INTRODUCTION

Despite increasing efforts and funding, current conservation programmes are failing to prevent the rapid progression of mass extinctions and habitat loss (McCarthy et al. 2012; Waldron et al. 2013; Ceballos et al. 2015; Ceballos et al. 2017; Estrada et al. 2017). A growing body of research documents escalating clashes between conservation activities and the human rights of local people (Duffy 2014; Annecke and Masubelele 2016; Duffy 2016). Mainstream conservation predominantly consists of global conservation programmes often operated by big international non-governmental conservation organisations (BINGOs) that dominate funding and public thought. Principal communications of such programmes present a mixture of ‘doom-and-gloom’ images highlighting extinctions and habitat destruction alongside images of phenomenal successes. These neither explain nor validate their methods, ignore contradictions and challenges of their practices, and generally completely overlook the key role local populations play in conserving the environment (Igoe and Brockington 2007; Fletcher 2010; Igoe 2010; Horwich et al. 2015; Mbaria and Ogada 2016).

Igoe et al. (2010) believe ethnographic research is essential to better understand and potentially transform mainstream conservation methods and ideologies. They emphasise that people and processes, currently excluded from the dominant conservation discourse, have the potential to challenge dominant ideologies, but are disregarded or discredited by external experts and groups with opposing economic interests (Igoe et al. 2010).

This article’s definition of discourse follows Hajer’s (1995) arguments that discourses are deliberately manufactured by actors to strengthen their opposition to and superiority over rival actors, or create coalitions with others. Discourses highlight...
the contradictions between different local perspectives and between local and external conservation narratives (Leach and Fairhead 2000). This article analyses discourses as part of, and as the basis for, the Ronda’s environmental actions.

**Amazonas and San Martin regions**

The Amazonas and San Martin (ASAM) regions, in the eastern slopes of the Andes, northeastern Peru, are a central part of the Tropical Andes Biodiversity Hotspot. This is amongst the most biodiverse areas on Earth, habitat for numerous endangered species, and a global conservation priority (Myers et al. 2000; Myers 2003).

Throughout these regions, social, economic, and political dynamics are highly complex; poor migrant and native populations, international corporations, environmental criminals, development agencies, and conservation bodies are constantly in conflict, resulting in rapid environmental degradation and severe threats to endangered species (Young and León 1999; Shanee 2012; Shanee and Shanee 2014; Shanee et al. 2014; Holland et al. 2016; Shanee and Shanee 2016). Rural populations, predominantly impoverished farmers (known as *campeinos*) and their families, suffer from land insecurity and degraded environmental resources (Loker 1996; Schjellerup et al. 2009). The *campeinos* are predominantly migrants from the country’s highlands, forced out by rapid population growth and the proliferation of mining operations. This has resulted in a scarcity of fertile land to cultivate, unaffordable land prices, and a lack of natural resources (Bury 2005; Bebbington and Bury 2009; Shanee 2012). Construction of a marginal highway and the state’s promotion of the Andes’ eastern slopes as an area of fertile land with potential for development made it one of the most rapidly populated areas in Peru (Dreyfus 1999). Small-scale farming activities have become the major cause of deforestation (Shanee et al. 2013; Holland et al. 2016).

Pathak et al. (2004) define community-based conservation (CBC) as self-initiated, voluntary conservation of ecosystems, species or cultures by local people, through communal management and institutions. Seymour (1994) suggests the success of CBC depends on their community traditions and intrinsic capacity to organise their resource use, rather than on external intervention. Successful projects are ‘discovered’ rather than designed. CBC differs from Integrated Conservation and Development Programmes (ICDP), which are top-down and are initiated by mainstream organisations inviting local people to participate. ICDPs ideologically perceive local people as a problem that needs addressing rather than as partners in conservation (McShane and Wells 2004), and are criticised for inappropriate treatment of social issues and environmental inefficiency (McShane and Wells 2004; Igoe and Brockington 2007; Durand and Vázquez 2010). Although Peru’s legal framework for conservation is relatively advanced, severe institutional deficiencies compromise law enforcement’s ability to protect areas (Rodriguez and Young 2000; Naughton-Treves et al. 2006; Shanee et al. 2017), regulate extraction companies (Dietsche et al. 2007; Arellano-Yanguas 2011), and control crime (Shanee et al. 2015; Shanee and Shanee 2016).

**Campesinos in northeastern Peru**

*Campesinos* in northeastern Peru establish and manage many environmental initiatives of varying size, including locally run reserves, internal control of hunting and deforestation, environmental education, reforestation, and developing economic alternatives to destructive activities (Shanee et al. 2014; Horwich et al. 2015; Shanee and Shanee 2015; Schleicher et al. 2017; Shanee et al. 2017). Rationales given by local conservationists for their initiatives include appreciation of nature’s intrinsic value, religious and spiritual values, concern for environmental deterioration and sustainability, and promoting social justice and recognition (Shanee 2013). Conservation discourses and activities of such marginalised groups often go unnoticed, but careful examination of northeastern Peru as a case study of locally-initiated conservation provides an important view of what bottom-up conservation methods look like.

**The Rondas Campesinas**

The *Rondas Campesinas* (also known as the *Ronda* or collectively as Rondas) comprise a network of autonomous civil organisations aimed at self-protection. They practice vigilance and civil justice based on customary rights in rural Peru and cities where state control is inadequate (Gitlitz 1995; Yrigoyen 2002; Langdon and Rodriguez 2007). This grassroots organisation is the most important social movement in northeastern Peru and is involved in many conservation initiatives in the region (Shanee 2013; Shanee 2016).

The first *Ronda* was established in Cajamarca region in 1976 by a group of farmers as a vigilance committee to patrol the village’s land at night to protect it from criminals (Gitlitz and Rojas 1983; Starn 1999). The *Ronda* had considerable success and was adopted by many villages throughout northeastern Peru. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were ~3,400 *Ronda* bases with more than 400,000 active members (*Ronderos*) (Starn et al. 1995; Starn 1999).

