

# Commodification or the right to the island: The struggle against the construction of a hotel in La Tejita (Tenerife)

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**Abstract:** Tourism is an attractive means of economic growth for governments, private companies, and international organizations, especially in places on the periphery of world capitalism. This growth strategy goes hand in hand with the transformation of coastlines and their surrounding areas and the enclosure of common spaces. These trends are illustrated by ongoing processes in the Canary Islands. In the aftermath of the 2007–2008 economic and financial crisis, and in line with its island development model, the archipelago’s regional government boosted the urban development of rural land and the construction of new hotels along the coastline. In early 2016, a movement to prevent the construction of a hotel on the coast of La Tejita (Tenerife) was formed. This study analyzes the fight to halt the development project, together with key landmarks in the protest, and explores the hypothesis that the *right to nature* exists and is indeed upheld, expressed in turn as the *right to the island*. The analysis is based on participant observations, dialogue with activists involved in the protest, and media coverage.

*Keywords:* right to nature, island development models, right to the island, coastline, Tenerife

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## 1. Introduction

In the long history of island research, Baldacchino (2004) differentiates between early studies of individual islands, specific aspects of insularity, and territorially defined units, on the one hand, and the tendency from the 1980s to treat islands as specific realities (Greverus, 1997). Research into case studies and other issues approached from an island studies perspective has increased in recent decades, although attention has yet to be paid to the islands of some geographical regions (Grydehøj, 2017). Vast amounts of literature can be found on Small Island Developing States (SIDS), especially their role in the global discourse on sustainability,

but far fewer studies focus on non-sovereign islands or other forms (Baldacchino & Kelman, 2014).

Tourism is another main focus of island studies (Podhorodecka, 2018). In general, tourism is an attractive means of economic growth for governments, private companies, and international organizations (Büscher & Fletcher, 2017). Although tourism is expanding indiscriminately, it is undergoing particularly sharp growth on the peripheral or semi-peripheral fringes of world capitalism, where it acts as a driving force behind the restructuring and urban development of local areas. It is particularly closely associated with the transformation of coastlines and their immediate surroundings, accompanied by the enclosure of what are traditionally *common* spaces. It is not surprising, therefore, that many protest movements in southern Europe's tourist regions are the outcome of territorial disputes over the protection of marine and coastal ecosystems (Kousis et al., 2008).

In the case of islands, some academics point to the error of importing urban planning models and techniques based on development theories honed in continental contexts (Clark & Kjellberg, 2018), since development models like PROFIT, SITE, and MIRAB are founded on abstract standard models (Ronström, 2013), often not allowing “islanders themselves to set the agenda” (Grydehøj, 2017, p. 9). The Canary Islands are a good example of this (Bianchi, 2004). Tourism is the archipelago's main economic activity, accounting for 35% of its GDP (Exeltur, 2019, p. 7), and its expansion has been a priority for the public authorities since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The first destinations for mass tourism to the Canaries were the archipelago's two central islands, Tenerife and Gran Canaria. In the 1970s, the phenomenon spread to the two easternmost islands (Lanzarote and Fuerteventura), and today these four islands constitute the region's main tourist destinations. There was one fundamental feature to the first tourist boom (1960–1973), with it persisting during subsequent boom periods: the travel industry's subordination to capital gains by the construction and real estate sectors. The boom ended in the year of the oil crisis, not so much because of the increase in fuel and travel prices (although they were contributing factors), but more due to the growing gap between the soaring development of hotel and non-hotel tourist accommodation and the much lower growth in visitor numbers (Vera, 1993). Spatially, tourism was limited to a few specific places with a high density of buildings (Armas-Díaz et al., 2022). It began to affect the islands' ecosystems, including anthropized ones, although for a while it coexisted with traditional agricultural activities, fishing, and the scanty processing industry without completely destroying them. During this late phase of the Franco regime — a lengthy period of dramatic social repression and central control, with a keen pro-growth policy by the regime, mainly through urban development and industrialization (Hamilton, 2017) — the State fostered the notion that rising numbers of tourists automatically went hand in hand with growing general prosperity, promoted through development plans (Vera, 1993, p. 479). This notion continued to be encouraged through to the later democratic period. The second tourist boom (1985–1989), which was closely linked to the accelerated international circulation of capital, had a very big spatial impact despite its short duration, with the amount of developed land earmarked for tourism doubling (Martín, 2000). This gave rise to numerous protests by local groups, who each tried to combat the impacts of the real estate-tourism process separately, with little regional (or even island) coordination. Even so, through a combination of these fragmented efforts and scientific proposals, a breakthrough was achieved when Natural Spaces Act (1987) was passed in the regional parliament, thanks to a majority vote by progressive

political groups. This safeguarded over 40% of the archipelago's surface from direct development, including almost half of Tenerife.

