

Ecuador's Bitter Choice - Extraction of petroleum decided from the ecologically fragile Yasuní National Park

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ON OCTOBER 3, 2013 after a marathon 10-hour debate, the Ecuadorian National Assembly approved the extraction of petroleum from the ecologically fragile Yasuní National Park. That decision was a dramatic reversal of a signature program of leftist president Rafael Correa to preserve the park. It also highlights ongoing debates within the South American left over how to balance urgent needs for economic development with environmental sustainability.

Since taking office in 2007, Correa has pursued economic policies designed to grow Ecuador's economy and lower poverty rates, and succeeded admirably in these goals. [\[1\]](#)

Although canceling the Yasuní preservation initiative was the most unpopular decision in his years in power, it would be an exaggeration to call this a watershed moment. Instead, it was a reaffirmation of the contradictions and limitations that were present since the very beginning of Correa's mandate.

Correa's developmental policies could be characterized as neoliberal environmentalism — they reveal how easy it is to employ a discourse that articulates ideas of respect for the rights of nature as long as they are not put in operation. [\[2\]](#) Therein lies the rub between Correa and his opponents on the Indigenous and environmental left. These activists favor a concrete implementation of ideas that the president is content to leave on the level of rhetoric.

The Yasuní-ITT Initiative

Experts estimate that the Ishpingo Tiputini Tambococha, or ITT oilfields in the Yasuní National Park in eastern Ecuador, hold nearly a trillion barrels of oil, about a fifth of the country's total reserves. Depending on petroleum prices, its extraction could generate \$18 billion in revenue. That money could provide key health, educational and economic development resources to overcome poverty and marginalization in this South American country.

Yasuní is also one of the most ecologically diverse places on the planet. UNESCO designated the park as a world biosphere reserve in 1989 because it contains 1300 species of animals and 100,000

species of insects, many not found anywhere else in the world. Each hectare of the forest reportedly has as many as 655 tree species, more than in all of North America.

Given the importance of the Yasuní, Indigenous and environmental activists began advancing ideas for a plan to exchange preservation of the park for international economic development aid. Not drilling in the pristine rainforest would both protect its rich mix of wildlife and plant life, and help halt climate change by preventing the release of more than 400 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

When Correa was elected president, he incorporated those ideas into what became one of the most popular proposals of his government. About 90% of the country's population supported leaving the petroleum in the ground. Correa used an Indigenous proposal to advance the popularity of his government, and in exchange his government gave a social movement proposal global visibility.

According to the original Yasuní-ITT plan, in exchange for forgoing drilling in the park, international donors would contribute \$3.6 billion, half the estimated value of the petroleum as of 2007, to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) for health care, education and other social programs. Despite broad local and international support for the plan, donors were not forthcoming with contributions.

After six years, the fund had only collected \$13 million in donations with \$116 million more in pledges. On August 15, 2013 Correa announced that because of a lack of contributions he would cancel the Yasuní-ITT initiative. "The world has failed us," Correa stated in a news conference. "With deep sadness but also with absolute responsibility to our people and history, I have had to take one of the hardest decisions of my government."

He blamed the world's hypocrisy for failing to support the innovative proposal with financial donations. "We weren't asking for charity," Correa said, "we were asking for co-responsibility in the fight against climate change." [3]

The Rights of Nature

The Yasuní initiative built on the recognition and protection of the rights of nature that was codified in Ecuador's 2008 constitution. This recognition built on a growing environmental consciousness in the 1980s and 1990s throughout the Americas. [4] Constitutional reforms in Colombia in 1991 and Brazil in 1998 established the right of people to enjoy a clean and sustainable environment, even though the extension of human rights to the realm of nature was controversial at first. [5]

Ecuador's new constitution, drafted under Correa's mandate, took this one step further to recognize the rights of nature itself, the first country in the world to do so. These rights included that of the very existence and restoration of nature. Article 71 declares, "nature or Pachamama [the Quechua term for mother earth], from which life springs, has the right to have its existence integrally respected." [6]

The inclusion of the rights of nature was largely due to the actions of Alberto Acosta, the president of the constituent assembly, who pressed for the need to move beyond an anthropocentric vision of Ecuador's future. Acosta argued that while giving rights to nature might seem as strange to some as the need to give rights to slaves or women appeared at one point in history, "great changes require bold action and open minds."

