

National Waters, Public Space: State and Environment in Guanabara Bay, Brazil, 1995–2005

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My project is an urban environmental history of Guanabara Bay over the twentieth century. The bay is the setting of one of Brazil's best known cities, Rio de Janeiro. It is also a history of how state environmental institutions have changed over time, during an amazing urbanization process which transformed the physical, social, and political landscape of Brazil. In the early twentieth century, the state promoted land reclamation and more extensive use of the bay's resources; a hundred years later, however, it was heavily committed to a costly, extensive and, unfortunately, failed program for cleaning Guanabara Bay.

As we see the changes in the bay, we also study the transformation of the concept of "nature" into "environment" in Brazil's public sphere. If the bay was seen as a beautiful—and everlasting—resource of Rio de Janeiro in the beginning of the century, by 2000 public officers dealt with a more troubled entity, a more frail and—a new concept—polluted Guanabara Bay.

The study discusses how often ad hoc policies for Guanabara Bay evolved into planned environmental management. It explores how a loose set of practices that transformed Guanabara Bay, regulated and monitored its natural resources, and enforced such regulations, gradually progressed toward comprehensive state policies that focused on the conservation and administration of the natural environment.

The project begins in 1905, when a Haussmann-inspired reform of the national capital changed the outline of the bay dramatically. It concludes in the twenty-first century when a high profile, internationally-funded program failed, also dramatically, to live up to its expectations of cleaning up the polluted Guanabara Bay, and to offer some semblance of a modern sanitary system to its more than fifteen million residents. I also include a brief discussion on previous uses of the bay, as well as some perspective on the new urgency for cleaning up the bay for the 2016 Olympic Games to be held in Rio de Janeiro.

I argue that, during this period, competing state institutions staked their claims to Guanabara Bay. As the local population increased twenty-fold, the bay's water regime, biota, and shoreline were radically transformed. The physical bay and the institutional bay changed together—not as in a careful blueprint, but rather as in a messy patchwork.

My research shows that the often proclaimed institutional weakness contrasted with the strength of personal networks of mid-level public servants. The evidence suggests that bureaucrats, scientists, naval officers across state agencies carefully cultivated personal networks, on which they depended to carry on their technical functions. These personal networks, rather than solid institutions, could determine the success or failure of most government-led environmental programs.

This experience of creating and reinventing environmental institutions to manage Guanabara Bay set a standard for urban environmental agencies throughout Brazil in the late twentieth century. The high visibility of Rio de Janeiro and the bay amplified the debate over urban pollution in Brazil, and over the state's responsibility to address pollution as a social and political problem.