

The Natural Cultural History of Palo Verde, Costa Rica

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This presentation will explore how power relations among humans determine which non-humans live and die in the cultured spaces of natural refuges. Palo Verde National Park in Costa Rica is natural cultural contact zone where multiple species of plants, animals, and microbes have encountered human social worlds—those of conservation biologists, hunters, and farmers. In the 1970s, when Palo Verde was part of a North American cattle ranching scheme, migratory ducks (*Anas discors* and *Dendrocyna autumnalis*) would arrive in spectacular flocks of up to 50,000. In other words, these species were flourishing alongside a capitalist scheme to produce beef. But when the land was expropriated, and turned into a National Park, the ducks disappeared. The decline of the ducks in Palo Verde can perhaps be best understood as a tale of two rhizomes: the native cattail (*Typha domingensis*) and cultivated sugarcane (*Saccharin officinarum*). The cattails, a rhizome with anti-capitalistic tendencies that flourishes in post-industrial landscapes, covered up the favorite resting places of the ducks within the National Park. Sugarcane, a rhizome spreading in the service of capital, started to displace the favorite food of the ducks just beyond the park's borders in the rice fields of Costa Rican farmers. Following the contingencies of strange connections among diverse natural cultural worlds, this presentation will showcase conceptual and methodological tools from the emergent interdiscipline of multispecies ethnography.