Unlike the previous real estate–tourism booms, the third one (1993–2008) affected most of the island's urban areas. It was not merely limited to an increase in the tourism supply, as it also extended to first homes, second homes, apartments, and luxury villas for seasonal foreign residents. This third boom was also characterized by heavy development of infrastructure and megaprojects. The regional authorities approved a series of tourism moratoria, aimed at containing tourism growth in certain areas, although other consequences were triggered as a result. The first proposed moratorium for the four tourist islands entailed the application of guidelines aimed at rationalizing the growth of the accommodation supply and limiting further land development. However, it prioritized the renovation and reclassification of established tourist areas and it encouraged “higher quality” tourism facilities and permissiveness in the expansion of land for residential use, leading to a growth in urban development (García Cruz, 2014). This continued up until the 2007–2008 economic and financial crisis, when many development projects were abandoned, having become toxic assets for financial institutions, with many having to be rescued by the State (García, 2010).

To mitigate the effects of the 2007–2008 crisis, tourism became the main focal point of the Spanish economic policy (Murray, 2005). Legislative changes were promoted so that hitherto partly protected rural land could be re-rated apt for development, allowing for activities other than agricultural ones (Armas-Díaz & Sabaté-Bel, 2020). The regional authorities deregulated land by rolling back environmental legislation and, with it, the consensus achieved in the 1980s on land as an essential resource for the ecosystem. The compensation measures introduced by the European Union during the construction of the Port of Granadilla in Granadilla de Abona (southern Tenerife) — such as ‘species offsetting’, a form of ‘un-green’ grabbing (Apostolopoulou & Adams, 2015) — fostered deregulation affecting protected areas and non-protected natural spaces. At the same time, the regional authorities reduced the protection given to endangered species so as not to hinder urban development and the construction of forthcoming infrastructure (Armas-Díaz & Sabaté-Bel, 2020). More recently, the 2017 Land Act removed supervisory control and regulation, thereby diminishing regional control over the municipalities. By arguing that it is in the public or social interest, the municipal authorities can change the status of rural land (which had been considered tantamount to protected land up until 2017) to include “uses non contemplated there when the site's location in a rural setting may contribute to its development—such as the construction of tourist or industrial facilities or services” (Gobierno de Canarias, 2017, p. 51). The new Act views land in such a way that local authorities can promote its use as they wish and act upon it at their discretion, without the need to comply with bylaw or a higher level of planning over natural resources. Finally, the law facilitates the devolution of power to town councils so that they can draw up plans and regulations and carry out environmental assessments. This goes against the planning regulations currently in force. Concerns about these responsibilities being in the hands of the local authorities are mainly related to the use of urban planning to generate profits (Armas-Díaz & Sabaté-Bel, 2020). Projects for the construction of new hotels in coastal areas involving the enclosure of common natural spaces and their commodification for the benefit of transnational bodies are also being reactivated.

In recent decades, there has been growing social participation in environmental and territorial protest movements in the Canary Islands, compared to other organized protest relating to issues such as health, education, employment, or housing (Armas-Díaz & Sabaté-Bel, 2020; Sánchez, 2015). While it is true that nature plays a fundamental role in the accumulation of capital (Smith, 2007), it is also true that the fight to prevent the destruction or deterioration of natural assets is a powerful source of opposition to neoliberalism (Heynen et al., 2007; Apostolopoulou & Cortes-Vazquez, 2018) and a new source of possible future alternatives (Smith, 2010).

In connection with these processes, the *right to nature* can be construed as a democratic desire to combat or redirect capital-driven urban development processes that modify relations between nature and society (Apostolopoulou & Adams, 2019). Several researchers contextualize this concept within the framework of neoliberalization processes boosted after the 2007–2008 crisis. However, fewer studies have analyzed it as an expression of the *right to the island*; that is, efforts to conserve certain areas and natural resources from commodification in island contexts, where these processes and their excesses are more obvious (Armas-Díaz & Sabaté-Bel, 2020; Armas-Díaz et al., 2020; Clark, 2013). The same is also true of the enclosure, appropriation, and dispossession of marine and coastal ecosystems, which have been the object of little attention up until now (Hill, 2017).

This study focuses on a recent social protest process that illustrates the territorial processes outlined above, with grassroots social movements taking on the role of a popular epistemic community (Valdivielso & Moranta, 2019). In early 2016, a movement was formed to prevent the construction of a hotel on the coast of La Tejita, one of the few undeveloped beaches areas in southern Tenerife, located a short distance from a highly sensitive natural area. We analyze the fight to combat the development project, exploring how the protest is organized and the hypothesis that a *right to nature* exists and is more or less consciously upheld on a specific scale, expressed in turn as the ‘right to an island’. To achieve our goal, our analysis is based on participant observation, dialogue with activists involved in the protest, and media coverage and other documentation. We tackle this analysis from the theoretical and conceptual perspective of a territorial dispute in terms of the *right to nature* and to space, exploring the singularity of the island context in section 2. In section 3, a summary is given of the process of territorial change in the case in question, while section 4 concludes with some final reflections.