Similar to how it was necessary to stop the buying and selling of slaves, it was now important to halt

the commodification of nature. "If social justice was the central axis for social struggles in the twentieth century," Acosta maintained, "environmental justice will increasingly play that role in the twenty-first century." [7]

In addition to the constitutional mandates to protect the rights of nature, the constitution also required the government to protect the rights of Indigenous peoples, and in particular the Tagaeri and the Taromenane who were living in voluntary isolation in the Yasuní National Park. Article 57 of the 2008 constitution specifically states:

"The territories of the peoples living in voluntary isolation are an irreducible and intangible ancestral possession and all forms of extractive activities shall be forbidden there. The State shall adopt measures to guarantee their lives, enforce respect for self-determination and the will to remain in isolation and to ensure observance of their rights. The violation of these rights shall constitute a crime of ethnocide, which shall be classified as such by law." [8]

Proponents argued that drilling in Yasuní was a direct violation of these constitutional guarantees.

At first a strong ally of Correa, Alberto Acosta subsequently became harshly critical of the president's economic development strategies. He contended that a reliance on extractive enterprises were not consistent with the new constitution's emphasis on the *sumak kawsay* (the "good life," or *buen vivir* in Spanish), a Quechua concept that privileged human needs over those of capital.

After Evo Morales's ascendancy to the Bolivian presidency in 2006, Bolivian foreign minister David Choquehuanca emphasized the necessity of pursuing the Andean principle of "living well" (*vivir bien*) rather than the capitalist, modernist concept of "living better" (*vivir mejor*).

Instead of focusing on consumerism and material accumulation, this approach sought to build a sustainable economy. This perspective included an explicit critique of traditional development strategies that increased the use of resources rather than seeking to live in harmony with others and with nature.

Uruguayan environmental analyst Eduardo Gudynas aptly notes that the *sumak kawsay* "is a complex conceptual field that includes different perspectives that simultaneously present a radical critique of current development approaches and endorse alternatives based on the rights of nature, expanded conceptions of the community, rejection of the linearity of history, and so on." It draws on gender, the rights of nature, plurinationality, and Indigenous cosmologies. [9]

Many critics do not call for an end to mineral extraction, but oppose new large-scale mining plans that continue preexisting extractivist paradigms. "We are obligated to optimize the extraction of petroleum without causing environmental and social damage," Acosta argues. Ecuador needs to realize the highest possible social benefit from each barrel of oil extracted, instead of only focusing on maximizing production.

"We have to learn," he continues, "exporting natural resources had not led to development." Rather, "the principal factor in production and development is the human being." Ecuador had to change, Acosta insists, "that vision that condemns our countries to be producers and exporters of raw materials" that historically had underdeveloped economies in the developing world. [10]

Beyond Distorted Development

Acosta points out that the *sumak kawsay* is different than development in that it does not apply a set

of policies, instruments, and indicators for an “underdeveloped” state to achieve a “developed” condition. Despite the attempts of many countries to follow that path, few have achieved the goal, thereby pointing to the uselessness of that approach. Rather, these attempts have resulted in a *mal desarrollo*, a “bad” or distorted type of development, which contributed to climate change on a global scale.

Acosta urges instead to move beyond traditional concepts of progress that emphasize production and mechanical notions of economic growth. Acosta calls for alternative visions based on Indigenous knowledge and ancestral concepts that are consistent with ecological, popular, Marxist, feminist and other alternative ideas for how to structure society that emerged out of marginalized sectors.

He points to the need to overcome the divorce between nature and human beings. Instead of sustaining civilization, capitalism put life itself at risk. The *sumak kawsay* charts one path for moving beyond western notions of progress, with a special attention to the rights of nature. [11]

Responding to criticisms of his extractive policies, Correa argues that “the biggest mistake is to subordinate human rights to ostensible natural rights.” [12] In contrast to Acosta’s position, Correa identifies poverty as Ecuador’s primary problem, and justifies extractive development strategies that result in a negative ecological impact on a few people in order to reduce poverty for many more people.

