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Indigenous Group Uses "Living Forest" Model to Oppose Ecuadoran Oil Push

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Under renewed pressure from government-backed oil interests, the Kichwa people of Sarayaku, in the Ecuadoran Amazonía, are employing a new tool to defend their lands and lifestyle: an alternative-development model that challenges the classic concepts of wealth and poverty espoused by most western governments and international organizations.

The tribe gained international attention in the mid-1990s when it organized against the Compañía General de Combustibles (CGC), an Argentine oil company that had been granted access to more than 60% of the group’s lands in the Amazonian province of Pastaza. The Ecuadoran government—prior to issuing its concession to CGC—neither informed nor consulted the people in Sarayaku and thus failed to meet constitutional guidelines regarding the use of indigenous lands.

The people in Sarayaku defended their territory, setting up Campos de Paz y Vida (peace and life camps) to mobilize against incursions by the CGC (NotiSur, May 11, 2012). In 2012, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) found the Ecuadoran state guilty of human rights violations in the case. It ordered the government to pay compensation and issue a formal apology to the communities of Sarayaku.

The government, nevertheless, has decided to include Sarayaku—along with the territories of other indigenous groups in Ecuador’s southern Amazonian area—in a new oil concession process. The people of Sarayaku, as a result, are mobilizing once again to prevent drilling on their lands. Only this time, they have come up with a development proposal of their own, one that stresses the sacred nature of their territory, that re-evaluates concepts regarding quality of life, and that respects their spirituality and right to make independent economic decisions.

The "living jungle"

"What does it mean to be poor?" asks Franco Viteri, a Sarayaku indigenous leader who heads the Gobierno de las Naciones Originarias de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana (GONOAE). "Being poor isn’t necessarily about lacking money. It’s about lacking food, medicinal plants, the accompaniment of one’s family; being poor is being left without marshlands, without mountains, without lakes, without clean rivers. Those are the things we really need to live."

It was with these considerations in mind that the people of Sarayaku drafted a document called the Kawasak Sacha (living jungle), which emphasizes an approach to life and a worldview specific to their indigenous culture and jungle surroundings. Organized around a series of principles, the declaration has become a key element in the group’s ongoing opposition to the government’s pro-extraction policies.

Above all, the Kawasak Sacha stresses the importance of achieving harmonious coexistence with nature—not for romantic or aesthetic reasons, explains José Gualinga, the president of Sarayaku, but to preserve the jungle’s natural ecosystems, the true indicators of the economic, social, and cultural wealth of Ecuadoran Amazonía’s various indigenous groups.
For the people of Sarayaku, true wealth comes from keeping "the land free from evil," a concept known as Sumak Allpa. Ecosystems must remain clean. The land must stay fertile. People must take care not to pollute the water, air, and forests. They should also preserve the jungle’s sacred places, which are a source of both spirituality and wisdom.

Another fundamental principle for the Sarayaku people is Sumak Kawsay (harmonious life). Sumak Kawsay, a basic element of well-being, comes from adherence to positive, individual, and collective values. A third part of their worldview is the idea that development should be guided by the "know-how and technology of indigenous science"—the accumulated wisdom that has been generated through centuries and passed down from generation to generation. Sacharuna Yachay, as the concept is known, refers to ideas regarding social organization, land management, use of natural resources, spirituality, craftsmanship, and traditional medicines, among other things.

"The people’s true wealth comes from these three pillars: Sumak Allpa, Sumak Kawsay, and Sacharuna Yachay," says José Gualinga. "That’s what will allow us to share our lands justly and in peace."

The Sarayaku people's ideas run counter to how large multilateral organizations view development. Things like rising income levels, industrial expansion, and even the "millennium goals"—which have been adopted by various governments—are of little value to Amazonian indigenous people who have a fundamentally different understanding of what wealth and development mean.

The "regenerating jungle"

Dedicated to blocking oil-industry incursions in the south, the GONOAE is also eager to help areas in northern Amazonía where petroleum companies have already caused serious environmental problems. In the provinces of Orellana and Sucumbíos, for example, very little old-growth forest remains after decades of colonization and oil extraction, which began in the 1970s.

"We need to develop a set of ideas that would be valid and applicable to that region. One option is the principle of the regenerating jungle," says Franco Viteri.

Implied in the principle of regeneration is the idea that northern Amazonía is ill and needs to undergo a healing process. "The last pockets of original forest must be located. From there the regeneration process can begin. The native communities will also have to recover what they’ve lost during 40 years of western meddling," says Viteri.

The GONOAE president is convinced the ongoing struggle by communities in northern Amazonía to force oil giant Chevron-Texaco into paying for damages it caused there could serve as an example of how to go about regenerating the jungle and how to hold individuals or companies responsible for the damages they cause (NotiSur, March 4, 2011). "Regenerating the forest and restoring its harmony are the only ways the indigenous peoples of the northern Amazonía region can hope to survive," he says.

The threats

The government’s pro-extraction policy threatens the majority of the country’s jungle-based indigenous groups since the region where they reside, Ecuadoran Amazonía, is precisely where the oil and other sought-after resources lie.
The oil drilling boundaries are expanding in all directions: northward, with the incorporation of the Yazuni-ITT oil fields (NotiSur, Sept. 27, 2013); and toward the center and southwest, into the territories of the Kichwa, Shuar, Achuar, Andoa, Shiwia, and Zápara tribes. In the southern Amazonía region, the Kichwa de Saraguro and various Shuar communities are also being threatened by large-scale mining.

"These projects are presented to the communities as being in their best interest. As a result, many families turn their backs on their own history and sell their land. But, in the long run, that decision just means more poverty and, ultimately, the demise of the tribe itself," says José Gualinga.

The people of Sarayaku are determined not to let that happen. Well-aware of their history, they plan to do all they can to resist industrial encroachment and thus preserve their treasured Kawsak Sacha.

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