Adoption of the *Ronda* quickly reduced thefts, so they expanded their responsibilities to local conflict resolution. The *Ronda* assembly started to judge and punish criminals caught by patrols, resolve disputes of inheritance, land rights, water rights, domestic violence, etc., and initiate communal development projects (Starn 1999; Yrigoyen 2002). *Rondas* became a communal authority on their own lands, communicating between neighbouring bases and developing a sense of identity and collaboration (Yrigoyen 2002). Starn et al. (Starn et al. 1995) describe *Rondas* as one of the most significant rural movements of twentieth century Latin America.

The state’s attitude to *Rondas* has been ambivalent since its inception (Yrigoyen 2002; Yrigoyen 2002; Piccoli 2008; Piccoli 2014). On the one hand, state officers enjoy the peace generated and the relief of much of the burden on the police and judicial system; successive governments have attempted to use them in their struggle against rebels or to promote...
political actions and parties (Starn 1999; Faundez 2003). On the other hand, the power gained by Rondas worries the state. Leaders are often accused of hindering police and judicial processes, repeatedly facing criminal charges and imprisonment (Yrigoyen 2002). Their legal status also changes frequently, variably permitting and prohibiting their autonomy and authority (Yrigoyen 2002).

In 2009, Peru’s Supreme Court published Agreement No. 1-2009/CJ-116, which recognised the Rondas’ legitimacy and autonomy to administer special justice in rural areas, in parallel with the official justice system. The 6th article of the Rondas Law (No. 27908) grants them the “… right to participation, control and supervision of development programs and projects to be implemented in their jurisdiction according to law”2. These legal tools grant Rondas autonomy to administrate their environment. Although not all Ronderos are indigenous, this law as well as the Peruvian Constitution consider Rondas as an indigenous organisation, granting them the same rights as that of indigenous people and communities globally. Thus, international and national laws guarantee the Rondas’ right to govern on their lands according to their traditions.

Ronda bases can be organised by any population (community, neighbourhood, village). They are encouraged to organise male and female Rondas, youth groups, and school Rondas. Men generally take part in vigilance activities, patrolling their village at night in small rotating groups. Women deal with what are viewed as women’s problems and are less involved with vigilance.

The Rondas are organised as a pyramid, with delegates from each level meeting periodically to form the higher level. The Central Unica Nacion de las Rondas Campesinas (CUNARC; Unique National Centre of the Rondas Campesinas) is the highest level directing and governing the Rondas. Each level includes president, directive board, and assembly. The assembly decides the organisational rules and regulations for each level in the hierarchy. Minor problems can be addressed by the directive board at the base level. Major problems, however, must be discussed and voted on by the general assembly, with advice from higher levels. It is estimated that Rondas have 5000 bases in Peru, mainly in the northeastern region, and that they solve ~180,000 cases per year3.

None of the Ronderos (at any level) are paid. These are voluntary, honorary positions. Ronda leaders are subject to social pressures within their bases, as well as stress from state authorities or denunciation by the criminals they have punished. These situations sometimes escalate and might cost Ronderos their lives. Because of the personal risk and required investment, many bases periodically disband and often reorganise when crime returns.

The Rondas’ interest in environmental issues is still new. Orin Starn, who studied Rondas during the 1980s and 1990s, did not find the Rondas active in protecting natural resources. He believed this was due to minimal mining operations in northeastern Peru at the time, and hardly any environmental discourse until the late 1990s (O. Starn, pers. Comm. 2012). Daniel Idrogo identified their first environmental initiative as the one in 1992 by the Ronderos from San Ignacio, Cajamarca, who fought against logging. Denounced as terrorists by INKAFOR S.A company, 11 of them were sentenced to 30 years in prison (Idrogo 2007).

This study seeks to offer an empirical account of conservation efforts initiated by Rondas; their ideologies, observations, internal struggles, their strengths and shortfalls as conservationists, and their potential to influence mainstream conservation.

**METHODS**

This study took place in rural parts of the ASAM region of the eastern slopes of the Andes, northeastern Peru, between 2008 and 2017. The author used ethnographic methodologies, including interviews, questionnaires, and participant observations (LeCompte and Schensul 1999), to record the views, ideologies, and behaviours of Ronderos towards the environment, their conservation activities, and their effectiveness. These research methods were also used with professional conservation agents interacting with Ronda initiatives. Forty-eight questionnaires were given to leaders of Rondas throughout ASAM for additional quantitative data, allowing increased sample size systematisation and validation (Schensul et al. 1999).

Research was performed by Dr Noga Shanee during her time in the area as co-director of the Yellow-tailed Woolly Monkey Project, run by Neotropical Primate Conservation (NPC), a small charity based in La Esperanza, Peru. One of NPC’s aims is to support local conservation initiatives. This project and associated activities involved constant contact with Ronda groups throughout ASAM, including cooperation on projects, mutually assisting each other’s goals, giving talks at each other’s meetings, creating local conservation areas, and climbing mountains in search of endangered primates. NPC received official approval from the Ronda assembly for cooperation to conduct an ethnographic study of their environmental efforts. This provided access to many closed events and documents, facilitating a thorough validation of the data. Epistemic discourses could be triangulated with the actions they promoted and their effect ‘on the ground’5.

The research period of nine years provided prolonged exposure to the area’s social and environmental processes. Participant observations took place in a wide range of settings, such as internal and public meetings of Rondas, the government, and NGOs, visits to field sites, and other conservation initiatives in addition to many other planned and spontaneous occasions. Different settings provided access to private conversations and internal discourses as well as those intended for outside agencies. Private interviews allowed the author to investigate the rationale behind some contradictions between the different discourses and to follow discourses as they transferred from outsiders to Ronda leaders and on to
rural bases and vice versa. Relevant national and international laws and other written materials were also reviewed. The ethical guidelines of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (ASA, 1999) were applied throughout the study. Special attention was given to the protection of informants; names of places and people have been concealed unless otherwise agreed by informed consent.