## **2. Neoliberalization, insularity, and the right to nature and to the island**

Islands act as test laboratories in processes that generate biological and cultural diversity on a global scale, playing a far more significant role than their population and landmass might imply (Chandler & Pugh, 2021; Whittaker & Fernández-Palacios, 2007). At the same time, their ecological and biocultural fragility has been a determining factor in uneven development processes, triggered by reforms by the public authorities over the last four decades, which have boosted commodification, privatization, and growing market relations.

In general terms, and despite certain increases in prosperity, the increased circulation of capital has boosted certain negative factors, such as widening inequalities, growing pressure on natural and humanized environments, and the commodification of new tangible and social spaces, giving priority to financial logic in all walks of social life (Harvey, 2005, 2010). The

semi-peripheral islands of the capitalist world economy have very specific subordinate functions; for instance, as tourism destinations, real estate markets, plantations for the export of goods, and quarries for the extraction of mineral. More recently, academics have also analyzed how urban development affects islands; that is, how “the urban’ encompasses not just the usual suspects (like New York City and Mumbai) but also remote sparsely inhabited islands” (Grydehøj et al., 2015, p. 8). Although “the urban” is not completely overlooked in island studies, the tendency has been to downplay the islandness and the role of the sea in some regions (Hay, 2013). As Clark (2013) pointed out in a seminal work on financialization in the biocultural geographies of islands, this is increasingly expressed through processes of commodification and privatization of spaces. It often involves the enclosure of common spaces, environmental destruction, and the displacement of people, affecting their ways of life. It is, therefore, not surprising that the exploitation of local nature, including cultural practices, generates serious conflicts in terms of environmental, labor, migration, and economic terms (Armas-Díaz & Sabaté-Bel, 2020; Armas-Díaz et al., 2020; Schmitt & Blázquez-Salom, 2003).

The common goods and resources that remain relatively unaffected by traditional capitalist-driven commodification are an important and often explicitly unacknowledged facet of social life. Ostrom (1990) highlighted the existence of a wide variety of ways in which communities in many places independently organize the management of common resources, with the establishment of sustainable long-term management systems. However, since they do not easily fit in with the logics of private or public authority property rights, they attract less attention in research, remaining invisible, and they are barely taken into account in environmental governance practices (Dietz et al., 2003).

In the academic literature on island regions and the difficulties inherent to their socioeconomic development, other axioms have been established, however, that fail to take into account their biocultural fragility or the existence of possible best practices for the management of common assets. These are island development models, known by the acronyms that stand for their key identifying features: MIRAB, PROFIT, and SITE. The MIRAB model (Bertram & Watters, 1985) refers to island economies that mainly depend on migration, remittances, aid, and bureaucracy. This is considered the lowest rung on a “ladder” to development (Bertram & Poirine, 2007), and ascending to the next model or next ‘rung’ is interpreted as remarkable progress. The PROFIT model (Baldacchino, 2006) is based on the organization of people, resource management, contracts with foreign territories (*overseas engagement*), finance, and transportation. The optimal model is SITE (small islands tourist economies), which encourages almost total dedication to tourism (Baldacchino, 2013).

Numerous articles support this paradigm (Baldacchino, 2006; Baldacchino & Bertram, 2009; Bertram & Poirine, 2007; Oberst & McElroy, 2007) and they share a certain automatic tendency to base success on income from “quality tourism,” mainly through foreign investment, without ruling out the existence of transnational geostrategic military installations (García-Herrera & Sabaté-Bel, 2009). The environmental differences, geo-economic contexts, and historical specificities of each island territory are not addressed. The ‘recipes’ do not vary to any great extent and are uncritically disseminated by archipelagos and continental metropolises that manage them. In this regard, Clark (2013, p. 133) states:

It is easy to imagine these models capturing the ears of those seeking ‘strategic opportunities’ for profitable investments on islands, and those who see themselves as ‘key individuals’ with certain ‘strategic perceptions’, ‘crucial’ to their island’s ‘development’; in short, those with the right ‘attitude’.

We can identify evidence of this in the Canary Islands, with examples of this kind theoretical hypothesis having been put forward by an island patrician with broad political and social influence, José Carlos Francisco: the Canary Islands’ regional Minister of the Exchequer in the 1990s, the head of a highly influential consultancy firm whose services are regularly used by archipelago’s public authorities, and the current chairman of the regional employers’ association:

For over two decades, economic literature has been dominated by the MIRAB model, which argues that small islands are sustained by remittances from their emigrants, metropolitan aid, and bureaucracy. However, for some years now, the SITE model has come to the fore, where island development is based on the identification of the successful variables of non-abandoned tourist areas, with suitable infrastructure and a favourable geography [...] [Hawai’i] casts light on new avenues of development [...] In 2010, its GDP was 66.8 billion dollars (almost 30% higher than the Canary Islands). Unemployment is 6.6%. In its economy, military expenditures represent between 2–3% of GDP, and 38,700 people work in this industry. It is important to point this out, given that some people think that military bases do not contribute to the local economy. [...] Why don’t we, in the Canaries, have an air and naval base [...] to keep the fleet here, with highly profitable logistical activity, given the favourable conditions that everyone can see, as advocated to high degree in recent years by consultancies and bodies of proven prestige? The Canary Islands are of a neutrality bordering on stupidity. (Francisco, 2013, pp. 71–74)

