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Mining and Cross-border Conflicts in Ecuador and Peru
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The Ecuadoran government has decided to implement large-scale extractive-mining projects in the southeastern part of the country, even though the lands under consideration for mining operations either have been declared "intangible" because of their great biological diversity or are protected because of their vegetation or their being a source of water for several populations and the headwaters of large rivers that flow mainly into the Amazon.

The main mining project extends along the Cordillera del Cóndor in southeastern Ecuador, which straddles the border with Peru, an area that has generated ongoing armed conflicts between the two countries because demarcating the border has proven impossible given the ruggedness of the terrain and ignorance of its topography, and especially because large deposits of gold, copper, and uranium have been detected in the region—minerals coveted by both governments.

El Cóndor: a sanctuary for biodiversity
The Cordillera del Cóndor is a massif in the southeastern foothills of the Cordillera de los Andes, on the 320 km Amazonian border between Ecuador and Peru.

Ecuadoran biologist Alfredo Luna, who studied the area together with scientists of the influential environmental organization Conservation International in 1993, says this mountain range, which is more than 90 km long, is a key element in the hydrological cycle linking the Andes with the Amazon. This cycle allows a flow of huge quantities of water, thanks to the rains that are rapidly recycled in an endless cycle of rain, filtration, evaporation, and new rain.

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Luna's study found that the eastern slopes of the Andes, because of their "tortured and complex geological formations and proximity to the immense sea of moist Amazonian forest, create ecological and evolutionary conditions that support and generate tremendous biological wealth." The year-round abundance of water fosters the existence of a huge variety of plants, some still unidentified by science, dominated by orchids, of which there are 40 species, 26 of them new to science. The flora also supports animal species that are endemic to this area: 29 amphibian and reptile species, 27% of which are endemic, have been identified, along with 210 bird and 45 fish species. A new species of marsupial was discovered, which has been named the Caenolestes condorensis, and many other species are waiting to be identified.

In addition, says biologist Segundo Sánchez, a researcher with the Peruvian Grupo de Formación e Intervención para el Desarrollo Sostenible (GRUFIDES), the Cordillera del Cóndor provides a refuge for species being displaced from the Amazonian valleys because of advancing human intervention.
The Cordillera del Cóndor is also a great regulator of water resources, helping to control the effects of greenhouse-gas emissions and, consequently, of climate change. It is the source of the waters that feed the watersheds of the Zamora and Santiago rivers, which in turn are major tributaries of the Río Marañón and then the Amazon, which reaches a flow rate of 200,000 cubic meters per second when it empties into the Atlantic Ocean in Brazil.

Armed conflicts for control of El Cóndor

Since becoming republics, Peru and Ecuador have engaged in various border conflicts. In the 20th century, the most significant was the 1941 war, which ended with the Protocolo de Río de Janeiro, signed Jan. 29, 1942, which established the present borders of the two countries (NotiSur, Feb. 10, 1995).

The Río Protocol left some areas undemarcated, including the Cordillera del Cóndor, where in 1960 planimetric data confirmed the existence of a river, now called the Río Cenepa, which had not been considered in the 1941 protocol. This caused Ecuadoran President José María Velasco Ibarra (1934-1935, 1944-1946, 1952-1956, 1960-1961, 1968-1972) to declare the Río Protocol null and void. This left an opening for new conflicts in the area, such as the Guerra de Paquisha in 1981 and the Guerra del Cenepa in 1995. Even though war was not declared in either instance, the disputes resulted in numerous human casualties and armed confrontations, including with warplanes.


One point in the Brasilia Accord called for creating a binational ecological park in the Cordillera del Cóndor; this park would be an icon of peace between the two countries. In Ecuador, the 2,440 ha Parque Nacional El Cóndor was officially created by executive decree on July 4, 1999, in the provinces of Morona Santiago and Zamora Chinchipe on lands belonging to the indigenous Shuar people. Peru made progress as well, creating the 5,440 ha Zonas de Protección, on untitled ancestral lands of the Awajún and Wampis peoples, and then creating the Parque Nacional Ichigkat Muja-Cordillera del Cóndor.

Mining side by side

The official history of the conflict between Ecuador and Peru does not refer to the mining concessions in the area, but the two states may have granted concessions for the entire Cordillera del Cóndor to Canadian firms, after reports from Conservation International, which from 1993-1994 analyzed both the Peruvian and Ecuadoran territory, made known not only the biodiversity but also the existence of a significant potential for mining gold, copper, and uranium.
The Canadian firm Corrientes Resources acquired concessions on both sides of the border; while the Peruvian firm Afrodita, a subsidiary of the Canadian firm Dorato Resources Inc., obtained a concession for much of the Awajún and Wampis lands.

In Ecuador, besides Corrientes Resources, called Ecuacorrientes in Ecuador, the firms Goldmarca Ltd, Aurelian, Kinross Gold Corporation, and even the Ecuadoran Army's Dirección de Industrias (DINE) were vying for concessions.


To further the mining processes in the Cordillera del Cóndor, the government of former Peruvian President Alan García (1985-1990, 2006-2011) decided to grant titles to the Awajún and Wampis peoples, but for only one-fourth of their ancestral lands. The Instituto Nacional de Recursos Naturales (INRENA) in Peru went ahead with the process of granting titles without consulting the Awajún and Wampis peoples, paying attention only to pressures from Peruvian private and government mining interests.

Similarly, in Ecuador, an attempt was made to clear the area by expelling the artisan miners who had penetrated the western foothills of the Cordillera del Cóndor. In September 2010, the national police carried out an intense operation to remove the small-scale miners, which was complemented by the criminal trial of Salvador Quishpe, indigenous prefect of Zamora, site of the Cordillera del Cóndor. Quishpe's trial aimed to silence one of the most critical voices of large-scale mining and preventing the Zamora prefecture from drawing up an ordinance to protect the biodiversity of El Cóndor.

Pablo Sánchez of GRUFIDES says that, for open-pit mining, as is planned for El Cóndor, to be profitable, it has to produce a minimum of one gram of gold per ton of earth. In Yanacocha (Cajamarca, Peru), 600,000 tons of earth are turned over per day, which, besides drying up the water sources used by the neighboring communities, has completely altered the mountain landscape, removing many mountaintops in 20 years of exploitation. This is what awaits the Cordillera del Cóndor if the peoples of Ecuador and Peru are unable to influence their respective governments to respect the rights of the peoples in the area and the rights of nature.

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