RESULTS

Ronda environmental discourse and actions

Ronderos use various discourses to explain the importance of the environment, criticise its destruction, and promote its protection. These can be complementary and contradictory. Table 1 details the main categories of discourses encountered during the project. Many discourses justify or lead to conservation actions, such as creation of and support for locally-run reserves, reduction of hunting and deforestation, environmental education, reforestation, and the search for economic alternatives, with additional focus on controlling extractive industries (Figure 1).

The details of different discourse categories, the actions related to them, and their conservation results are described.

Religious and moral justifications for the importance of the environment

Leaders repeatedly remind Ronderos that this obligation means respect for and protection of all forms of life. Discourses illustrate romanticised views of nature, which should be valued and protected for its intrinsic and theological values, combining knowledge retrieved from churches, conservation agencies, and revolutionary ideologies. In these discourses, Ronderos take responsibility for the environment and choose between inflicting damage on nature or protecting it. They are called to stewardship of nature to demonstrate high moral and religious values. Complementary discourses place Rondas as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
<th>Characteristic statements</th>
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<tr>
<td>Religious and moral</td>
<td>We must defend the patria, the forests, the animals, the rivers; everything that we can see is part of creation and we have to defend it. Life started in the water; the spirit of God was above the water. If there is no water, there is no life. We have to defend it. Life and water... We and our body are part of the environment... When you kill animals, you must know that they are part of the creation, we are not allowed to kill the animals that give us life, as it is not part of the continuation of the liberating work of Christ. When you go to the forest and see a tree, you think how beautiful it is, God planted it there. But, really, it was the monkey who planted it. He walks from tree to tree like we are going to the market, what they (biologists) call habitat, is in our language the monkey’s home.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal organisation and environmental conduct</td>
<td>We cannot be guilty as campesinos for ruining the same area that we did not let the companies ruin; we cannot make more damage than them. We cannot let our environment become a desert. You must punish every person that burns habitat because he kills millions of lives; millions of microorganisms. It is a sin. Also, the selling of animals, we cannot kill animals or sell them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defending the environment against harmful extraction companies</td>
<td>[It is] Not us, the campesinos, who are polluting the environment, it is the big companies. We are not free, we are still a colony; a dollar per mountain and people aren’t worth anything. We do not speak our language, they took away the gold and they gave us the bible. The defence of the environment is part of the class struggle. We are ready to fight even if we will have to stop the bullets with our chests. This [logging] company will not take down our forests.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Criticising state and NGO conservation</td>
<td>The Ronda must coordinate with environmental organisations, but I don’t trust them. There are people that think that they can do conservation from the office. I call all the environmentalists to unite with us—but for real, not like organisations that announce their interest to protect the environment, but only protect the mines, and at the same time waste a lot of money on their meetings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-determination - pride in efficiency</td>
<td>We have to start acting. For example, the Ronda is more practical, faster; we have already conserved Hocicon, and La Primavera, in Asucion Goncha and Delta. Sometimes, without talking too much, one can do a lot of things...we go from village to village, by example. “Even if I do not win, they will see the difference and understand what politics should look like... we will win... the Regional Government will learn from us, we will make reserves everywhere.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropogenic reasons for conservation</td>
<td>The campesino has to defend the environment for agriculture. From NGOs we learnt of a few environmental issues and it helped us to confront the great dangers of environmental contamination. As farmers, Ronderos depend on the land and must defend themselves from invasions by mining companies, and therefore build their own capacities in environmental issues and defence of their lands, water and biodiversity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaining of lack of recognition of conservation efforts and cooperation from outside agents</td>
<td>Unfortunately, it [Ronda’s conservation efforts] is not recognised by the state. I don’t want this to be the last time that you invite us—we should always coordinate—but for acting, for working, not for theorising. They [NGOs and the state] always call us when there are land invasions and other problems, because they are looking for a cheap and secure way to evict the invaders. The don’t call us to cooperate with them but to do their job”</td>
</tr>
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Conservation discourse and initiatives of the Rondas Campesinas

Responsible for internal organisation and environmental conduct of campesinos

Inspired by these discourses, Ronderos take the role of internally organising their communities to ensure they respect and protect the environment. Actions resulting from these two categories of the discourse are the control of hunting, of keeping of wildlife, of deforestation, and of land-trafficking. A few examples are:

Between 2007, when the author arrived in Amazonas, and 2011, 23 Lagothrix flavicauda were found hunted for trophies or kept as pets in local villages. Although this number is low, actual numbers were probably much higher, as wild pets are often hidden from view. In early 2008, NPC was invited to give a short talk to the Ronda of Yambrasbamba, explaining the situation of the critically endangered and endemic L. flavicauda and the problems of keeping wildlife as pets. Marcos Diaz, regional president of the organisation in Amazonas at the time, took the stage and lectured the crowd that keeping wildlife as pets is equivalent to kidnap and torture. At the end of this meeting, the assembly signed an agreement that the hunting, capture, and sale of threatened wildlife is prohibited and will be punished according to Ronda tradition. This agreement was ratified in a regional meeting a few days later to include the whole of the Amazonas region and was passed on to Ronderos.

According to Diaz, the idea of prohibiting hunting was on his mind for a few years, but he needed outside support to sustain it in front of the Ronderos. He invited a local television crew to announce the decision to the media. This decision has been reaffirmed in subsequent years.

The government wildlife authority of Amazonas suffers many deficiencies, which severely reduce its ability to control hunting and wildlife-trafficking (Shanee 2012; Shanee et al. 2015; Shanee 2016); however, although systematic data of captive wildlife has not been recorded, it is anecdotally clear that the number of animals extracted from the wild in this region has decreased (Shanee 2012; Shanee et al. 2015). The last yellow-tailed woolly monkey found as a pet in Amazonas was in 2011.