The last statement is due to the fact that the Canary Islands were one of the four Spanish self-governing regions that voted, in this case by large margin, against Spain’s permanence in NATO in the referendum held in March 1986. This has been interpreted as the expression of a clear neutralist stance on the part of large sectors of the island’s populations. At an earlier point, Francisco (1998, p. 17, emphasis in original) defended the inevitability of the Canary Islands’ specialization in tourism, a position that he successfully continues to champion to this day:

Generally speaking, we travel by car without a spare wheel. The tyres we have don’t show any signs of possible problems, but there are no other tyres available. That’s all there is today. The other option – *a utopia* or a dream world, self-sufficiency, and radical localism – is tantamount to closing one’s eyes to reality.

This type of hegemonic discourse is based on the notion of an inevitable dependence on tourism, hence its acceptance, as if a place were somehow geographically fated. Francisco (2013, pp. 63–66) goes to argue:

There are about 140 countries worldwide that (each) has about two million inhabitants, like us. Many of these states are island economies. Their problem is that they are not open to real diversification, an almost mythical idea that we have cultivated here as one of our favourite obsessions, one of our greatest absurdities. [...] The origin of this incapacity is, to put it in biological terms, genetic economics. They are economies with determining market limitations. It is written in the DNA of a geography of specific characteristics, with a volume of people that cannot be molded like clay at our convenience. [...] I'm sorry to disappoint diversification's many fans. There is no point in continuing [...] a misconception.

Although some defendants of the acronym models directly link the narrow choice of strategic options with an indispensable need for super specialization (in what is almost a pseudo-biological process of speciation), the truth is that these paradigms fail to take into account the particularities of different islands, and still less how strategic decisions are to be made, who should make them, who benefits, and who is harmed. So-called success stories of island development often conceal forms of accumulation by dispossession in which the construction of seemingly objective representations play a central role. However, exist alternative non-mainstream forms of island development, based on communing, which “provide spaces of hope that community reciprocity is capable of integrating local economies in coevolution with – rather than being displaced by – market exchange and state redistribution” (Clark & Kjellberg, 2018, p. 388). At the same time, many islands can be regarded on a specific socially produced scale, without falling into the territorial trap (Agnew, 2010): a scale in which collective efforts are made to protect resources or to combat specific projects, with a sense of territorialization that has nothing to do with national sovereignty (Allen, 2017).

A specific form of territoriality is imposed on the island. As in other fields, territoriality is an essential force in capitalism, expressed, as Harvey (2003) points out, through state policies' support for economic processes. This is the case with the redefinition of island areas as regions dedicated to the supply of energy (Cederlöf & Kingsbury, 2019), or to tourist activities that define their territoriality (Celata & Sanna, 2010). Insularity is regarded as a territorial characteristic, used in official discourse in the abstract sense of a territory that is mere a container (Agnew, 1994). Other alternative approaches emphasize the fact that islandness matters, in as much as the official scale or notion of territoriality must be revised when islands are seen in terms of disputed territories (Allen, 2017, p. 82). It is worth remembering that spatial scales are not fixed but are produced socially through fights and resistance (Smith, 1996). As Lefebvre (1968) argued, urban dwellers have the right to appropriate a city, both through physical access to space and by using and occupying it. However, this notion of 'urban' extends beyond the city (Brenner, 2018); for instance, in the case of a fight to combat dispossession or a diminished quality of life in rural areas (Urkidi, 2010) or islands (Clark, 2013). Thus, insularity or islandness plays an essential role, not only for its capacity to territorialize projects, but also because it produces a scale for the collective fight to protect resources or to combat specific projects (Allen, 2017; Armas-Díaz & Sabaté-Bel, 2020).

Nature and biodiversity have achieved social and political significance. Clark (2013) highlighted the principle of the *right to the island* in his criticism of the abstract “ideal types” of island development models by drawing on Lefebvre's (1968) *right to the city*. This right has been revived as a leitmotif for social movements in defining their concept of struggle.

However, its main utility is its capacity to act as a “step towards unifying struggles [...] as both a working slogan and political ideal” (Harvey, 2008, p. 40). Apostolopoulou and Adams (2019) build on Lefebvre’s idea and define the *right to nature* as the right to influence and redirect capital-driven urban development processes that modify relations between nature and society. Clark (2013) proposes the particularization of this right, associating it with that of spatial justice, that is, the deepening of democracy and the de-commodification of space and nature, placing it in an even more specific framework: an *island* framework.

