at that time, and symbol of the transition between the farming past and the nascent tourist interest.

Elite tourist landscape: Saltos del Laja as a tourist development pole (1955-1986)

In the second half of the 20th century, Saltos del Laja went from a productive landscape based on the hacienda model to an incipient tourist landscape, driven by a tourism vision as an instrument of modernization. The construction of the Salto del Laja Hostel in the 1950s marked a milestone in this transformation, allowing visitors to extend their stays and helping consolidate the area as an emerging tourist destination and gateway to southern Chile (Figure 6).



Figure 8. View of the new and old bridge, ca. 1960s. Source: [Photo], Salto del Lajatur. www.saltodellajatur.cl.

Located on an island with privileged views of three of the four waterfalls, the resort was inspired by the American motel model. It integrated itself into the national tourist circuit thanks to its proximity to the Southern Pan-American Highway. Its design sought to harmonize with the natural environment by adopting a reduced scale and following principles of the Japanese garden, where contemplation and water were central elements (Figure 7).

The infrastructure promoted by the Puffe family, oriented toward elite tourism, was reinforced by the construction of the new bridge over the Laja River, which facilitated access and spurred new regional dynamics that benefited tourism development (Figure 8).

During this period, the agrarian reform accelerated the decline of the hacienda model by expropriating factories and estates, such as the La Aguada Hacienda, reconfiguring land ownership in the area. A key milestone was the 1968 expropriation of 19 hectares of the El Salto Estate for a working-class resort (Law 17,059 of 1969), which is now known as Yumbel Municipal Resort.

The reconfiguration of land ownership was reflected in the establishment of the first tourist enterprises in the ACSL, such as the first campsite, located in front of the Salto del Laja Hotel, which is now the Los Manantiales tourist complex. This property, located on the banks of the river, was acquired in 1986 by Gastón Rodríguez, a native of Los Saltos, marking the beginning of a new stage in the territory's occupation and tourism.

Harmonious tourist landscape: Heyday of tourism development in Saltos del Laja (1986-2000)

With the arrival of the bus, the train was gradually displaced as a means of mass transport. Saltos del Laja began to be consolidated as a popular tourist destination, attracting new visitors from nearby cities, which, together with the arrival of street traders and the sale of local products, such as tortillas and jerky on the bridge (Figure 9), fostered new economic dynamics and consolidated traditions still present in the ACSL landscape.



Figure 9. Donoso Family Jerky Makers, 1980s. Source: Donoso Family Archive.

Thus, at the end of the 1980s, the opening to a popular tourism imprint gave way to the proliferation of campsites in sectors around the ACSL, such as Paraguay and La Playita, which were driven by local inhabitants, who saw in tourist services an alternative for their family's livelihood and a new economic relationship with the landscape.

At the end of the 1980's, the first actions by the public administration aimed at managing the area with a tourist approach were defined in the Salto del Laja Sectional Plan (Resolution 1 of 1990), which proposes intercommunal planning for the ACSL polygon. Some of the interviewed actors recognize this period as the heyday of tourism development in Los Saltos, due to the "harmonious" coexistence among inhabitants, street traders, artisans, and the Puffe family, who operated their tourist enclave. To this, the private concessions that the Municipality of Yumbel granted in the 1990s for its resort were added, which are positively recognized for their management, evidenced by the creation of new infrastructure and the establishment of regulated commercial areas.

Dual tourist landscape: The massification of tourism in Saltos del Laja (since 2000)

The construction of the Route 5 south bypass was a turning point in the expansion of tourism in Saltos del Laja. Although at first the inhabitants perceived its construction as a threat by disconnecting the ACSL from the main route to southern Chile, over time this decision was valued as an environmental improvement that strengthened tourism. At the same time, the municipal administrations of Yumbel and Cabrero promoted the expansion of fairs within the municipal resort through clientelist practices and political favors, which generated the first disputes over the projected tourist image of the place (Figure 10).

Since the 2000s, tourism promotion policies by the National Tourism Service, SERNATUR, and the ZOIT declaration have consolidated the destination, attracting small-scale private investment. However, the exclusive incorporation of formalized actors into the participation widened the gap



Figure 10. Access to the main waterfall. Yumbel Municipal Resort, 2023. Source: Personal archive of the Authors.



Figure 11. View from a Salto del Laja Hotel bedroom. Source: [Photo], Hotel Salto del Laja. <http://www.hotelsaltodellaja.cl>

with the informal sectors, which support a large part of the ACSL economic circuit. These dynamics, combined with the administrative complexity arising from the convergence of three communes, reflect the structural tensions that shape the current tourist landscape of the ACSL, as evidenced by the two largest properties it comprises.