Land-trafficking poses another severe threat to the forests of ASAM (Holland et al. 2016; Shanee and Shanee 2016). Ronderos’ educational discourse often mentions land-trafficking; in both talks and written materials, Ronderos commit to controlling it. In 2016, in the Pampa del Burro Private Conservation Area belonging to the Yambrasbamba Community, Rondas intervened in the case of a group of brothers who had invaded the reserve and were clear-cutting and logging timber. A formal complaint had been lodged at the prosecutor’s office for 3 years without result. In coordination with the community’s leaders, the brothers were offered lands in another, non-protected area of the community (Similar cases described in Shanee 2016; Shanee and Shanee 2016).

Ronderos cannot always resolve these problems, however. Low levels of education, confidence, and experience in legal issues sometimes means that Ronderos cannot act efficiently against organised criminals. For example, a group of land invaders illegally sold plots to migrants, creating a new settlement in the Alto Mayo Protected Forest’s buffer zone. Ronda groups in the area met with the invaders who showed false documentation and convinced the Ronderos that the invaders were acting legally. No action was taken. Land traffickers sometimes use Rondas for defence and legitimisation; settlers in new areas, including illegal land invaders, often establish a Ronda base as soon as they settle and request protection from other Rondas to defend against attempts to evacuate them.

As with wildlife trafficking, land trafficking and organised invasions of reserves are not efficiently controlled by state authorities (Shanee and Shanee 2016). High rates of deforestation and illegal settlements in northeastern Peru imply that Rondas do not fully answer the problems; however, where they do act, they provide quick and efficient answers to specific problems.

Another result of discourses on conservation morality and internal control is informal conservation initiatives, including local bans on deforestation and hunting. These bans have proven effective in northeastern Peru. Even in highly-populated areas, where gazetting protected areas is impossible (Shanee et al. 2014), measurable positive outcomes in the conservation of yellow-tailed woolly monkeys and spider monkeys have been documented (Shanee and Shanee 2015).
Many Ronda bases set environmental rules, such as fining people who start forest fires, banning the hunting of endangered species, setting fishing quotas, banning the use of explosives in fishing, and stopping the transport of logged timber.

Ronderos being part of the community is not always helpful. They are sometimes forced to obey the village hierarchy and struggle to intervene against influential community members, such as the family of the Ronda president or other authority figures. This is more common with environmental offences, which do not have immediate, direct consequences on human health or capital. The pressure to act is not as strong and therefore these issues are not always properly addressed. Campesinos and village authorities not directly involved in Rondas often criticise Ronderos for lack of action. In a regional meeting, a resident of Vista Alegre stated “The Ronda was trying to get the invaders out of the river catchment forests, but they refused to be evicted. We need the help of more institutions”.

The same problem is observed in a village where most of the population gains in some way from illegal timber operations. Individual Ronda bases rarely intervene with the trade, but these matters are sometimes solved by higher level Ronda assemblies, who may make groups from other areas, not directly involved, to act objectively.

Defending the environment against harmful extraction companies

This discourse is connected to social defence against mining, oil, and logging companies, considered as outsiders who take away natural resources for economic benefits while undermining campesinos’ rights and destroying the environment. Peru’s multiplying free trade treaties are frequently discussed and people are warned that these treaties open the way to markets that are much stronger than campesinos’ production abilities and will negatively affect their economy and the environment. They mention concerns about the introduction of genetically modified foods, which they believe will harm the genetic diversity of native crops. They also warn about a connection between international free trade treaties and the killings in Bagua, a link also made by academics (Bebbington 2009; Hinojosa et al. 2009; Schmall 2011).

These discourses are sometimes contradictory to the previous discourses in that campesinos are presented as part of nature and nature’s guardians against outsiders. Agriculture is referred to positively as campesinos feeding the world and its association to deforestation is ignored. This part of the Rondas’ environmental discourse supports initiatives such as protest against extractive industries, land protections and education of the social consequences of environmental degradation.

3.7% of the area (144,116 ha) in the Amazonas region of northeastern Peru and 3.4% of the area (174,900 ha) in San Martín (CooperAccion 2016) is under mining concessions. As mentioned earlier, Rondas are considered an indigenous organisation and their members descendants of native people. They demand proper consultation for each extraction project, as set out by the international conventions of which Peru is a signatory. As this rarely occurs, clashes are often inevitable. The Rondas’ various struggles with mining companies are well documented (Bebbington et al. 2010; Sullivan 2014; Isla 2017; Viitala 2017). In ASAM, there are currently fewer extractive activities and therefore fewer conflicts. Following pressure from Rondas, the Regional Government of Amazonas decided in 2011 not to approve any further mining concessions in the region without proper consultation. The Regional Government of San Martín and the Ronda organised a joint demonstration against mining in the region in 2008. Rondas, inspired by the law authorising them to monitor projects within their jurisdiction, arrange visits to mining operation sites they believe are exploited without consultation. Sometimes, even after the visit, there is no proof that mining operations are active due to bad information or as the operation is in an exploratory stage. In cases where operations are discovered, Rondas take an active role in organising local opposition.

Ronderos actively supported the protest that led to the killings in Bagua in 2009. For the first two months, they collected donated food and organised parallel marches. Their main slogan was ‘the forest is not for sale, the forest is to be defended’. On 5th June, the day of the killings, many Ronderos were involved and one was killed. All over Amazonas, Rondas protested against the government with the same slogan. Ronda leaders participating in the protest justified the indigenous struggle and transmitted to all bases what they defined as the ‘indigenous’ deep message for the defence of life. Similarly, Ronderos from all over Peru financially support and sometimes join protests in other regions. During protests against the Yanacocha mine in Cajamarca, Ronderos were killed by state armed forces (Hernández Llamo 2014). Hundreds of Ronderos from all over the country came to the region to join the struggle. Rondas also financially support each other through popular collections for the wounded and the orphans and widows of those killed in these struggles.

