

The pentagon of Lake Tota

For years, the perceived problems of Lake Tota focused on pollution, harmful agricultural practices, over-extraction and general unsustainable practices. But as an environmental NGO working in the Lake Tota basin for years, we investigated these problems further and revealed that these are just manifestations of deeper systemic issues.

This article proposes a “pentagon” framework as a basis for the interconnected problems around Lake Tota. Resolving these elements will allow for a more harmonious coexistence for Lake Tota and all its stakeholders.

The pentagon elements:

Protection

The formal legal safeguarding of Lake Tota’s ecological value from municipal to international levels. This includes the essential protection of the RAMSAR Convention and the Colombian government, as a Ramsar Site.

Economic justice

Lake Tota provides great economic benefits to many stakeholders active in the Lake Tota basin, yet the investment poured back into preserving the lake is a small fraction of those benefits. By implementing a law by which beneficiaries must pay tax on the generated benefits, the current extractive economic model of Lake Tota activities will shift to a more balanced and just economy. Sources such as TEEB for Water & Wetlands would support this law and a Mixed Trust Fund (Water Fund) could be created, overseen by a basin council.

Value chains

The economic activities around Lake Tota cannot be seen as isolated from the rest of the production chain. All stakeholders, from farmer (or provider) to consumer must be taken into account when analyzing the harmful practices. Shifting to more sustainable practices requires a holistic approach to the problems.

Governability & governance

Governability means that official governmental institutions must be adequate, transparent and law-abiding political bodies.

Governance refers to the participation of civil society as a complement to the government. We believe that the creation and running of a Watershed Council is essential and urgent to fill this role.

Integral education & research

All basin stakeholders must have permanent and easy access to quality environmental education and training. Visitor centers, programs of continuous academic research or other public spaces must be dedicated to providing the stakeholders with understanding of all environmental aspects of the lake basin using the CEPA principles.

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We believe that these guiding principles will serve as a basis for an integrated approach to the Lake Tota problems. Improvements in one aspect will have a ripple effect across all the dimensions.

We emphasize again that these problems are interconnected and complex. There is a wide variety of actors and interests at play in the Lake Tota basin. The challenge, as described by Gandhi, is how to achieve harmonious coexistence.