
Ecuador: New oil exploration activities in Yasuní National Park

Yasuní National Park stretches along the basins of the Yasuní, Cononaco, Nashiño and Tiputini Rivers. Aside from the fact that these are major rivers in their own right, they are also surrounded by floodplains, wetlands, lagoons and lake systems like the Jatuncocha, Garzacocha and Lagartococha. This area is also the ancestral territory of the Waorani indigenous people and two indigenous tribes living in voluntary isolation, the Tagaeri and Taromenane.

Cononaco and Tiputini, like hundreds of other indigenous names, are also the names of oilfields. The oil industry's practice of using indigenous names for projects that entail the devastation of indigenous territories are just one more means of humiliation of the local communities.

In December 2008, the Waorani denounced new oil exploration activities in the Cononaco oilfield. In order to appease the community, the Ecuadorian state-owned oil company, Petroecuador, paid them 35,000 dollars. But these new activities affect the Yasuní National Park, a protected area.

Previous oil operations in Cononaco have been inspected as part of the trial underway against Texaco, since the activities in the field were undertaken by this multinational oil giant. Of the 35 samples taken, 30 showed readings higher than those permitted by law.

The area in question forms part of both the Yasuní Biosphere Reserve and the Waorani people's ancestral territory, and the contamination caused by oil activities there directly affects Yasuní National Park.

When the pipeline between the Auca and Cononaco oilfields burst in 2006, the resulting oil spill contaminated the Tiputini River which runs through the National Park. But the new exploration activity is even more menacing, because it is taking place in areas vital to the survival of indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation.

Moreover, the denunciation of new exploration activity in protected areas implicitly exposes the continuation of the extraction-based economic model, which views nature as merely an adversary, and the continued use of typical oil industry practices. Essentially, the first hole drilled will imply the violation of all of the rights recognized in the country's new constitution:

- * The prohibition of oil operations in protected areas, Art. 407.
- * The right of nature to exist and maintain its life cycles and structure, Art. 72.
- * The precautionary principle, established through the stipulation that the State will apply precaution and restriction measures to all activities that can lead to the extinction of species, the destruction of ecosystems or the permanent alteration of natural cycles, Art. 73.
- * The protection of the territory of peoples living in voluntary isolation, a right whose violation would entail the crimes of genocide and ethnocide, Art. 57.

The Waorani, who have demonstrated their opposition to oil operations through different forms of protest, have been treated as criminals, divided and ignored. Today, however, protected by the right to resistance recognized in the new constitution (Art. 98), they are armed with a new tool to move from denunciation to action.

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