Anthropogenic reasons for conservation

Ronderos are part of a generally poor farming society in constant search for development opportunities. The relationship between the environment and crop quality is becoming evident through their experience as farmers and information received from external conservation agents. Rondas of ASAM were repeatedly observed offering support to state conservation agencies and NGOs. They see conservation as a development strategy that can help campesinos control their lands and provide legitimacy (Shanee 2013). Many villages invite conservation NGOs to visit, hopeful of developing joint projects. Having a Ronda base in a village is perceived by locals as an essential step for attracting NGOs, as it assures visitors’ safety.

The Ronda of Coroshá Campesino Community created the private conservation area Hierba Buena–Allpayacu to conserve high forest protecting the source of the river feeding the community’s hydroelectric plant.
The Asociación de Productores Agropecuarios La Primavera (APALP; Association of Agricultural Producers of La Primavera) created the Sun Angel’s Garden Conservation Concession with support from local, regional, and national Rondas, as part of their efforts to certify their coffee as organic because environmental protection was a requirement of the certifying company.

Environmental education is a strong component of the information that Ronda leaders share with their bases; the benefits of a healthy environment are constantly emphasised. Environmental information retrieved from conservation agents and the general public is integrated into the movement’s communications and distributed throughout the network. During 2009–2010, more than 40 ‘environmental schools’ were organised throughout the region by the regional Ronda president, including a full day of lectures on aspects such as conservation opportunities and dangers from mining. NGOs and state conservation agents were invited to present at many of these events. Leaders often present environmental information through local and national media, therefore reaching larger audiences. The magnitude of the Rondas means that the transmitted environmental messages are received by vast numbers of people, many living in the most remote areas neighbouring forests, where external conservation agents rarely venture.

Rondas have very little funding, which is collected from members. Many meetings and activities are cancelled due to lack of funds for travel and basic expenses. The unpaid duties and hard economic situation of most Ronderos means that the loss of working days for meetings or activities is a great sacrifice. Therefore, although the organisation is inclusive and internal regulations encourage participation, attendance is at times low. On average, women in the study area worked ~12.4 hours/day, not including childcare, which is ~2 hours a day more than men (Shanee 2012). Women attending meetings often whisper about work waiting for them at home and are impatient for meetings to finish.

As environmental educators, Ronderos often suffer from lack of access to accurate, up-to-date information. Much of the information provided by leaders arrives in a distorted form. For example, there is often confusion about which animal species are threatened, the national laws concerning forest clearing and hunting, the causes and consequences of climate change, etc. This could be due to the many rounds the information has made or due to low levels of formal education in the area. However, Ronda leaders mix powerful images and cultural beliefs into their information; they can therefore often engage the public better than outside experts.

Complaints about the lack of recognition of Rondas’ conservation efforts and real cooperation from conservation agents

Most conservation organisations entering a community present themselves to Ronda leaders. The common reason given for this is that they believe Rondas are important and should be part of conservation activities. This is often just lip service, however, as Ronderos are often asked by NGOs to participate in projects but rarely to take part in planning. NGOs usually come from the cities and don’t communicate well with Ronderos, so cooperating can be mutually frustrating.

The case of Alto Mayo Protected Forest is complex, involves many actors, and is beyond the scope of this paper to detail in full (Shanee In prep.). Since 2015, there has been hostility and occasional violent clashes between Ronderos, park management, and Conservation International (CI), which is involved in this park as part of carbon sequestration efforts by Disney9. According to the administration and CI public discourses and private interviews, Rondas are used by a group of criminal land and timber traffickers who want to take over the reserve. They identified Ronda leaders as family of the criminals and are calling for a State of Emergency to bring in the army and regain control of the area. The national Ronda leaders’ discourse, however, identifies the same criminal group and stresses that, although Ronderos had asked the park management to cooperate in controlling them, the park had not taken them seriously. However, Rondas do not consider this as the main threat; they blame the park for approving a hydroelectric concession and plan to sue the park management in international court for destroying the reserve.

The plan to build a hydroelectric plant in Alto Mayo is not publicly known but was confirmed in an interview with a CI employee. According to this interview, it was ordered by the San Martin Regional President, Cesar Villanueva; although opposed in public consultation with campesino villages around the project, the administrative process to authorise it is advancing. This problem is much more complex, but it illustrates the practicality of this discourse. Rondas cooperate with conservation agents when their intentions are socially and environmentally unambiguous; the approval of a concession inside a reserve, even affecting only a small part, is a betrayal they cannot be party to.

Due to these differences, many state and private conservation agents believe that Rondas fail to fulfil their social and environmental roles, resulting in further discord. The Ronda of Amazonas invited the regional wildlife authorities to meet and offered to create a written agreement that the Rondas will help to control and confiscate illegal timber. The authority representative was very interested, but his superiors in Lima withheld permission. The representative explained that, in Lima, Ronderos are often perceived as violent criminals10. According to the Ronda leaders, this was their third attempt at arranging such a meeting.

Some of the Rondas’ social and environmental discourses followed by contradictory actions that harm nature can
be considered as “greenwashing”. Rondas are sometimes involved in land trafficking within forested and protected areas (Shanee and Shanee 2016). In 2011, Ronderos from Candamo, a village inside the Alto Mayo Protected Forest, attacked and wounded the park director when she tried to stop the illegal construction of a road through the park. According to her, the Ronderos defended a small but powerful group of illegally-settled coffee growers. The group decided to build the road to the village using their own money without government permission. “One moment they are Ronderos, and the next they are a mob of poor, landless farmers. Shameless people, claiming to be poor when they have enough money to build a road.”

**Ronderos take pride in being efficient environmental protectors**

The frustration felt by Ronderos in their interactions with mainstream conservation agents can have positive consequences, pushing them to demonstrate their superior efficiency in initiating conservation projects. They often present their initiatives as alternatives to national and international development based on natural resource exploitation.

