

Defending Our Home

I laid there on the hard crooked bench of the so called picnic table, just watching a chubby barefoot woman spread fresh banana leaves across the table. She moved delicately and patiently, seemingly enjoying herself. I slid off of my resting spot and motioned to her that I would help. With a gentle smile she nodded and showed me how to break the steams and lay the leaves. As I was working a young man walked in with a baby in his left arm. He greeted me in Spanish, and immediately after I returned his greeting I bit my tongue and thoughts raced through my head, "Don't try talking to me in Spanish...don't try talking...too late!!! Here we go.." He saw the look of horror on my face as I tried to continue the conversation after he asked where I was from. "Do you speak Spanish?" "Finally, English!" "Sort of...not too well." He tried with broken English to learn more about me. I realized this would be an amazing opportunity to get some research done on conservation for my paper. I attempted to ask him how he felt about conservation but I experienced difficulty communicating my question. "Conservation???", I said slowly after realizing he didn't understand, but he stared at me blankly. "Umm...protect the animals??? Ummm...no cut down trees???" We both laughed because he still had no clue. "Okay," I thought to my self, "I need to start slowly from the beginning." I looked at him and said "The jungle" A look of understanding crossed his face as he nodded repeatedly. "Yes, yes...my home", he proclaimed excitedly. His words stuck me like lightning. What more did I need? What more could I ask after a response like that ..how he feels about protecting his home?? How would anyone feel? Why didn't I see it before? I knew people lived there, but it was there home, their livelihood and their life. For the people of the jungle conservation is not a matter of forest and trees, but a matter of house and home, of life and death.

When I first arrived in Ecuador, I only knew there had been controversy about protecting the rainforest, but I never knew exactly what was going on. It didn't take long before I started hearing the stories and seeing through the eyes of Ecuador's people the truth of the circumstances.

High in the Cloud Forest, in a lodge at Bella vista reserve, I spoke with a young man who worked there about local conservation issues. He explained that nearly all of the land in Ecuador is in danger of being destroyed unless something is done. The major problem is that the government owns 90 percent of the land and regardless of the will of the people, they will do with it as they please. For a time they may designate a section of the forest and call it protected, but if they find any valuable or profitable reason to destroy it, they won't hesitate. The only land that is secure, is that which is privately owned, and thus privately funded, such as Bellavista. The problem with privately owned reserves is that they often are not large enough to sustain the natural life that would normally live there. For example, there are no bears found in Bellavista because a bear needs about 15 hectares per individual, and Bellavista just does not have the land to support them. He felt that the only way it would ever change was if Ecuador got rid of the corruption within the government, but to him that seemed to be a never ending cycle. The people of Ecuador become very involved in the elections because most of them want to see a change, but when someone who they feel is actually a good person is elected it doesn't take long until he is bribed or changes his motives in the face of money. The last thing he said to me was, "When I think of all these things it makes me feel sad." There were so many things I didn't get a chance to ask him, but as I sat at lunch in my minds eye I saw the reality of the situation begin to unfold before me. What I had read, what I had learned, it was real.

Back at the hotel I had time to do some more research about all I was told that day. It became clearer that property rights are a key issue in conservation management. In his book *Who Owns the Worlds Forests?*, Andy White explains, "Despite many efforts, rainforest degradation has steadily increased. At the same time there is a growing realization that insecure property rights are a key underlying problem and cause of degradation. Looking at the big picture, the issue is more than just the land. It is estimated that nearly 60 million highly forest-dependent indigenous forest people live in the rain forests of Latin America. An additional 400 million to 500 million people are estimated to be directly dependent on forest resources for their livelihoods."

An estimated 50 percent of Ecuador, or 14 million hectares, has already been forested, more than half of which was government owned land, sold and destroyed for no benefit of the people. The other half of the deforestation occurred mainly to clear space for pastures, or to create linking roadways through the forest. A small percent was lost to illegal logging for personal or community profit. (Forestry).

The Amazon Jungle...those words always sent visions of an endless dense forest capped by dense fog, and alive with the voices of nature dancing through my head. My once magnificent images seemed like nothing more than a child's painting when I saw the real thing. Words cannot describe the awe and wonder of this jungle, but with its magnificence, the Amazon also brings the harsh reality of its steady destruction and shrinking borders. Sitting in

a canoe looking onto the mighty jungle in the early morning fog, its boundaries seem as endless as time, but the locals have a far different story.

It was another early morning and we were on our way to learn about the medicinal plants of the rainforest. On the way we stopped to hear a lecture about the rainforest at a nearby resort apparently where students come to do volunteer work in the Amazon. We sat and listened to a middle-aged Ecuadorian explain the well known controversial situation of the oil pipeline. The pipeline in the area apparently impacted 180 hectares of forest. In order to find the oil for this pipeline the workers used dynamite and once the oil was located they drilled with chemicals which leaked into the river and the soil. The people living in the areas were given no consideration. Their soil became polluted damaging crops or any food source from the land. The river was polluted poisoning the fish and life in the water, and thus the people were basically cut off from their sources of livelihood.