To delve further into the issue, there is an evident spatial and scale-based difference between the *right to nature* (which would encompass the biosphere’s non-anthropized or less anthropized resources and any of its specific expressions, such as a particular forest, mountain, wetland, river, lake, coast, sea, or any natural or barely humanized landscape in general), and the *right to the island*, which is limited to concern for the future of all or part of a medium-sized or small island. Nonetheless, the main conceptual difference between the two notions is basically a qualitative one, involving at least two aspects. First, experience shows that the local communities and populations of island territories traditionally tend to develop a more pronounced awareness of limits than communities in continental areas. Debate on the now classic yet very topical issue of the limit to growth (Meadows et al., 1972) seems to be expressed in islands in a more direct, spontaneous way due to obvious physical and social factors, such as the clear perception of islands’ territorial limits, bounded by the sea, the habitual fragility of both their natural ecosystems and their social and community-based ones, frequent irreversibility when areas are destroyed, and the verification that all goods that cannot be produced locally must be imported from overseas, leading to strong external dependence. In the case of the Canary Islands, some papers (Armas-Díaz & Sabaté-Bel, 2020; Armas-Díaz et al., 2020) explore the connection between environmental protests and insularity, showing that the most important current social and citizen movements and mobilization processes revolve around the fragility of the environment and the island context. Second, in keeping with Clark (2013), we believe that the *right to the island* is not limited to demands for the protection and active defense of landscapes, ecosystems, and natural and cultural heritage (although it does include them), but that all these demands and aspects form part of broader debate on the style of island development and its effects, with the population having a democratic right to decide on their present and future models of socioeconomic development, taking into account their historical experience, specific island culture, and accumulated skills and knowledge. It is an environmental and environmentalist issue and also a social and cultural one, posed by the majority of the island’s population (or which they should be able to pose), tied in with conflicts and debates concerning the democratic social construction of a model and style of island development.

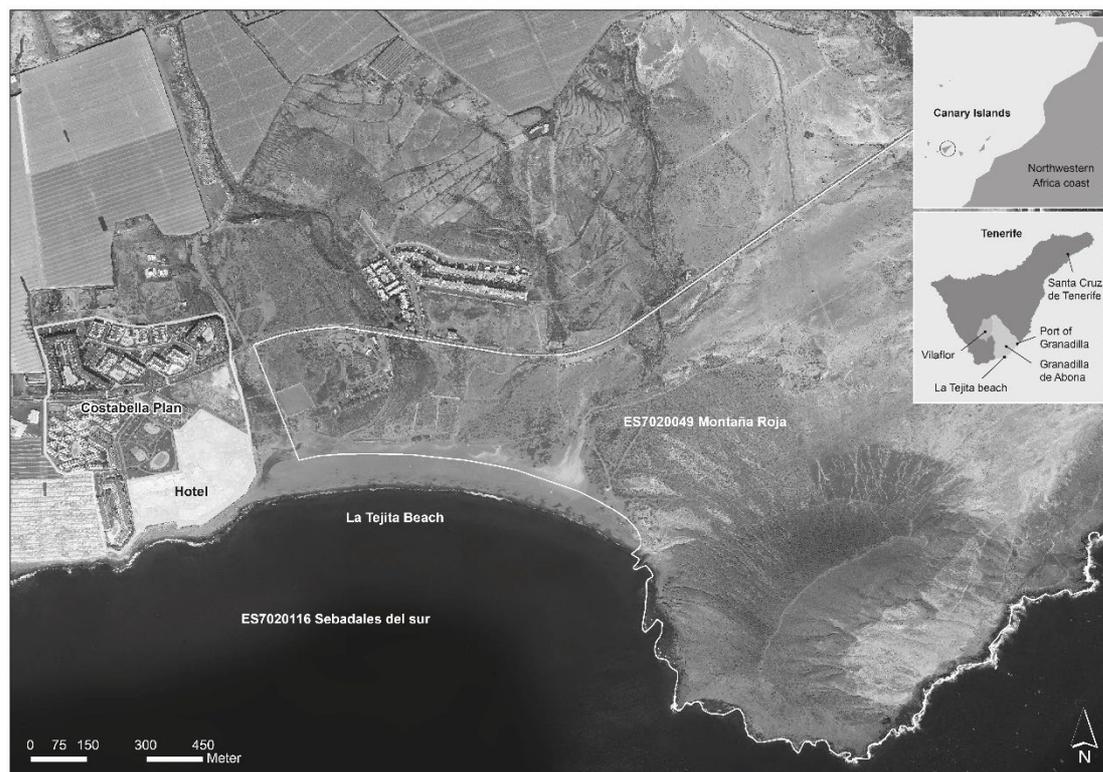
By unifying the fight for the *right to nature* and for the *right to the island*, huge emancipatory political potential is opened up for social and environmental movements that fight for the production of nature in accordance with a philosophy of social and environmental justice (Apostolopoulou & Cortes-Vazquez, 2018).

