## **COMPETING VISIONS OF** THE FUTURE: COLOMBIA'S **MAGDALENA RIVER**

**CARTAGENA** 

the plan could improve river navigation but might end up making their jobs more diffic



stection, but feared the plan would ca ats to bypass El Banco completely,



**BARRANCABERMEJA** 

**PASSENGER BOAT PILOTS** 

small watercraft would have to give way to massive towboat-and-barge, convoys, forcing them to explore unfamiliar, hazardous river branch to avoid accidents.

and their engineers get their hands on it, who knows what will happen, what it will become."



**SCAN TO HEAR MORE** FROM AUSTIN ZEIDERMAN **ABOUT HIS RESEARCH** 

In 2014, the Navelena public-private partnership between the Colombian government, Brazilian engineering firm Odebrecht, and local contractor Valorcon won the tender to restore commercial navigation to the Magdalena over 13 years.

900KM OF RIVER, 24 HOURS

A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK,

**365 DAYS A YEAR** 

Nearly \$1 billion was earmarked to extend the commercially navigable section of the river, currently to Barrancabermeja, upriver to Puerto Salgar. Dredging and channelling would create a 900km river channel, seven feet (2.13m) deep and a minimum 150 feet (46m) wide, to transport over 10 million tons of freight annually.

## **HISTORY OF THE MAGDALENA RIVER**

would be left behind?



In his new book, Artery: Racial Ecologies

Austin Zeiderman explores the past and

present of one of the world's great rivers,

revealing the challenges of pursuing just and sustainable planetary futures.

on Colombia's Magdalena River, Dr

One story concerns the potential

impact of a state-backed megaproject

corridor. For some, the plan promised a more prosperous future for Colombia.

But could it truly break free of enduring

and the extraction of natural resources?

patterns of violence and exploitation,

Who did this vision support, and who

to transform the river into a logistics

For 400 years, the Magdalena River was a conduit for the expansion of colonialism and capitalism in the Americas, channelling slavery into the mainland and transporting valuable goods like gold, coffee, and oil to the coast for export.

Today, river transport still supports extractive regimes – fossil fuels currently make up 90 per cent of its cargo. And it continues to reflect enduring geographical divides - such as between the Andean interior and the Caribbean coast - and structures of inequality that privilege lighter-skinned Colombians over those with African and Indigenous ancestry



The plan could help the town leave behind its past traumas as a former epicentre of violence during Colombia's armed conflict. But in stretches of the

**PUERTO BERRÍO** 

PUERTO SALGAR

**PUERTO WILCHES** 



**BOGOTÁ** 



Activists voiced concerns of dredging and other modifications to the river while pursuing legal strategies for future protection. Some welcomed the shift from road to river transport as a positive step toward climate mitigation



REGULATORS

on Colombia's inland waterways, including the Magdalena. Some saw the river as neglected, hoping the plan would "reactivate Colombia's



FLUVIAL TRANSPORT AND LOGISTICS MANAGERS

transportation infrastructure and economic competitiveness. In their view, the plan offered a cost-effective and environmentally friendly alternative to road transport, while integrating river transport into a broader multimodal

## A GREEN AND JUST TRANSITION?

In 2017, the Navelena partnership collapsed. Financial backers withdrew after the US Department of Justice revealed Odebrecht had paid \$788 million in bribes across Latin America.

Colombia is at a crossroads. Although the country is the third-largest producer of fossil fuels in Latin America, the government recently banned new oil, gas and coal licences in favour of solar and wind power. Improving navigation on the Magdalena remains a government priority, but in 2019 the Magdalena was awarded legal personhood, making it a holder of rights.

Will a new plan for the river continue centuries of exploitation and extraction, or could it support the transition from fossil capitalism? The Magdalena now enjoys some legal protections, but the experiences of those who depend on the river remain overlooked. How can those charting the river's future ensure a green and just transition that honours both human and more-than-human justice?