Bolivian vice president Álvaro García Linera presents a similar argument in his book *Geopolítica de la Amazonía* that examines the tensions between economic development and environmental protectionism. Rather than defending the rights of nature or appealing to the *sumak kawsay*, García Linera favors a strategy of development at all costs with the goal of creating an economic surplus that can then be redistributed in order to satisfy the needs of society. [13]

Both Correa and García Linera condemn naïve environmentalists and ultraleftists who fail to understand the logic of this state-centric strategy for development. [14] And indeed, as the business-friendly Latin American Weekly Report observes, Correa “embraced extractive industries to spur Ecuador’s development even more than his neoliberal forebears.” [15]

Pursuit of the *sumak kawsay*, Acosta contends, requires moving beyond rhetoric and vague platitudes to a pursuit of alternative development models. Underlying these conflicts between Acosta and Correa were different concepts of the state, and in particular the role of social participation in decisions over public policy.

Despite Acosta’s criticisms of an anthropocentric view of the world that informs Correa’s political strategies, most leftists still favored policies that ultimately prioritized human development over concerns for environmental sustainability.

Dirty Hand of Chevron

President Correa’s decision to open up the Yasuní for drilling came almost two decades after Indigenous communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon sued Texaco for polluting their environment.

From 1964 to 1992, Texaco actively extracted petroleum from the region. In order to save production costs, Texaco had refused to use appropriate technology to prevent oil spills. As a result, they left behind contaminated waterways, destroyed wildlife, and health problems for the local residents. [16]

Over the intervening years, the case took many different twists and turns, and twenty years on appears no closer to resolution than when the original case was filed in 1993. In 2001, Chevron acquired Texaco as well as the lawsuit. In 2011 an Ecuadorean court ordered Chevron to pay more than \$18 billion in damages, but the oil company refused. It contends that Texaco had undertaken its share of the cleanup and that the state oil company and Texaco's domestic partner Petroecuador was responsible for most of the remaining pollution.

Chevron subsequently counter-sued Steven Donziger, lead attorney in the case, claiming that he had masterminded a conspiracy to extort and defraud the company. [17]

Despite Correa's support for drilling in the Amazon, he publicly assumed an anti-imperialist position in supporting the case against Chevron. On September 17, 2013 Correa launched a campaign called "The dirty hand of Chevron" that calls for a global boycott of Chevron products. He labels Texaco's ecological damage to the Amazon "one of humanity's most serious disasters." Correa consistently defends Ecuadorian sovereignty and the rights of Amazon residents. [18]

How Much Damage?

From the beginning of his government, Correa forwarded a nationalistic economic platform and criticized foreign oil corporations for extracting the majority of petroleum rents out of the country. He pushed through congressional reforms that raised taxes on windfall oil profits, and used these funds to provide subsidies to poor people to lower their utility costs, expand access to credit, and improve social services. [19] "Now the oil is everyone's," Correa declared. [20]

A neo-Keynesian economist trained at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Correa attempted to use petroleum resources to develop the Ecuadorian economy. Correa maintained that anything could be used for good or evil and that he was determined to use Ecuador's natural resources to create a positive development model.

Creating alternatives to an extractive economy was a long-term proposition, he said, while short-term dependence on mining for revenue and employment was unavoidable. He repeatedly declared that "we can't be beggars seated on a sack of gold" to justify the exploitation of oil and other minerals.

Correa contends that drilling in Yasuní would only impact one tenth of one percent of the park. For him, "the real dilemma" of drilling in a sensitive ecological area was "do we protect 100 percent of the Yasuní and have no resources to meet the urgent needs of our people, or do we save 99 percent of it and have \$18 billion to fight poverty?" [21]

Environmental activists, however, strenuously dispute these claims that with modern technology it would be possible to drill without the resulting environmental damage as happened with Texaco in the 1970s. Critics contend that roads and other infrastructure associated with any drilling operation inevitably would open up the park to colonists and result in irreversible damage to the ecosystem.