### **3. Protest against the construction of a hotel in La Tejita**

Historically, the Canary Islands’ regional governments have tended to erect barriers to citizen participation. With this, they have contributed to a growing social indignation, demonstrated

with greater intensity than in other self-governing regions through non-official channels like public protests or popular legislative initiatives (Brito Díaz, 2020). This happened, in particular, during the third real estate-tourism boom (1993–2008), coinciding with the island's liberal-conservative government (Brito Díaz, 2018). Since the 1990s, political groups and lobbies in Tenerife, such as its nationalist parties and their allies from economic sectors of the tourism and real estate industries, have paved the way for the remapping of the island (García-Herrera & Sabaté-Bel, 2005). One crucial aspect in this process was the control over political institutions by weaving a network that began at local level (city councils) in the mid-1980s and quickly spread to encompass Tenerife's island authorities and then the archipelago's regional government in the early 1990s (Armas-Díaz, 2015). At that time, a local umbrella party was formed, called Coalición Canaria (CC), which grouped together almost all the left-wing parties in the Canary Islands that had opposed the Franco dictatorship, together with the Tenerife Independent Association (ATI; an island-based populist's conservative party), and some other local parties. This covered a broad political spectrum from nationalist populist conservative groups to left-wing ones (Sabaté-Bel, 2005). From the mid-1990s to 2019, the CC was the party in power, either alone or in coalition. This unique union among originally opposing political forces was only possible thanks to their nationalist links, initially at an island level and then on a regional scale (García-Herrera & Sabaté-Bel, 2009).

During the 1990s and 2000s, a succession of calls for the mobilization of the population led to the normalization of this type of protest, and it became an almost permanent feature of clashes around 2004–2005 (García-Herrera & Sabaté-Bel, 2009). Thus, in recent decades, environmental protests in the Canary Islands have involved more popular participation than all the protests put together over more “social” types of issues, like health, education, and housing (Sánchez, 2015). Recurrent action by citizens to combat the destruction of nature has formed the backbone of protests in the Canary Islands (Brito Díaz, 2018), such as mass protests against the installation of a high voltage power line in Vilaflor or to the construction of the Port of Granadilla — Granadilla de Abona — both in the south of Tenerife (Armas-Díaz & Sabaté-Bel, 2020). The population continued to rally in defense of the archipelago in protest of its commodification and destruction, even from 2008 on when a social crisis unfolded with dramatic dimensions in the Canary Islands that included high unemployment rates, poverty, severe poverty, and child poverty among the highest in the EU (Díaz-Rodríguez et al., 2017). This was illustrated by big demonstrations on all of the islands against a project to drill for oil to the east of the archipelago (Herranz et al., 2018). All these signs of the collective protests are an intuitive defense of the population's *right to the island*, exemplified most recently by protest to halt the construction of a hotel on the south coast of Tenerife (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Delimitation of La Tejita Beach, surface area of the planned hotel, and affected protected areas (European Union Sites of Community Importance). Source: Authors' own, based on Grafcan.

The idea of building a hotel on La Tejita beach in Granadilla de Abona dates back to 1970, during the final phase of the Franco dictatorship, and has been revived over the last two decades, just like the construction of the Port of Granadilla in Granadilla de Abona (Armas-Díaz & Sabaté-Bel, 2020). The project is specified in the *Costabella* Plan, approved in 1973. Over a decade later, the area encompassed by Montaña Roja's first declaration as a natural reserve (1987) overlapped a good part of the development plan until new environmental legislation in the Canary Islands came into play in 1994 and Montaña Roja's surface area was reduced, adjusting its limits to those of the 1973 development plan. In 2002, the hotel project was approved with an increase in size, more than tripling the planned area. However, Granadilla de Abona's local authorities did not approve the final submitted project until 2018. This comprised a 5-star hotel with 883 beds, covering an area of 26,758 m<sup>2</sup> and 276 linear metres of La Tejita beach, clearly invading part of the sands. As the project encroaches on the waterfront coastal strip that is protected from development, under review by the Provincial Coastal Service since 2018, it is clearly illegal. Additionally, it also has potential negative effects on the fauna, flora, and landscape of two protected areas of the European Natura 2000 Network — Montaña Roja (ES7020049) and Sebadales del Sur (ES7020116) — affecting the dynamics of sand circulation and the habitats of one of the largest natural beaches on the island of Tenerife (Salvar La Tejita, 2016). In June 2019, a construction company started work on the development, subcontracted by Grupo Viqueira, a well-known developer in Granadilla de Abona.

