The Amazon Waterway in Peru vs. Flowing Rivers

The Waterway aims to connect the Amazon to the world. But that argument is based on the idea that we are disconnected in the Amazon. That is not true. What it really wants to do is place the Amazon in service of capital, razing peoples who coexist with their forests and rivers.

"And when the great Lupuna tree fell, it gave birth to the great and small rivers, and from its leaves the fish were born."
Story from the Kukama people — Loreto, Peru

The Amazon Waterway mega project seeks to create a mega-corridor to connect markets in Brazil with the river port of Yurimaguas in the Amazon in Loreto. This port in turn would connect with the interoceanic highway and the Port of Paita on the northern coast of Peru, for transport of goods en route to Asian and Australian markets.The Waterway would dig out the bottom of rivers in 13 shallow sections, which are commonly called "bad steps," **to ensure navigability of the most important rivers of the Amazon throughout the year:** Amazonas, Ucayali, Marañón and Huallaga. The removal of rocks and sediment from the bottom of the rivers would allow **large and heavy boats** to navigate them (1).

The stated objective is to connect the Amazon with the world. But this argument is based on the idea that we are disconnected in the Amazon. That is not true. **There are countless trade routes and early trade networks in the Amazon.** The major intercultural exchanges among indigenous communities of the central rainforest in Peru, which took place on the salt mountain, Ampiyacu—among other places—demonstrate that not only were we connected and still are, but that there was first-rate commercial and intercultural exchange (2). **The idea of a disconnected Amazon merely has the economic objective of placing the Amazon in service of capital—an idea that does not even take into account the peoples who live in it.**

The river is life itself and the world where we Kukama people live—in the tropical forests of what is known today as Loreto, in northeast Peru. For the Kukama people, **our territory encompasses spaces even beyond the physical**. The river is a being, with a life and will of its own.

The River and the Kukama People

The Kukama people depend on fishing for their physical survival, and on the rivers for their spiritual and cultural survival.

The bottom of the river is very important for the spirits that live in the water, such as the *purawa* (serpent), or the *karuara*—the people who live in the depths of the river, after having been carried away by the water spirits. Those who have gone to live in the world of water communicate through dreams with their families who live in the earthly world. The pools formed on the river banks, which enable the water to keep circling, is our ancestors' place of life. In this way, **the Kukama have a personal and deep relationship with the rivers.**

The bottom of the river is also very complex for other life systems. Many fish live, breed and feed in the riverbed. On the riverbed there are high and low reliefs, like the dunes of a desert. These dunes impact the current of the rivers, sometimes forming backwaters and other whirlpools. This means that **different species of flora and fauna are associated with the dynamics of the river**.

The river, or the "great serpent," cannot be seen as a fixed path; it is constantly changing and exchanging with the forest and its many systems of life. The river has a flood season and a dry season. In the flood season, the water and its sediments enter the forest and give shape to the wetlands, where water is the main factor controlling life. The floods leave sediments that produce specific habitats and bring nutrients that fertilize the land. These floods also help connect the different streams that feed the forest. This helps develop the plants, bushes and fruit trees necessary to sustain life in the forest along the rivers. In addition to feeding, many fish get rid of parasites by eating the fruits of some trees, in order to be healthy in the summer. The Kukama people also use the fertilized lands at different times of the year for their crops.

Even the tree trunks that fall into the river, either due to erosion or falling down, are an important element for the rivers. Take the *quiruma* from trees, for example: When they fall, their trunks end up in the middle of the river where the current is faster, and they slow the speed of the water and create a whirlpool where big fish rest—fulfilling a very important function. Likewise, the palisades on the banks of the river serve as breeding grounds for many fish.

The rivers and the forest are one; everything is united, nothing is separate. To think about rivers and to protect them is to think about our lives and to defend them. The rivers speak, feel and express themselves. **The Kukama, however, must face the skepticism of the Waterway project engineers and concessionaires, including the State.**

Rusbel Casternoque, *apu* or chief of the Kukama community of Tarapacá, on the Amazon River, said: *"When Westerners talk about the 'bad steps', we just keep seeing what we already know: the tail or head of a* purawa *could be there. When there is a beach in the middle of the river,* Raya Mama *is there; as usual, they lie in a place and the sand or mud builds up there, and a beach appears. Therefore, for us indigenous peoples,* ***dredging the river is a threat with the risk that—over time—these beings may leave the rivers"*** (3).

Turning Rivers into Global Market Routes

The project grants a 20-year concession for dredging work to the COHIDRO consortium—which is the partnership between Chinese company Sinohydro Corporation and Peruvian company Construcción y Administración S.A (CASA). It should be noted that Sinohydro Corporation has a track record of poorly executed projects and links to corruption in the region.

During the contested consultation process, which was carried out with more than ten indigenous groups that will be affected by this project, **officials from the Ministry of Transport and Communications promised "offerings" to the Kukama people as compensation for affecting the "spirituality of the rivers."** Given the Kukama peoples' strong relationship with the rivers, the Ministry's action constitutes a profound lack of respect for this people's way of life and their coexistence with their environment.

Currently, the National Environmental Certification Service (Senace) is in the process of evaluating the Environmental Impact Assessment for the mega project.

The Waterway project, however, threatens to profoundly affect the Kukama people, breaking their ancestral beliefs as well as their livelihoods and sustenance.

Where is Mama, now that the *maisangara* have arrived? [bad spirit]
Where is Papa, now that these strange beings have arrived?
Where are my grandparents? I need their stories in this solitude
Mama has been taken as a slave to the boss's house
Papa has been condemned to the roads, to bleed with the trees until he dies
Grandmother and grandfather cried, and became the tree
I was taken to the bottom of the river
I have a spear in my hands
I have a bow and some arrows
The boss walks in front of me but cannot see me
My feet become roots
My body a tree
He cannot see me
I become a tiger
I become *izango* [a type of mite]
He cannot see me
The boss shouts angrily
He cannot see me
A tree branch slowly rises
Another tree branch sustains the arc
The arrow shoots through the soul of the boss like lightning

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Nauta, Loreto

Radio Ucamara was founded in 1992 and reaches listeners in more than 40 indigenous and riverside communities, as well as the city of Nauta. Its mission is to rescue the Kukama culture and language, and to popularize information to reinforce indigenous identity and strengthen the communities who are facing major and abrupt changes and processes.
Watch the video series: "Río que camina," at: http://radio-ucamara.blogspot.com/(1) AIDESEP, ¡El dragado No Va! (No to dredging!) and SERVINDI, ¿A qué juega el Senace? (What is Senace up to?)
(2) See the note, "El célebre Cerro de la Sal"
(3) Alianza Biodiversidad, Perú Hidrovía Amazónica: Preocupaciones y expectativas del pueblo Kukama, 2018