He went on to say that within the oil wells there is formation water, gas, and oil. Often times the formation water leaks or is thrown into the streams. In areas where the water contains high concentration of formation water, the cattle of the local people die, and these people no longer have clean water to drink with or bathe in.

Besides the environmental hazards, the pipelines themselves are actually a danger to all nearby communities. The pipeline located directly across the road, only meters away from where we were sitting already burst 18 times since its installation. Throughout the rainforest 18 billion barrels of oil have been spilt due to pipelines like that one bursting, and oil spills cannot be adequately cleaned. In the small attempt made to rectify these situations, Texaco hires locals to clean the mess because they refuse to endanger their own people by exposing them to the threats associated with oil spills. The local people risk their lives to earn slightly more than nothing and many end up injured.

Currently the pipeline is heated under high pressure, so these pipelines no longer leak, but instead they explode. These explosions are potentially lethal and are responsible for many deaths. Tragically, an entire bus full of people was passing during an explosion. Needless to say, no one survived.

Another explosion destroyed the homes of two nearby families and the oil company threatened them not to expose the incident to the press or they will receive no compensation. In a later case, a pipe was turned on before welding was complete and gallons of oil were pumped into a nearby lake that local families farmed from, and received their water supply from. They were compensated 180\$ for the complete loss of the lake's use.

Despite these and other incidents numerous pipelines have been placed within meters of school houses and communities. Neither the oil companies nor the government of Ecuador prioritize the safety of the people even though they are well aware of the dangers. It seems money is the ultimate and only concern of all those involved with the industry. Sadly, it was this money that was supposedly going to boost Ecuador's economy, and help its people. Ironically, before the pipeline 20 percent of Ecuadorians lived in poverty and currently 60 percent are impoverished.

As I sat there listening to this gentleman speak, in a plea for us to understand their plight, I couldn't help but feel fear myself. He spoke of the carnage left by pipeline explosions and only meters away sat one of those very pipelines. What if it exploded in that instant? Then my thoughts drifted from me to them...Are they always scared?? Do the children know the dangers? What side effects are there to exposure? Why do they have to live like this?

In my research after I returned home, I uncovered a crisis which took root decades ago and a debate that is still raging stronger than ever even today. News report after news report revealed in greater detail the reality Ecuadorians in the Amazon face:

“At least eleven people are known to have died when an oil pipeline exploded in the Ecuadorian town of Esmeraldas, 110 miles northwest of the capital, Quito. The explosion followed an oil leak, and sent a ball of flames through a neighboring community, destroying many houses and spilling oil into a nearby river. Many people threw themselves into the river as a huge fireball made its way down the pipeline. Around 70 people were injured, some with severe burns. Several are still missing.” (BBC News)

“Analysis of water samples near the former Texaco station in the community of San Carlos found the concentration of total hydrocarbons in the water to be 288 times any European Community's acceptable limit for drinking water. The contamination from oil development around the community was linked to the high number of cancers in the area and the high rate of spontaneous abortions. It was found that the risk for developing cancer was 2.3 times the expected rate and 30 times the expected rate for rare cancers.”(Ecuador Report)

Sadly, it seems the cycle of hardship is pushing forward rapidly. In 2001 the Ecuadorian government gave the go ahead to begin building yet another pipeline. This 298 mile pipeline will extend from the Oriente to the

Esmeraldas, using crude oil found in the country's protected national parks, wildlife reserves, and Indigenous people's lands. A major concern is the northern most route of the pipeline which crosses an important Cloud Forest Reserve in the Andes called Mindo Nambillo. The line will be a major threat to the reserves' biodiversity and numerous endangered plant and animal species. Also, it represents a threat to the area's ecotourism industry, which is expected to bring in \$600 million over the next 20 years. Like the young man in Bella Vista was explaining to me, it seems even the protected land is in danger of destruction. This new project is expected to double Ecuador's oil production capacity, but the people of Ecuador will never reap the benefits of any new revenue.

Consequently, oil exploration throughout the forests will begin in order to fill the new line. Many environmentalists realize this could lead to irreversible loss and destruction of some of the country's last remaining primary rainforests.

The pipeline project has been continuously delayed and as of June 2004 oil had never yet run through the line. Why?... because the people of Ecuador will take no more. They are risking their lives to fight for what is theirs and letting their voices be heard. The battle between the government and oil companies and the natives has grown intense over the past few years. Many communities, such as the Sarayaku, are arguing that oil extraction in their territories will damage their environmental way of life, and they have proposed alternative, sustainable development. In response they received death threats, not corporation.

Another Ecuadorian environmental activist, Angel Shingre was murdered after first receiving threats from people tied to the oil industry for advising locals on environmental law.

In addition, the Ecuadorian government has responded to protests with increased military presence. Former Ecuadorian president, Gustavo Noboa, declared, "Wage war on environmentalists and fight project critics trench by trench." (Just Earth). Concern for the safety of environmental and Indigenous activists in Ecuador's oil zones is growing. Security forces have been cited for numerous human rights violations including shooting and killing three civilians who had peacefully assembled in a church to protest the government's economic policies.

