
Bolivia: Conservationists against the environment and local people

The San Miguel-Cuiaba gas pipeline project of Enron-Shell which will cross Bolivia into Brazil has been severely questioned by Bolivian and international environmental and social NGOs for its serious long term impacts on the Chiquitano dry forest in eastern Bolivia, that is the world's last significant remnant of intact dry tropical forest, the headwaters of the Pantanal, which is the world's largest wetland. Rural communities and indigenous peoples that inhabit the area will be affected as well. Since November 1998 the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) -a decentralized financial institution of the US government- was repeatedly urged by local community representatives, NGOs and scientific institutions to deny financing to such destructive project (see WRM Bulletins 20 and 21)

On June 4th a numerous group of concerned NGOs addressed an open letter to Mr. George Munoz, President and Chief Executive Officer of OPIC, explaining him once again the reasons why the project should not be financed. "Project's sponsors have failed to adequately consult and involve local stakeholders in the assessment of the project's impacts and in the design of mitigation measures (and) both the initial Environmental Impact Assessment and the subsequent Supplemental Environmental Assessment have failed to assess the project's direct and secondary social and environmental impacts" states the letter. Violations of Bolivian environmental regulations and unwillingness by sponsors to consider alternative routes were also denounced. "In sum, to proceed with financing for this project would be an attempt to circumvent the Foreign Assistance Act and related OPIC policies that prohibit funding for extractive or infrastructure projects affecting tropical forest and otherwise causing major and unreasonable harm to the environment. To date, this policy has been explained away rather than implemented. We urge you to uphold the intent and the language of OPIC's new environmental policies, President Clinton's pledge, and the Foreign Assistance Act and deny financing for this project" concluded the letter.

Nevertheless on June 15th OPIC decided to finance the project. According to OPIC such decision was taken because some Bolivian and American "conservationist" NGOs -which had also signed on the letter addressed to OPIC a few days before- as the Wildlife Conservation Society, the World Conservation Society, the Missouri Botanical Garden, Fundacion Amigos de la Naturaleza and Museo Noel Koempff Mercado, had negotiated with the promoters of the project their support to it if a Conservation Plan of U\$S 20 million was implemented.

Considering that local communities and indigenous peoples living in the area are the real guardians of nature conservation, it is surprising that these NGOs are now trying to usurp their role. Surprising as it may seem, Enron and Shell will also take part in the "conservation" project. This elitist market-approach to natural resources conservation explicitly ignores the rights of local and indigenous peoples, in favour of getting some money to "mitigate" or "compensate" the effects of the project. Is it serious to assign monetary value to the last dry tropical forest in the world? Or to the biggest wetland? How can the home of rural communities and indigenous peoples be given an economic value? Is it possible to mitigate the effects of the project? Bolivian concerned NGOs have expressed their opposition to this agreement, which is against ethics and the interests of local people and the country.

Sources: Glenn Switkes, International Rivers Network, 8/6/99, Foro Boliviano sobre Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo (FOBOMADE), 22/6/99.