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Peruvian National Park Targeted by Oil Company

by Guest
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Some 20,000 plant species, at least 600 bird species, 232 species of fish, 174 mammals, 100 reptiles, and 1,200 butterfly species. On top of that, an astonishing, immense landscape of lush forests and rivers. This earthly paradise is the Bahuaja-Sonene National Park, between the southeastern Peruvian regions of Puno and Madre de Dios. With an area of 1,092,142 hectares, diverse ecosystems, and astounding biodiversity, it represents one of the few places in the world that has had almost no human contact.

Executive would cut back protected area for hydrocarbon site

The Council of Ministers, headed by President Alan Garcia's Cabinet chief Jorge del Castillo, discussed a proposal in September that would have a disastrous effect to cut down the national park by no less than 209,782 ha in order to create an oil bloc that would allow the exploitation of the oil field that presumably exists there.

The formula to achieve the cutback was to send a bill to Congress permitting the repeal of supreme decrees from July 1996 and September 2000 that delimited the territory of this protected area. "If they open this door for oil investment, many other problems will emerge," says Jose Luis Capella, a lawyer with the Sociedad Peruana de Derecho Ambiental (SPDA). "You can't infringe environmental norms like that."

Peruvian laws define nine categories of protected areas. In three of them national parks, national and historical sanctuaries it is only permitted to make indirect use of the natural resources and landscape. In other words, only nonmanipulative scientific investigations, tourism, and recreational activities may be made under tightly regulated conditions. Directly extracting resources or modifying the environment is strictly prohibited.

In 1998, when the territory was labeled a Reserve Zone a transitory category before being declared a protected area, according to Peruvian law US company Mobil Oil initiated explorations. Protests from environmentalists, as well as some press reports, managed to detain the project. The Garcia administration attempted to reduce Bahuaja-Sonene because it could not repeal the environmental legislation, but could, instead, decrease the protected area. According to Article 68 of the Peruvian Constitution, "The state is obligated to promote the conservation of biological diversity and natural protected areas."

In Chapter 18 of the free-trade agreement (FTA) with the US, ratified by the US Senate on Dec. 4 (see NotiSur, 2008-01-11), that obligation is reiterated. If part of the national park is no longer a protected area, any activity will be permitted. And what would be logical, Capella says, is that,
along with oil companies, illegal loggers and informal miners also will encroach. Environmentalists worried "We are scared that this will convert into a new Huaypetue," points out Ninon Diaz, assistant manager of the protected areas in the Madre de Dios region, referring to a disastrous example of what happens when environmental regulations are too slack.

In Huaypetue, in Madre de Dios, around 15,000 gold extractors the majority informal have converted that portion of the Amazon into a desolate wasteland. They have filled the rivers with mercury, uprooted the trees, and there are even complaints of forced labor and slavery. Bahuaja-Sonene could have the same destiny if the decision is made to opt for oil investment. The presence of informal miners has already been spotted on some rivers from the neighboring Tambopata National Reserve. "Every day there are more," says Diaz.

Furthermore, other potential opportunities that this area holds in its lush flora and abundant fauna would be lost as would environmental services, that is, the potential to use nature's resources in a sustainable manner. Capella and Diaz explained that Bahuaja-Sonene's immense forests and rivers provide water to other basins and purify the course of other rivers, like the Tambopata. These important rivers supply water to various communities and towns, such as Puerto Maldonado, capital of Madre de Dios.

All this uncorrupted territory is like a large fish breeder that later serves to feed the settler and native communities that live in remote areas thus its continued purity is essential for the health of the communities it provides for. The protected area is home to numerous animal species, of which 13 are endemic, and its silent-but-effective contribution in the struggle against global warming must not be underestimated. This is one of the few places on the planet that endlessly purifies the alarming increases in carbon dioxide.

Eddy Torres, from the Zoological Society of Frankfurt, who works in the park, says that this forest continues to hold scientific mysteries. In its interior, leafy and still partly undiscovered, plants and animals with great genetic potential may be found. The biodiversity in Bahuaja-Sonene is so abundant that in 2002 the National Geographic Society declared it one of the seven most emblematic natural sanctuaries on the planet.

The government had to give up after a campaign initiated by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and companies through public action and a Web site www.salvemoscandamo.com to save the Candamo zone, one of the most beautiful parts of the park. For the moment there are no signs of reviving the abandoned plan. But the growing international boost of oil prices will cause, sooner or later, the government to resume its attack against those who wish to defend this paradise.

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