
Ecuador: Sign-on letter to protect UNESCO reserve from oil exploitation

The following includes a description of the situation facing Yasuni National Park, a sign-on letter and an appeal to remain in contact with the campaign. If you or your organisation can sign on to the letter please respond to amazonia@hoy.net. A copy of the letter will be delivered to the President of Ecuador, the President of Petroecuador, the President of UNESCO and to interested oil companies. If you would like to send your own version please send a copy to us at the same e-mail address or at the following Fax Number 593-2-527-583

Sincerely,
Gloria Chicaiza, Area de Petroleo, Accion Ecologica

Ecuador's Yasuni National Park once again under threat from oil exploration

Despite the world's growing preoccupation about the burning of fossil fuels and resulting climate change, the Ecuadorian government is pressing ahead with plans to develop a field of heavy crude in a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in the country's Amazon region. Ecuador is not alone in its rush to pump more oil. Most Latin American countries are planning to increase production when conditions are favourable. But increasing Ecuadorian production involves more than production of CO₂.

The major new project is the Ishpingo Tambococha Tiputini field located within Yasuni National Park, a UNESCO biosphere reserve. The 900,000 hectare park, located in the far Northwest of the country close to the border with Peru and Colombia, is renowned worldwide for its high levels of biodiversity. Over 200 species of trees have been identified inside Yasuni and a recent scientific expedition has identified over 825 species of woody plants in only a two hectare area. The park also contains over 500 species of fish, over 500 species of birds and more than 100 species of mammals.

While the park is legally protected from exploitation of any kind, two companies, Perez Compac of Argentina and Elf of France are already drilling for, and/or producing oil, and causing impacts within its boundaries. The Argentinean company YPF is also producing in an area which was originally within the park before its boundaries were changed in order to facilitate oil production. Meanwhile, the new project is expected to bring in another large oil company (possibly Shell) together with Petroecuador.

Pressure to develop the field is high. Ecuador's overwhelming external debt (45% of the state budget goes to debt interest payments) plus pressure from international organisations such the Multilateral Development Banks and the International Monetary Fund, means that politicians are not receptive to calls to protect the environment at the expense of the economy. In fact, the ITT project, which will also be linked to a smaller field in the neighbouring Cuyabeno animal reserve, is being hailed as a way to save Petroecuador. The state oil company is virtually bankrupt due to use of its internal resources for other government priorities.

Drilling in the middle of the park will undoubtedly cause extensive damage in all phases of exploration and production. Apart from the almost inevitable spills and other types of accidents, even the most

"ecologically sound" production methods still produces a barrel of liquid toxic waste for every barrel of oil produced. Other impacts include the deforestation associated with construction of pipelines, heliports and drilling platforms, not to mention roads and the inevitable colonisation that they bring.

But damage to the flora and fauna is not the only issue in Yasuni. The park is also home to the Huaorani, an ethnic minority which has already fallen victim to the impacts of intrusion into their lands, their population having fallen from over 25,000 when contact was first made, to around 3,000 today. If the field, which already has undergone approximately 1,750 kms of seismic exploration, is developed, the Huaorani will suffer further intrusions and damage to their already threatened culture.

SIGN ON LETTER:

Dr. Fabian Alarcon
President
Republic of Ecuador

Dear Mr. President,

The undersigned organisations would like to make known their opposition to the development of the Ishpingo Tambococha Tiputini field and to the operation of other new or existing oil wells in Yasuni National Park.

Yasuni contains biological treasures which the world can ill afford to lose, and we must not allow this jewel of the natural world to be affected by oil activity. The parks' boundaries have already been changed in order to allow oil extraction, and roads have been built through the northern wing of the newly defined park, bringing colonisation and damage to the inhabitants and biodiversity of the area. Any further assaults on the integrity of the park will simply compound the already serious damage done.

It is not sufficient to state that any new oil activity will be of the "environmentally sound" type, or carried out with state of the art technology. Any form of oil activity produces impacts, both in the exploration and extraction stages. Apart from the almost inevitable spills and production of toxic wastes, the construction of pipelines, the construction of the drilling platforms, and the construction of helicopter landing sites will all have a dramatic impact on the physical integrity of the park and its diversity.

It is interesting to note that despite a discourse to the contrary, damage has in fact already occurred in the drilling of Petroecuador's exploratory wells in the area.

In recognition of its value to humanity, and in order to protect it from exploitation, Yasuni has in fact been designated as both a biosphere reserve by UNESCO, and as a National Park by the Ecuadorian authorities. In the latter case the area is legally protected under the 1981 Law of Forests and the Conservation of Natural Areas and Wildlife, which states in its definition of a national park that,

"the areas will be maintained in their natural condition in order to preserve their ecological, aesthetic and cultural features, prohibiting any form of exploitation or occupation" [translation].

The political constitution of the Republic of Ecuador guarantees state responsibility for maintaining the environment free of contamination and for preserving the natural environment.

However, the protection of the natural environment in Yasuni is not the only concern. The park is home to ethnic cultures such as the Huaorani. The survival of these peoples and their culture has already been seriously compromised by existing oil activity in and around the park and must therefore not be subjected to any further oil exploration even on the most "ecologically sound" basis.

The park and its inhabitants must not be affected by short term economic demands which will compromise both the integrity of this area and threaten the lives of hundreds of Indigenous Ecuadorians.

We therefore demand that you, and the Ecuadorian Congress:

Respect the designation of Yasuni National Park as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and as a National Park

Respect the protection provided to the park by Ecuadorian Law.

Reject any pressure to exploit this area.

Stop all other oil activity in this park.

Sincerely, the undersigned