Leftist opponents claim further that in framing the issue as one of development versus the environment Correa set up a false dilemma, and that this revealed his failure to break from a capitalist logic of resource extraction. They refer to petroleum as a "resource curse."

Carlos Larrea, who worked on the Yasuní-ITT initiative, notes that although Ecuador had exported petroleum for more than four decades, "poverty still affects one in three Ecuadorians, and almost half of our workers are underemployed."

No oil-exporting country, he maintains, has managed to achieve an equitable and sustainable form of development. Economic studies illustrate resource extraction provides a fundamentally flawed strategy for economic development. [22]

A fundamental problem is that the value added to the processing of raw commodities accrues to advanced industrial economies, not to Ecuador. Furthermore, as Ecuador raised taxes on oil companies those companies stopping investing in new explorations and production stagnated at about 500,000 barrels per day.

Serious questions remain whether a reliance on export commodities could ever grow Ecuador's economy. These fundamental problems led to a common saying in Ecuador that the country becomes a dollar poorer for every barrel of oil that it exports. As Gudynas observes:

“(T)here are many intermediate steps between extracting a natural resource and reducing poverty, and it is in these stages that a great many problems arise. These go from the very doubtful economic benefits of these kinds of extractive industry (since on the one hand the State profits from exporting oil, but loses on the other due to the need to attend to social and environmental impacts), to the role of intermediary (where the enterprises, whether state or private, from the North or from southern friends, can only succeed when they maximize profits, and this is almost always at the cost of the environment and local communities).” [23]

Correa's leftist opponents contend that the *sumak kawsay* should lead to a fundamentally different concept of development, and repeatedly charged that Correa had failed to make a fundamental break from a capitalist logic of resource extraction. Sociologist Jorge León Trujillo never understood how the commodification of the environment, as would happen with the Yasuní initiative, could be considered a revolutionary proposal. [24]

Economist William Black concludes, “Correa's budget priorities are precisely those recommended in the Washington Consensus — education, health, and infrastructure.” The economic proposals that Correa pursues are not unlike those that the conservative economist Hernando de Soto in neighboring Peru had long advocated. [25] At best, for leftists Correa's approach appeared to be one of green capitalism that was quickly discarded when it no longer provided the expected economic returns.

Social Movement Responses

On August 20, 2013, the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana (CONFENIAE, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon) that groups 21 organizations and federations from 11 Indigenous nationalities in the Amazon denounced the government's plans to terminate the Yasuní-ITT initiative.

“The deepening of the extractive policies of the current regime, which exceeds that of former neoliberal governments,” the statement reads, “has led to systematic violations of our fundamental rights and has generated a number of socio-environmental conflicts in Indigenous communities throughout the Amazon region.”

The CONFENIAE points to a historical pattern of the extermination of Indigenous groups due to petroleum exploration, including the Tetete in northeastern Ecuador 40 years earlier. “History repeats itself,” the federation proclaims. “We are on the verge of a new ethnocide.”

The current abuses were occurring, the CONFENIAE complains, even as the country projected an

image as “possessing one of the world’s most advanced constitutions, which recognizes the collective rights of Indigenous peoples, especially their right to free, prior and informed consent, the rights of nature, the *sumak kawsay*, among others.” Nevertheless, “when the interests of large capital become involved, the rulers through their control of the judicial system demonstrate that they have no qualms with reforming laws to legalize theft, looting, and human rights violations.” Correa’s announcement to suspend the Yasuní initiative “has been only one more example of the neoliberal, pro-imperialist, and traitorous character of the current regime.”

From the CONFENIAE’s perspective, Correa’s actions confirm what they had long understood: “the government was never really committed to the conservation of nature, beyond an advertising and media campaign to project an opposite image to the world.” [26]

On August 22, 2013, in the name of Indigenous, student, and environmental organizations, the noted jurist Dr. Julio César Trujillo formally delivered a request to the constitutional court in Quito for a popular referendum on the president’s plans to drill in the ecologically sensitive park. To demand a referendum, opponents are required to collect 584,000 signatures, or 5% of the voters in this country of 15 million people.