In addition to informal conservation initiatives, Rondas are also involved with more official initiatives run locally or by the state. Ronda leaders and bases, as well as the regional federations and the CUNARC, have been involved with many initiatives to create and officially register protected areas in ASAM. In some cases, Ronda bases initiate the creation of reserves, and sometimes take part in the vigilance of new and existing reserves. Moreover, Rondas push authorities to comply with their obligations. Rondas presented a document to the municipalities of Amazonas asking them to protect the forests around river basins and micro basins, explaining it as part of the people’s right to clean water and important for agriculture. This proposal was adopted by the mayor of Jamalca district, who announced the protection of all these forests by municipal order. Rondas also help in the maintenance of state-run protected areas. In 2008, Ronderos accompanied the Public Prosecutor and the Ministry of the Environment to the Cordillera de Colan National Sanctuary to evict invaders.

The main schemes for privately protected areas are Private Conservation Areas (ACP; Áreas de Conservación Privada) established on privately owned lands and Conservation Concessions (CC; Concesión Para la Conservación) established on untitled state land and involving the registration of the area for 40 years. Both schemes are very popular in northeastern Peru (Shanee et al. 2017; Shanee et al. Submitted). Rondas are involved in the creation and maintenance of both these types of reserve.

### Ronda-run Conservation Areas (ARCAs)

Legally registering conservation areas in Peru is complicated, expensive, and slow, and is therefore inefficient and discriminative towards local populations (Shanee et al. 2014; Shanee et al. Submitted). Ronda leaders’ experiences with such initiatives exposed them to the deficiencies of mainstream conservation systems. As many Ronda bases had internal agreements to conserve wild areas already, Ronda leaders and the author of this paper developed a new model for creating and protecting conservation reserves, called a Ronda-run Conservation Area (Área Ronderil de Conservación Ambiental; ARCA), based on the model already used by Ronda bases. ARCs are not registered in state offices, but with local, regional, and national Rondas, and their creation is simple and inexpensive. An instruction manual was approved by the National Ronda Assembly in 2012. Local Ronda bases are responsible for designating areas to conserve and protecting them. Bases decide on the frequency of vigilance patrols, rules for entry, punishments for offences, and ways to promote the area locally, ensuring people are aware of and respect the area. Creation of each ARCA is celebrated locally, inviting neighbouring villages and local authorities to a party where it is announced, along with the conservation regulations of the area. As previously mentioned, Peruvian law grants Rondas the same legal rights as indigenous communities, including the right to free determination, allowing indigenous people to determine their proper ways of development; the right to self-government and autonomy, to determine their financial and administrative priorities and the use of their lands; the right to territory, Rondas have the right to use and enjoy their collective territory, including the lands and natural resources necessary for their social, cultural, and economic subsistence; the right to administer, allocate, and control territory, in accordance with their customary law and system of communal property, without external interference from third parties or the State; and the right to their own jurisdiction, giving the Ronda the right and duty to exercise jurisdiction within their territorial scope. These international rights constitute the legal basis for the creation of ARCs on Ronda territories, both on titled and untitled lands. These reserves aim for double impact; they allow fast and effective conservation and protest exclusive state conservation systems that require high economic investment and lengthy bureaucratic processes.

The legal framework for land rights in Peru is extremely complex, changes often, and has many loopholes (Shanee and Shanee [2016] discuss some of them), and often contradicts international conventions that Peru is party to. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the legal capacity of these reserves to fend off different external interests. The long-term practicality of ARCs will have to be examined in the future.

Hocicon is a 505-ha reserve initiated by the Ronda base of Libano, Amazonas, in December 2012; it was the first ARCA. Its creation was announced through a celebration organised by the Ronda base, with participation from public, local, and regional authorities, schools, and local media. National environmental authorities were invited but did not attend. Regional authorities of Amazonas publicly congratulated the initiative, but privately asked the Ronda to register the area through one of the legal conservation schemes, explaining that
ARCAs are not legitimate as “you cannot have an autonomous state within the state.”

In 2015, the author was invited to a meeting with the Regional Government of Cajamarca with the then President of CUNARC and the president of the regional federation of Rondas of Cajamarca. The regional government wanted to learn about ARCAs. As nearly half of the Cajamarca region is gazetted for mining concessions (Calculated from: MEM 2011) and the government does not grant conservation rights where mining concessions and petitions exist, creating formal reserves in this region is especially complicated. The regional government’s plan for a system of conservation areas was therefore hindered. The regional government invited the author and CUNARC leaders to discuss establishing ARCAs in collaboration with local Ronda bases. They explained the creation of ARCAs as a step to creating the planned reserves, but it was not clear to what extent the regional government would control the creation and running of these reserves. The first reserve resulting from this cooperation is the 5200-ha ARCA Huangamarca, created in 2016. The reserve was labelled an ARCA, but the creation and management was controlled by the regional government without consideration of social and cultural aspects of the original ARCAs. Rondas are therefore discontented with this area; yet another conflict between Ronderos and the state.

As ARCAs came from existing Ronda custom, and each base can create them autonomously, it is hard to know how many ARCAs already exist. The author estimates there are hundreds throughout Peru, ranging from tens up to thousands of hectares in size.

**DISCUSSION**

The Ronda was founded as a social movement; environmental agendas were gradually incorporated into the organisation’s discourse and activities. Currently, conservation is one of the key areas in the Rondas’ struggle of ideas and is used to evaluate and demonstrate Ronderos’ ideologies and actions versus those of dominant groups in power. The Rondas’ interest in the environment results from their personal experiences as campesinos, living in marginalised farming societies and depending on the environment for their livelihoods in this age of environmental change. Throughout the study, the prevailing Ronda discourse was their role defending the environment against harmful extraction companies. Other discourses accept that campesino actions can negatively affect the environment and set the role of Ronderos as responsible for internal environmental control. Though these discourses became increasingly common during this study, they were always less frequent than the first kind. This newer discourse is likely the result of growing influence by external discourses holding campesino farming activities responsible for high deforestation levels in ASAM. The expansion of Ronda discourses is comparable to global environmental justice discourses, which originally focused on human disadvantage and vulnerability, but expanded to include the conditions of the natural world and non-humans, such as ecosystems and animals (Schlosberg 2013). There is an obvious contradiction between these discourses, as the first concentrates on defending the well-being of campesinos, while the second offers to sacrifice some of the campesinos’ well-being by limiting their actions to reduce the inherent conflict between development and the natural world (Cripps 2010; Schlosberg 2013). Ronderos justify this contradiction in their discourses by presenting conservation of nature as a godly demand and healthy nature as a necessary condition for campesinos’ development and well-being.