Private sector attempts to develop this area are not surprising, but it is shocking that authorities at local, island, regional, and national levels of administration have not questioned the environmental consequences or the dispossession of common areas of the coastline. As the spokesperson of ATAN (Tenerife Association of Friends of Nature) stated:

Natural spaces are much sought after. What could be better for a five-star hotel than to have a five-star environment? If you are in a rubbishy setting, then you have a hotel surrounded by rubbish, so a hotel of this type – a five-star luxury hotel in a deluxe place, where customers have such an impressive surroundings – well, it's good business. So what happens? The area's privatization for some people's benefit clashes with the conservation of a common public space. In addition, it has a very big impact because it invades Montaña Roja sands and La Tejita, with dire consequences, not just for that specific area but for the entire landscape of that strip of the island. (Interview with Eustaquio Villalba Moreno, 12/11/2019)

In 2015, the mayor of Granadilla de Abona, currently under investigation for urban planning corruption, announced the future construction of a luxury hotel at La Tejita as a “new incentive for tourism for the municipality and for this part of the coast” and an “opportunity to promote the creation of new jobs” (Eldiario.es, 2015). Between late 2015 and early 2016, activists began to make contact through social media. They soon began to form a popular assembly, centred in the town of El Médano, under the name *Salvar La Tejita* (Save La Tejita). They also decided to form a legal association in anticipation of possible legal action. Networking with island's longest-established environmental groups (taking advantage of their extensive legal experience), a movement was created with the support of many individuals, with the central slogan, “La Tejita is not for sale, La Tejita defends itself!” It was joined by people from the surrounding area and beach users of different generations, with a high number of young people. Its main protagonists acknowledge the influence of previous important environmental and territorial struggles: Vilaflor, Port of Granadilla, and the oil extraction project. They count on the support and occasional participation of some veterans from these social movements.

The first efforts to mobilize the population occurred shortly after the building permit was approved. At the same time, a letter was sent to the head of Grupo Viqueira by a federation of environmental groups, pointing out that the envisaged social protests in defense of this emblematic space would pose a problem for its image and also for that of the company running the hotel, as had happened before with the construction of other infrastructures (Eldiario.es, 2016). Several demonstrations were organized in different locations, with one in the island capital in 2016 bringing together around 3,500 people. The submission of complaints and petitions to local, regional, state, and European bodies was organized (achieving over 100,000 signatures through a digital platform) to halt the construction of the hotel, uphold the area's natural values, and safeguard its public use. A website and video subtitled in English and German were created, outlining the problem and the action that had been taken. In 2017, a red-green politician raised a question about the construction of the hotel and its effects on the protected areas next to it (Vallina, 2017) and, in 2018, the protest movement held a conference, broadening the spectrum of its environmental concerns.

Since 2015, the main legal aim of these ecologist groups is to extend the protected coastal strip first approved in 2002 to 100 meters. This would prevent the construction of the hotel, taking into account “the line of wind-formed dune that extends the limits of the beach,” as established in the current Coastal Act (Interview with Daniel Duque Funes, 03/11/2019). In October 2017, the ecologists submitted technical reports to the Provincial Coastal Service, outlining the geomorphological values and describing the coastal dynamics of the affected area, asking for their importance to be taken into consideration their importance in new delimitations. *Salvar La Tejita* and *ATAN* also claimed that the hotel construction company had built an illegal fence that prevented the natural dynamics of the dune system. Lastly, the ecologist groups stated that there had been irregularities in the project approval process by the municipal authorities, with missing documents that were required for the building permit and an inadequate sewerage system (Eldigitalur, 2021; Pérez, 2021). In November 2018, the Spanish State Ministry of Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge (Ministerio de Transición Ecológica y Desafío Demográfico; MITECO) took into account the reports presented by the ecologist groups (Gobierno de Canarias, 2019), informing them that a review of the coastal strip would begin. However, somewhat suspiciously, the review procedure was not immediately commenced by the Provincial Coastal Service, and instead it began three months after the aforementioned notification. In the meanwhile, in December 2018, the local authorities of Granadilla de Abona approved the building permit. As the construction of the hotel began in June 2019 (Medina, 2019), the ecologist groups notified MITECO that this anomalous circumstance has led building work on an area possibly forming part of the coastal strip protected from development under the Coastal Act. As in previous cases (Armas-Díaz et al., 2020), underlying these struggles to prevent the development of an area is an ‘awareness of the need for limits’, something that is particularly evident in island contexts. This is clearly stated by a spokesperson for the protest movement:

That was what upset many people: an almost unspoilt natural space, why batter it again? That’s how we’ll reach a point when everything collapses. There’ll be nothing more. It’s not infinite, and we’re coming to realize this. I think it sums it all up. I don’t know how we are going to escape the problem, but something will have to be done. (Interview with Daniel Duque Funes, 03/11/2019)

The phase of the struggle that attracted broad-ranging public sympathy — as well as high coverage in the press and on social media — due to the unique circumstances was in June 2020, when two activists climbed up cranes and remained chained there for 12 days, forcing the work to stop (eldia.es, 2020). The symbolic importance of this initiative must be underlined since it took place immediately after the COVID-19 lockdown was lifted, when prospects of the mass public protests of the previous period in the Canary Islands seemed to have temporarily vanished.