If enough signatures are collected, voters will be asked: “Do you agree that the Ecuadorean government should keep the crude in the ITT, known as block 43, underground indefinitely?” [27]

Correa welcomed the challenge of opponents calling for a referendum on the government’s decision to drill in the Yasuní. “How am I going to oppose a referendum if it is a constitutional right to request one?” Correa responded. “We are sure,” Correa declared, “that with sufficient information we will have the full support of the Ecuadorian people” for his plans to accelerate the pace of resource extraction. [28]

Despite initial support for the Yasuní initiative, public opinion quickly shifted to favor Correa’s position in favor of drilling. The potential defeat of a referendum on drilling in the park could further erode public support for environmental causes.

On August 27, 2013, Indigenous and environmentalist activists took to the streets of Ecuador to protest against the decision to drill in the Yasuní. A police cordon prevented the demonstrators from reaching the presidential palace on Quito’s central plaza. Police fired rubber bullets on the protesters, hurting 12 people (nearly blinding a young woman) and detaining seven.

Among those arrested was Marco Guatemal, vice-president of Ecuavarunari, the powerful federation of Kichwa peoples in the Ecuadorian highlands that had long fought against neoliberal economic policies.

In response to the repression, the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador), the country’s primary Indigenous organization, released a statement that calls on “the president to stop the repression and prosecution of Indigenous leaders.”

The CONAIE also demands amnesty for those who faced prosecution on charges of terrorism for previous protests against the government’s extractive policies. [29]

These conflicts placed a popular president on a collision course with social movements whose historic protests against neoliberal economic policies opened up political space for the election of his leftist government. Even though the government has now officially disavowed the initiative, Alberto Acosta still hopes that social movements might be able to make this idea a reality.

"Yasuní-ITT can still be achieved by civil society in Ecuador and around the world," Acosta concludes. "We need other Yasunís too." Social movements and leftist governments continue a dance around each other, and we need the cooperation of both to realize the shared objectives of saving the world from poverty and environmental catastrophe. [30]

Marc Becker

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Footnotes

[1] Mark Weisbrot, Jake Johnston, and Stephan Lefebvre, Ecuador's New Deal: Reforming and Regulating the Financial Sector. Washington, D.C.: Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), February 2013.

[2] The allusion to "neoliberal environmentalism" is to the ideas of neoliberal multiculturalism as most famously expressed by Charles R. Hale in "Does Multiculturalism Menace? Governance, Cultural Rights and the Politics of Identity in Guatemala," Journal of Latin American Studies 34, no. 3 (August 2002): 485-524.

[3] Clifford Krauss, "Plan to Ban Oil Drilling In Amazon Is Dropped," New York Times, August 17, 2013, B1; Jim Wyss, "Ecuador pulls the plug on innovative cash-for-conservation program in the Amazon," Miami Herald, August 15, 2013.

[4] Eduardo Galeano, "Nature is Not Mute," The Progressive 72, no. 8 (August 2008): 19.

[5] Esperanza Martínez, "Los Derechos de la Naturaleza en los países amazónicos," in Derechos de la Naturaleza: El futuro es ahora, ed. Alberto Acosta and Esperanza Martínez (Quito: Abya Yala, 2009), 87.

[6] República del Ecuador, "Constitución de 2008," <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html>.

[7] Alberto Acosta, "Los grandes cambios requieren de esfuerzos audaces. A manera de Prólogo," in Derechos de la Naturaleza: El futuro es ahora, ed. Alberto Acosta and Esperanza Martínez (Quito: Abya Yala, 2009), 15, 17-18.

[8] República del Ecuador, "Constitución de 2008," <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html>.

[9] Eduardo Gudynas, "Development Alternatives in Bolivia: The Impulse, the Resistance, and the Restoration," NACLA Report on the Americas 46, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 23.

[10] Alberto Acosta, "Siempre más democracia, nunca menos. A manera de prólogo," in El Buen

Vivir: Una vía para el desarrollo, ed. Alberto Acosta and Esperanza Martínez (Quito: Abya Yala, 2009), 27-28; Alberto Acosta, "El buen vivir, una oportunidad por construir," Ecuador Debate 75 (December 2008): 45-46.

