
Ecuador: Yasuni Park, oil and indigenous resistance

The Yasuni National Park, considered to be a Pleistocene refuge and declared Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1989, covers an area of 982,000 hectares and spreads out to the basins of the Yasuni, Conanoco, Nashiño and Tiputini Rivers. Its forests are host to the greatest number of species of trees per hectare in the world as well as a great diversity of species of fauna. The Huaorani indigenous peoples and some non-contacted groups such as the Tagaeri and Taromenane, live in the Yasuni Park. For this reason it is considered to be one of the most emblematic parks in the country.

However, about 60 per cent of the Yasuni National Park has been handed over in concession to transnational oil companies in 200,000 hectare blocks. The national oil policy with its main axis on the construction of the Heavy Oil Pipeline (Oleoducto de Crudos Pesados - OCP) (See WRM Bulletin No. 50), demands extension of the oil frontier to new areas and over-exploitation of those blocks already in activity, among them that of the Yasuni National Park.

All these activities have caused serious impacts on the ancestral Huaorani people, totally interrupting and distorting their community life and causing social problems such as an increase in violence, alcoholism, sexual harassment of the women, prostitution, family disintegration, insecurity, labour problems, conflicts caused by the payment of compensation to those affected, repression by the oil companies to subdue the communities' will. The various strategies used by the oil company officials to obtain authorization to enter the communities, ranging from deception, promises and threats, to discrediting the leaders, attempts at bribery, division of the communities or organizations, are another way of eroding community life.

Mention may be made of impacts on health such as contagion of new diseases (Hepatitis B and C and syphilis) and the effects of contamination that also imply the death of domestic animals from drinking polluted water or from accidents in the oil company facilities, loss of crops, market gardens and farms due to soil salinization around wells and stations and also due to the infiltration of contaminated water in rivers, estuaries, lagoons and groundwater (see WRM Bulletin No. 86).

It is in this context that a recent decision has been taken by the Council of the Huaorani Nations of the Ecuadorian Amazon (Consejo de Gobierno de la Nacionalidad Huaorani de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana - Onhae) to break off all friendly relations with the Brazilian oil company Petrobras, to ignore an agreement signed by the previous council of leaders of the Onhae with the former, and to prevent the company from entering the Yasuni National Park to launch activities in Block 31.

The said agreement provided for the financing of infrastructure in the communities, social aid and support for the creation of a small aircraft company, known as the Aereo Minta project. The present leaders have denounced that to date, nothing has been done.

To this is added the pressure of the grass-roots communities of this Nation, mainly women, which has led the organization to adopt such a decision.

Alicia Cahuiya, President of the Association of Huaorani Women, AMWAE (its acronym in the Huao

language), mentioned that her organization is opposed to the activities in the Yasuni National Park because the Huaorani women want to conserve the territory free from contamination for their children. They do not want their farms, where they sow yucca, bananas and other products that are the communities' only family food, to be contaminated by oil. Neither the State nor the company have taken on responsibility even when oil activities have contaminated the rivers where the inhabitants obtain their supply of water.

Cahuiya criticised the former Huaorani Government Council for signing the agreement with the Brazilian company Petrobras to exploit Block 31, without having previously consulted the grass-roots communities. AMWAE also opposes the construction of a 35 km road to be built along the banks of the Napo River, as they consider it will cause more deforestation, the disappearance of wild animals and the introduction of habits foreign to indigenous culture, such as alcoholism and prostitution.

The president of Onhae, Juan Enomenga, announced that there would be no going back on the decision to break off relations with the company and insisted on the total revision of the agreements signed with transnational companies.

For their part, the Kichwas from the Amazon province of Orellana, that are questioning compliance with environmental studies and the link between the communities and Petrobras, announced that they will support the actions promoted by the Huaorani against the oil companies.

Article based on information from:

"Los huaorani rompen los acuerdos con Petrobras", Redacción Tena, July 2005,

<http://www.elcomercio.com/noticias.asp?noid=134012>;

"Los kichwas están en contra de la acción de Petrobras", Redacción Orellana, July 2005,

<http://www.elcomercio.com/noticias.asp?noid=134240> sent by Elizabeth Bravo, Acción Ecológica, E-mail: ebravo@hoy.net;

"Parque Yasuni", Acción Ecológica,

http://www.accionecologica.org/webae/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=39