On June 22, 2020, MITECO ordered the construction of the hotel to be stopped due to the illegal occupation of public property. The developers, *Grupo Viqueira*, reacted immediately through the media, publishing a website (<https://transparentesconellhotellatejita.info>) to defend themselves and to “shed some light on the process,” although the website is no longer active. They also published a press release in some newspapers, presenting their main arguments, such as the building permit’s approval before the delimitation of the protected

coastal strip was reviewed, the project's low impact, its respect for the immediate natural area surroundings, and the generation of new jobs. Grupo Viqueira stated its "firm intention" to continue with the construction of the hotel, arguing that it "strictly complies with all legal requirements" (Europa Press, 2021). The local authorities have always supported the construction of the hotel, as they are aware of the economic importance (although the cost will be at the expense of these authorities if they have to compensate the developers). The municipal authorities also argued that the permit received its approval before the petitioned redefinition of the protected coastal strip (Medina, 2021). Similarly, the provincial Hotel and Non-Hotel Tourism Association (Asociación Hotelera y Extrahotelera de Tenerife, La Palma, La Gomera y El Hierro) also upholds the construction of the hotel in order to create more employment and to foster more tourism in Granadilla de Abona (Eldiario.es, 2019).

Works were allowed to be resumed in February 2021, subject to a reduction in the amount of coastline occupied by the hotel (Diario de Avisos, 2021). In the same month, MITECO rejected the main demand for a 100-metre protected coastal strip, put forth by both the ecologist groups and the regional authorities (no longer in the hands of the political party Coalición Canaria, as of 2019), which would have prevented the construction of the hotel, instead establishing that the said strip would measure only 20 metres (Medina, 2021). Following this decision, the ecologist groups filed an appeal for a review of the new delimitation (Asociación Tinerfeña de Amigos de la Naturaleza, 2021). In April 2021, the regional authorities warned the municipality of Granadilla de Abona that the hotel project would have to be modified because it invaded even the 20-metre protected coastal strip, and would require the authorization of the Government of the Canary Islands before a municipal license could be processed (Pérez, 2021). A two-year construction period for the completion of the hotel had been estimated by its investors.

#### **4. Conclusions: For a right to the island**

According to Clark (2013), who coined the concept of the *right to the island*, exercising this right implies cultivating a radical, pluralist democracy, stimulated by social movements that work toward the achievement of alternative island futures. Putting this into practice problematizes the concept of development and enriches the ways of moving forward toward the utopian goal of sustainability.

La Tejita demonstrates that nature continues to be a key factor in the accumulation of capital (Apostolopoulou & Adams, 2015). Although the relationship between capital and conservation is nothing new, increasing ways of exploiting nature have emerged in recent decades, especially in the period after the 2007–2008 economic crisis (Apostolopoulou & Adams, 2019). To this end, shortly after this date, some areas of hitherto partly protected rustic land in the Canaries were re-rated apt for development, allowing for activities other than agricultural ones. This was followed by other initiatives focused on the expansion of tourism, with a new land act that further continues the process of liberalization initiated at the beginning of the global economic crisis. In keeping with this philosophy, José Carlos Francisco (2013, p. 33), one of the main instigators of the current model of socioeconomic development in the Canary Islands stated:

It is appropriate at this point to focus on the much-needed transformation of our hyper-regulated economy. This is because our spatial planning legislation regulates economic activity in an infuriating way. [...] Extreme zeal in defending the territory is counterproductive, in my opinion. Even though it aims to foster a misled sustainability, it strongly limits the growth potential of the Canary Islands' economy.

Second, with the swift process of urban development, based on the construction of infrastructures and specialization in tourism, large flows of capital have been channeled into the real estate sector of tourist areas in order to meet the ruling classes' desire to integrate the islands into the world economy (Harvey, 2003). Tourism is the main cornerstone on which governance of the outlying region of the Canary Islands is based (Celata & Sanna, 2010). This is also illustrated by the application of acronym models of island development to the Canary Islands as a guide in their economic policies.

Finally, in the fight to defend the island, official discourse on scale and territoriality is challenged through demands for an alternative model of island development, consistent with environmental conservation and the *right to nature* (Apostolopoulou & Cortes-Vazquez, 2018). These protests by social movements are organized on a specific island scale and, hence, can also be considered to uphold the population's *right to the island*, acknowledging island singularities and the right of those who inhabit them to control urban development processes (Armas-Díaz & Sabaté-Bel, 2020; Armas-Díaz et al., 2020; Clark, 2013; Harvey, 2003).

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## **Interviews**

Daniel Duque Funes, spokesperson of Save La Tejita Platform (Plataforma Salvar La Tejita): 03.11.2019.

Eustaquio Villalba Moreno, spokesperson of Tenerife Association of Friends of Nature (Asociación Tinerfeña de Amigos de la Naturaleza - ATAN): 12.11.2019.