

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



SCAN TO HEAR MORE FROM AUSTIN ZEIDERMAN ABOUT HIS RESEARCH

In his new book, *Artery: Racial Ecologies on Colombia's Magdalena River*, Dr 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.

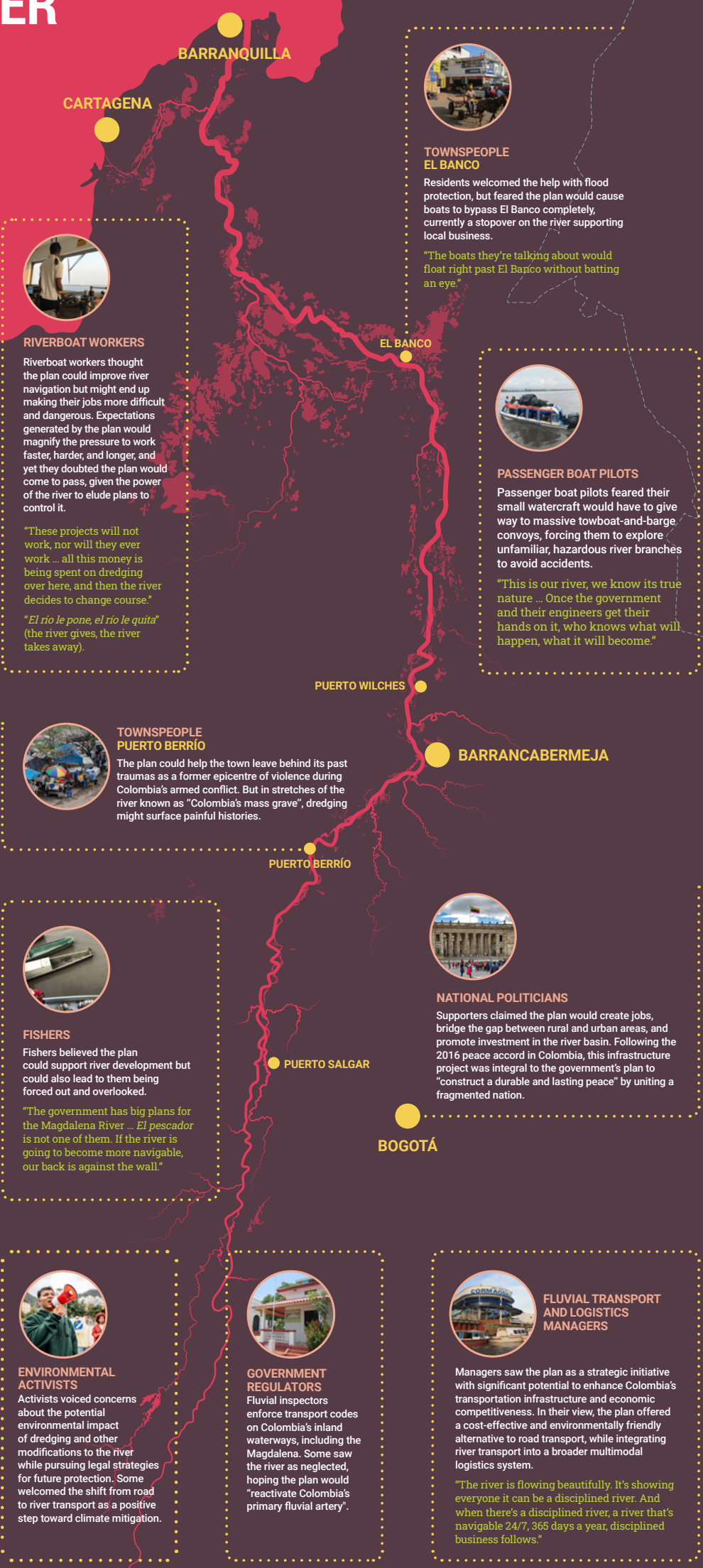
One story concerns the potential impact of a state-backed megaproject to transform the river into a logistics corridor. For some, the plan promised a more prosperous future for Colombia. But could it truly break free of enduring patterns of violence and exploitation, and the extraction of natural resources? Who did this vision support, and who would be left behind?

## HISTORY OF THE MAGDALENA RIVER



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 OFFICIAL VISION: 900KM OF RIVER, 24 HOURS A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK, 365 DAYS A YEAR

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.

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.

## 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?