According to Roberts (2009), involvement in environmental struggles has a positive, unifying effect on movements. Therefore, the Rondas’ involvement in conservation initiatives could lead to mutual growth Conservation and social opportunities. Bryant and Bailey (1997) classify grassroots environmental movements into protest movements, campaigning for better social and environmental conditions, and self-help groups initiating projects to improve standard of living locally. Ronda initiatives can be classified under both these categories. Ronda leaders aim to trigger social change in campesino populations to enable a ‘struggle of ideas’ to cancel some negative social and economic effects of capitalism in their society. Rondas see environmental issues as fundamental to this struggle, encouraging the opposition of large-scale extractive industry projects, regulating their own resource use, and initiating conservation projects to demonstrate their efficacy and resourcefulness. They repeatedly act against strong economic forces, which the government rarely controls (Arellano-Yanguas 2008; Arellano-Yanguas 2011) and mainstream conservation NGOs seldom protest (MacDonald 2010). They act with solidarity and sometimes give their lives in struggles they perceive as important both socially and environmentally.

As is frequently explained by Ronderos, poor societies in the Global South live in and depend on nature for survival, have strong ties to nature, and understand the importance of keeping it healthy (Davey 2009; Martinez-Alier 2014). According to Martinez-Alier (2014), these societies turn to environmental actions to defend their livelihoods, reinforcing their discourses with other values, such as the defence of indigenous rights and the sanctity of nature. Thus, campesino and indigenous people have become the backbone of the global environmental justice movement since the 1980s (Martinez-Alier 2014), influencing international environmental policy (Roué and Nakashima, 2002; Dumoulin, 2003). The main contribution of this paper to literature is the descriptions of deliberate, on the ground, environmental actions, such as the creation of conservation areas and leading environmental education campaigns. These actions are sometimes in collaboration with, but often in defiance of, the same environmental policy makers that the Rondas aim to influence.

Rondas are generally the most consulted of all communal authorities for many social issues. Village meetings arranged by Rondas are usually well-attended. Through education and the penalty system, effective results are achieved. Additionally, as also observed by Starn (1999), because of the Ronderos
intimate acquaintance with the villagers and the area, they are efficient in investigating crimes and identifying those responsible, and are therefore more efficient in dealing with crime than state agents. The Rondas’ power in numbers not only affects campesino populations, but regional governments understand their influence and answer to some of their specific demands. Because the Ronda, as a grassroots movement, is part of the campesino population and subject to the same social forces, however, there are many cases where the roles are reversed and Rondas take part in illicit activities that harm the environment.

Internationally, there is a growing divide between social and environmental movements. This is often due to local people’s growing need for agricultural or hunting lands conflicting with conservation’s need for exclusive lands in globally shrinking spaces (Brockington et al. 2008; Lunstrum et al. 2016). This conflict is present within the Ronda, where some factions struggle to establish new spaces for campesinos to settle and farm, sometimes inside protected areas, while other Ronda members fight to control the unorganised invasion into mature forest and/or protected areas. The most obvious case of this role reversal, from environmental protectors to anti-conservationists, was the Ronderos’ attack on the Alto Mayo Protected Forest director. In many other cases, campesinos criticise Rondas for not fulfilling their role as enforcers of environmental order.

CBC is based on local initiatives (Pathak et al. 2004). Examples indicate that Rondas initiate their own conservation activities as well as support others, so long as they believe their partners’ efforts are genuine. Although there are internal contradictions within the Ronda environmental discourses and actions, they do not tolerate external contradictions that undermine their environmental and/or social aspirations.

Their network and methods of social control enables various activities over a wide geographical area. The Rondas’ actions only give partial solutions to environmental problems, as hunting, land trafficking and deforestation are never totally eradicated. Nevertheless, these initiatives go a long way in reducing these practices and setting examples that neighbouring bases can duplicate. The contagion effect in conservation, defined by Horwich et al. (2012) and proved in Peru (Shanee et al. Submitted), is a major characteristic of CBC, initiated and designed by local customs and organisations. Success of one local group stimulates similar initiatives by others, adding up to large-scale conservation effects. The Ronda structure encourages continuity and increasing numbers of projects are popping up throughout Peru.

The Ronda, in its relationship with conservation agents, does not take a passive role or await direction. They actively seek cooperation and openly criticise agents of inefficiency, ambiguous morals, and disrespecting local populations. Some conservation agents, however, are reluctant to work with Rondas because of the movement’s reputation as violent or because they believe that Rondas do not fulfil their declared role of defending the environment. The latter view may be promoted by international and local discourses presenting campesinos as environmentally destructive (Loker 1996). These narratives are also used by mainstream conservation agents to excuse their own inefficiency and tolerance of contradictions, blaming failures to administer conservation on campesinos’ bad character (Shanee 2013).