On the south bank, the expropriated land, owned by the Municipality of Yumbel (Law 17059 of 1969), is characterized by architecture associated with the self-construction of initially ephemeral premises that, over time, have acquired a permanent character, promoting an offer of fast food and crafts. These structures, arranged in a linear pattern parallel to the riverbed and oriented towards the main waterfall, form the resort's main route. They propose a single route to the visitor, conditioned by a logic of consumption that restricts the spaces intended for the enjoyment and contemplation of the natural landscape.

On the other hand, on the north bank, the Puffe family's tourist offer responds to global models through its privileged space, which gives it an isolated location. The "Salto del Laja Hotel" complex preserves a hermetic management model, with controlled access and a leisure-based architectural program, organized from a closed circuit that structures the tourist experience (Figure 11). The vegetation accompanies the pedestrian path, which connects open spaces for golf and exotic animal breeding and provides access to three of the four waterfalls that make up the Saltos del Laja.

VI. DISCUSSION

The tourist landscape of the ACSL has been configured as a dynamic, relational process, punctuated by successive ruptures linked to the infrastructures of mobility and tourist equipment, which have redefined how the landscape is currently inhabited and what it means (Booth, 2024). The railway, the bridges over the Laja River, and the bypass of Route 5 South generated different forms of landscape appropriation, which evidence tensions among modernization, access, and inequality.

In the mid-20th century, the landscape of the ACSL began to be reinterpreted from the perspective of the traveler and the logic of leisure, transforming its rural base and resignifying it as a tourist resource. The infrastructure promoted by the Puffe family consolidated a tourism model associated with the automobile and a public with greater purchasing power, which expresses the neoliberal rationality that commodifies the experience of the landscape (Cantú Martínez, 2022).

Towards the end of the 1980s, the massification of bus travel and the creation of a popular resort expanded access to tourism by popularizing the landscape and diversifying its uses. The subsequent construction of the bypass marked a new rupture, requiring state mediation that made visible the inequalities between formalized actors and informal traders, reproducing the structural tensions of the landscape.

From the reading of Benedí-Artigas et al. (2025), based on the theory of postmodern tourism, the ACSL can be understood as a landscape straddling between the elitist and the popular, where nature and local memory have become commodified resources. However, unlike in urban processes, in Los Saltos del Laja, the resignification of the landscape arises from working-class sectors that, in a peri-urban context devoid of recreational spaces, have claimed the place as their resort and as a site of collective belonging.

These processes, traversed by power relations, symbolic disputes, and socioeconomic dynamics that, read from the typologies of tourism development by Cordero (2003), allow analyzing the coexistence of two models of tourism development: The Salto del Laja Hotel with an elitist tourism associated with modernization and private capital representative of an enclave oriented to the global market; and the Yumbel Municipal estate, as popular tourism, which responds to a local participation model, with an offer accessible to a wider public associated with a public space of great natural and scenic value.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis shows the existence of two cultural landscapes, built independently of each other, based on the interaction of a multiplicity of actors with often-conflicting interests. From this interaction, structural tensions arise that persist today: formality and informality, conservation and consumption.

Based on Cordero's approach, this duality can be understood as the expression of a mixed tourism model in which the logic of the global enclave is intertwined with local participation practices. More than a closed dichotomy, the ACSL represents a space in constant negotiation, where class differences, cultural capitals, and historical trajectories are inscribed in the landscape as material and symbolic traces. This mixed condition not only evidences the persistence of inequalities but also the forms of local

agency, expressed in trades, practices, and memories that articulate a shared identity around the river, the craft fair, and the ancient ways of inhabiting the landscape.

In this sense, the ACSL is presented as an opportunity to understand the intersections between tourism, landscape, and social class in Chile. Its study makes visible how tourism modernization, while opening up opportunities, reproduces hierarchies and exclusions. Faced with this, enhancing tourist landscapes requires policies that integrate cultural and natural heritage as inseparable components and promote development based on local identity and community management.

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Conceptualization, D.G., I.B.; Data curation, D.G., I.B.; Formal analysis, D.G., I.B.; Acquisition of financing, D.G.; Research, D.G.; Methodology, D.G., I.B.; Project management; Resources, D.G.; Software; Supervision, I.B.; Validation, D.G., I.B.; Visualization; Writing - original draft, D.G.; Writing - revision and editing, D.G.

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