[11] Alberto Acosta, "Construir el buen vivir — sumak kawsay," <http://lalineadefuego.info/2013/01/08/construir-el-buen-vivir-sumak-kawsay-por-alberto-acosta/>, January 8, 2013.

[12] "Correa takes big risk by bailing on Yasuní," Latin American Weekly Report WR-13-33 (August 22, 2013): 1-2.

[13] Álvaro García Linera, Geopolítica de la Amazonía: Poder hacendal-patrimonial y acumulación capitalista (La Paz: Vicepresidencia del Estado Plurinacional, 2012), 109.

[14] See on ESSF (article 30203), Garcia Linera's book reviewed by Devin Beaulieu and Nancy Postero, "[Amazonía: The Politics of Extractivism and Bolivia - Alvaro García Linera: From 'Live Well' to Extractivism](#)" — ed.]

Acosta denounces these neo-extractive strategies as a misleading farce, not unlike the unfulfilled promises of neoliberalism. [Alberto Acosta, "Correa y su obsesión extractivista por el crecimiento económico,"

<http://lalineadefuego.info/2012/12/27/correa-y-su-obsesion-extractivista-por-el-crecimiento-economico-alberto-acosta/>, December 26, 2012.

[15] "Correa takes big risk by bailing on Yasuní," Latin American Weekly Report WR-13-33 (August 22, 2013): 1-2.

[16] Agis Salpukas, "Ecuadorean Indians Suing Texaco," New York Times (November 4, 1993).

[17] Clifford Krauss, "Lawyer Who Beat Chevron in Ecuador Faces Trial of His Own," New York Times, July 30, 2013.

[18] Sally Burch, "Ecuador's Campaign: 'The Dirty Hand of Chevron,'" <http://truth-out.org/opinion/item/19016-ecuadors-campaign-the-dirty-hand-of-chevron>, September 25, 2013.

[19] Catherine M. Conaghan, "Ecuador: Correa's Plebiscitary Presidency," Journal of Democracy 19, no. 2 (April 2008): 55.

[20] Luis Ángel Saavedra, "'We've balanced out the power,'" Latinamerica Press 39, no. 19 (October 17, 2007): 1.

[21] <http://www.npr.org/blogs/.money/2013/09/02/216878935/ecuador-to-world-pay-up-to-save-the-rainforest-world-to-ecuador-meh>.

[22] Carlos Larrea, "El Parque Nacional Yasuní," <http://lalineadefuego.info/2013/08/29/el-parque-nacional-yasuni-por-carlos-larrea/>, August 29, 2013.

[23] Eduardo Gudynas, "The rights of nature following the end of the petroleum moratorium in Amazonia," ALAI, América Latina en Movimiento (August 21, 2013),

<http://alainet.org/active/66614>.

[24] Jorge G. León Trujillo, "Yasunizar sin proyecto Yasuní," <http://lalineadefuego.info/2013/08/27/yasunizar-sin-proyecto-yasuni-por-jorge-g-leon-trujillo/>, August 20, 2013.

[25] William K. Black, "The Mystery of Cannibal Capitalists and Ecuadorian Entrepreneurs," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/william-k-black/the-mystery-of-cannibal-c_b_3823118.html, August 27, 2013.

[26] Franco Viteri Gualinga, "La CONFENIAE ante el anuncio de explotación del Yasuní ITT," Puyo, August 20, 2013.

[27] Ángela Meléndez, "Civil Society Calls for Vote on Drilling in Ecuador's Yasuní Park," August 24, 2013, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2013/08/civil-society-calls-for-vote-on-drilling-in-ecuadors-yasuni-park/>.

[28] "Reportan choques en marcha contra la extracción petrolera en Yasuní," Prensa Libre, http://www.prensalibre.com/internacional/Ecuador-medioambiente-petroleo_0_982701811.html, August 28, 2013.

[29] Humberto Cholango, "La Confederación Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador CONAIE, frente a la entrega de Mandato de la Sierra Central," Quito, August 29, 2013.

[30] Alberto Acosta, "Why Ecuador's president has failed the country over Yasuní-ITT," <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/sep/04/ecuador-president-failed-country-yasuni-itt>, September 4, 2013.