ARCAs are examples of conservation initiatives designed and administered by local communities according to their culture and traditions as well as their international and national legal rights. Rondas are inspired by conventional conservation reserves to not only create ARCAs, but also to use ARCAs to demonstrate their own superiority as inclusive and efficient conservationists. They take pride in ARCAs’ low cost and non-bureaucratic creation process, based on their cultural organisation and beliefs. ARCAs are repeatedly mentioned in local and national Ronda meetings as an example of the organisation’s achievements. ARCAs have no legal recognition yet and therefore do not offer the desired legal protection against extractive operations or land invasions; these areas worry the state authorities. The regional governments’ attitude to ARCAs is typical of Peruvian state relations with Rondas and indigenous peoples—it promotes pluralism, but only up to a certain point (Piccoli 2008). It congratulates their conservation initiatives but tries to restrict them to “proper” conservation channels. The small economic investment and the high on-the-ground effectiveness of ARCAs is an important alternative to mainstream conservation trends that are gradually scaling up in both size and costs (Brockington et al. 2008; Bixler et al. 2016).

Many Ronda leaders recognise the contradictions in their organisation’s work and are keen to resolve them. They do need and appreciate external help; however, Ronderos are inherently suspicious of outsiders and can be proud and uncompromising. Supporting their work should be done with respect, patience, and following their lead, both in the quantity and type of support offered. As suggested by Torri and Herrmann (2016), leadership and internal dynamics of grassroots movements are key in their ability to act efficiently and collectively. Therefore, cooperation requires flexibility, allowing them to shape their organisation according to their needs and capacities. It is important to remember that contradictions exist in the actions of both mainstream conservation organisations (MacDonald 2010; Adams 2017) and the Ronda, and leaders should be guided and supported to resolve them using their own social structures, rather than be publicly criticised. ARCAs are an important socio-environmental tool and, although it is too early to evaluate their long-term efficiency, ongoing studies show positive trends in controlling both deforestation and hunting in these reserves (unpublished data). It is hoped that ARCAs will be recognised by the Peruvian state, through registration at the Public Registry Office (SUNARP; Superintendencia Nacional de los Registros Públicos), without the need to convert them to ACPs or CCs, which will enable Ronderos to better defend them. This, however, entails a long political process.
Supporting this process would be a great way for external conservationists to assist the work of the Ronda.

In answer to the Igoe (2010) proposition, this paper is set to challenge mainstream conservation, using detailed ethnographic research to ensure the inclusion of marginalised discourses and actions in academic literature. The contradictions this inclusion generates are essential to shifting the global discussion on local participation in conservation. Rondas are not unique; local and indigenous populations all over the world protect their environment, officially or unofficially, with or without external recognition. It is vital that mainstream conservation recognises and supports these initiatives. Understanding alternative, bottom-up discourses and how they shape environmental action is the first step in efficiently supporting local conservation actions.

The fact that the Ronda was not created as an environmental organisation but evolved to prioritise these issues, increases the relevance of this study for grassroots organisations all over the world. It demonstrates that an organised society, with the right guidance and experience, can become a major conservation player in highly biodiverse and heavily populated and threatened areas.

CONCLUSION

Local people all over the world use their inherent social organisation, traditions, and customary laws to conserve the environment; however, their efforts are often disregarded (Horwich et al. 2015; Mbaria and Ogada 2016; Nilayangode et al. 2017). The lack of academic and popular attention for such efforts denies local conservation initiators the support they deserve, forcing them to struggle with demanding conservation bureaucracies and severe financial constraints, thus preventing them from fulfilling their potential as effective conservationists (Shanee 2016). Contradictions within the Rondas’ discourses and actions should not be ignored, and the organisation should be encouraged to understand and resolve them. These contradictions must not serve as a reason to discriminate the organisation as an important conservation actor or to overlook its achievements. This article offers insights into the potential of Rondas to administer effective community-based conservation in one of the world’s most biodiverse and endangered areas.

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NOTES

1. Taylor (2006) distinguishes between three types of early Rondas—the Rondas of the Northern Andes, which developed autonomously in Cajamarca; the Rondas of the central-southern Andes, organised later by the Peruvian government to fight against the ‘Shining Path’; and the Rondas in the high jungle provinces, which collaborated with drug traffickers against the ‘Shining Path’.

2. Author’s translation: Las Rondas Campesinas tienen derecho de participación, control y fiscalización de los programas y proyectos de desarrollo que se implementen en su jurisdicción comunal de acuerdo a ley.

3. In sector Ronda meeting in Moyobamba, October 2009, no newer estimation exists for numbers of bases, Ronderos or cases processed. These cases would have otherwise been added to the state’s court system, which is extremely slow.

4. www.neoprimate.org

5. Some of the results in this publication were included in a Ph.D. thesis: Shanee, N. 2012. The dynamics of threats and conservation efforts for the Tropical Andes hotspot in Amazonas and San Martin, Peru. Kent University, Kent, UK.

6. In the discourse, God is sometimes swapped with ‘Pachamama’, a goddess worshiped by the indigenous people of the Andes, often translated to Mother Earth.

7. On the 5th of June 2009, Peruvian special forces, with tanks and helicopters, shot into a crowd of thousands of indigenous and mestizo protesters who had been blocking the Marginal highway near Bagua, Amazonas for the previous two months. The protesters called for the derogation decrees 1064 and 1090 aimed at disintegrating communities and indigenous territories, which they believed to be anti-constitutional and in violation of the Convention 169 of the ILO. The official numbers talk about 34 victims, including 23 police officers. There are many witnesses and testimonies, however, which point to much higher numbers of the missing and killed. At least one Rondero died. (Bebbington 2009; Schmall 2011).

8. Author’s translation: La selva no se vende, la selva se defiende!


10. Rondas are often referred to on the coast as abusive of their powers and of human rights. Some examples of rough investigations and punishments were observed during this study and are also mentioned by Starn (1999). However, many of the accusations of rapes and killings by the Ronda have no proven basis or can be traced to groups of Ronderos which are not integrated in the CUNARC.


12. UN Declaration on the Right of Indigenous People. Art. 3, 23; and ILO Convention 169 Art.

13. UN Declaration on the Right of Indigenous People. Art. 4; and Peruvian Political Constitution Art. 89.


15. UN Declaration on the Right of Indigenous People. Art. 20, 34, 35; and ILO Convention 169 Art. 5, 8, 9.
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