Even so, the people of Ecuador are prepared and willing to face the threat. They will not be silenced. They are pushing onward until their voices are heard, and they are making ground:

"The government declared a state of emergency because the protests are damaging the construction of the OCP pipeline. To protect the project, the military is brutally suppressing the demonstrations and feeding a climate of violence and insecurity..." (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador)

"We affirm our struggle against the OCP and declare that these types of repressive measures will not stop us." (Efrain Toapanta, Accion por la Vida).

Action is also been taken against the former Texaco line. In 1993, a class action lawsuit was filed against Chevron Texaco in Federal court in New York on behalf of more than thirty thousand Amazon residents. The complaint alleged that Texaco had not properly cleaned up groundwater and land contaminated by dumping 18.5 billion gallons of toxic waste waters:

"When Texaco contractors showed up at Monica Torres' wood shack in the jungle, they said they had come to clean up the mess the company had left behind. A pool of black oil sludge sat like a tar pit in her backyard, dumped by the company years earlier while drilling nearby. Company contractors trundled in a bulldozer, covered the pit with dirt and told her that it was clean. But today, nearly a decade later, black gunk still oozes from the weed-covered mound when it rains. Water from the family's main source, a nearby stream laced with paisley rainbows of petroleum residue, makes her children vomit. Torres suffers from severe headaches. "The crude is still there, alive," said Torres, 40, as one of her sons pushed a stick a few inches into the pit to reveal black ooze beneath the dirt. "They just covered it up and left." (Trail of Destruction)

Torres is only one of many who stand behind the lawsuit. Texaco faces charges that their operations between 1972 and 1992 not only destroyed land, but sickened residents and contributed to the downfall of indigenous tribes. All of these charges have of course been denied by oil official who claim that their operations had little impact on the environment or native people, and after persistently fighting the litigations, Texaco successfully had the trial sent back to Ecuador, where it took place in the Oriente province. As the trial opened thousands of pages of previously confidential memos, studies and internal documents that reveal the inner working of Texaco and the Ecuadorian state oil company, Petroecuador, were released. They stand as evidence that Texaco intentionally dumped waste water directly into streams instead of using disposal, and the Ecuadorian government showed little concern about the environmental impact, but rather cut the budget for environmental programs. The government claims they had no control over Texaco's actions.

The trial was then passed into the hands of a judge for investigation, a process that could take years and most likely will be appealed many times over. In the meantime the people of Ecuador wait and hope....Hope that they will be compensated for their suffering and losses, hope that the vast horizon 75 miles away from all pipelines and oil spills, where the mighty Napo twists through a maze of green forest, will not become the new oil frontier, and hope all people will look to the majestic jungle with awe and respect instead of greed. But the government is already starting with new promises of a better life for its if only they can export more oil:

“The men from the state oil company came by recently and told her that they wanted to drill another oil well behind her house. As compensation, they gave her three sheets of tin to cover her roof. They told her that it was the right thing to do for the nation. "They said they were going to take out more crude to help Ecuador," she said, a worried look on her face. "That's what they said."” (Trail of Destruction).

Although, it seems hopeless at times, I believe in the grand scheme the Ecuadorians will win the struggle. Organizations from all over the world have stepped in to fight against environmental damage. Also, in my time in the Amazon I was constantly seeing efforts to conserve and protect all aspects of the jungle, and it was truly inspiring.

“Our project: To protect the rainforest” That is what the sign said as we entered AmaZOOOnico wildlife rescue center, and after spending a few hours there I understood protecting the rainforest was exactly what they were doing. A German girl, not much older than me was our guide. She was lured to the Amazon by her desire to protect and rehabilitate its wild animals. She explained that AmaZOOOnico was started in 1993 to receive wild animals which were previously being traded on the black market. Locals often take wild animals illegally to own as pets. Once the novelty wears off, AmaZOOOnico receives the animals, along with babies whose mothers were killed by local hunters. Although the animals usually arrive malnourished, over one third of them can usually be rehabilitated and set free. The remainder have a permanent in the reserve home to live happily.

After the tour she explained to me that there is an area of protected forest called “Selva Viva” where they can release their animals. This is privately owned and protected from the government. Thanks to donations, the “living jungle” is continuously growing and now consists of over 1,200 hectares. It is an area where deforestation of any type and hunting are strictly prohibited.

AmaZOOOnico also works closely with the indigenous community of Ahuano to teach them proper eco-management of the rainforest. They are also involved in the oil crisis and waste disposal, working for a safer tomorrow for the jungle.

I cannot say what the future will bring for the people of Ecuador or the rainforest, but I believe all the reserves and protected areas of jungle I saw are signs of hope. As I reminisce about my time in the rainforest I can still see the raging Napo moving beneath our canoe and feel the rain drip down my cheeks. I smell the unforgettable smell of wet earth and hear the ore penetrate the omnipresent silence as it slices through the water. I shut my eyes and see visions of an endless horizon where the tangle of green jungle blends with the deep blue ceiling of the earth. I feel the hard bench I laid upon in the tiny jungle village and I hear the young man’s words again... “Yes, yes, my home.” Only this time I smile and say, “Yes, our home.”