
Ecuador: Yasuni National Park threatened by Petrobras oil activities

The integrity of the Yasuni National Park (PNY), located in the heart of the Ecuadorian Amazon is in serious danger from the imminent launching of oil activities by the Brazilian State oil company Petrobras (Petrobras Energia Ecuador).

The PNY is the largest park in continental Ecuador and is located in one of the World's most biodiversity-rich areas. The Environmental Impact Assessment carried out by the Walsh Company for Petrobras, recorded 95 different species of plants in a 0.25 hectare plot. As this is Amazon flood forest, its soil characteristics make PNY an extremely fragile site from an ecological stand-point.

However its importance is not only due to its biodiversity. PNY is the home of the Indigenous Huaorani People, already endangered due to the activities of seven oil companies that are operating in their territory and that have caused severe alterations to their environment and to their culture.

Crude oil spills have contaminated the waters of rivers and wells where the Huaorani people bathe, drink and wash their clothes. The forest has been felled to build roads and oil pipe-lines, frightening off the fauna and placing at risk and in a vulnerable situation the communities that live on the borders of the road and around the oil pipe-lines. As a consequence of this contamination, the Huaorani have suffered a loss in their quality of life (they now have to walk for 12 hours to hunt or to fish) and have become dependent (the company gives them cooked food, as part of the agreements with the community in order to compensate for the impact on their hunting and fishing activities). The presence of the oil companies has brought diseases so far unknown to the Huaorani (hepatitis, syphilis, etc.), in addition to increasing dermatological, gastro-intestinal and respiratory diseases because of the environmental contamination.

The international fact-finding mission that visited the Yasuni National Park (PNY) concluded that the type of relationship established by oil companies Repsol and Encana with the Huaorani communities is one of control, domination and dependence and implies a violation of their right to self-determination, affecting their culture, values and the knowledge that goes to determine their life-style. This implies a lack of protection of this right, a protection that should be exercised by the State. The mission believes that, on the basis of what they saw, the entry of Petrobras into the area will represent a further threat to the preservation and integrity of its inhabitants (see the mission report in Portuguese at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Ecuador/Yasuni.html>).

For its part, Petrobras made an environmental impact assessment for its oil operations in Block 31. The Ecuadorian organization, Acción Ecológica in the comments made to this study, concludes that:

“In spite of the shortfalls of these studies, it is revealed that the impacts of the activity will be high and that the company does not have any plans for environmental management or adequate risk assessment, neither does it have any contingency plans to ensure the conservation of this zone which is of such ecological and cultural value.

The operational practices proposed in the study reflect that poor technology will be used, that toxic

waste will be dumped into the environment and that cheap facilities will be put into place.

However, what is even more serious is the fact that the project will violate the collective rights of the Indigenous Peoples and the environmental rights of all Ecuadorians as the area belongs to the country's national heritage."

Acción Ecológica identified a series of aspects that reveal that the environmental studies of the Petrobras Energia Ecuador oil project do not represent a guarantee to the conservation of the PNY, nor will they enable the Huaorani people to freely exercise their collective rights as recognized in the Constitution. Some of these aspects are:

*The direct deforestation of 139.7 hectares is foreseen if the management plan is strictly followed, but the indirect impacts of the operation may compromise hundreds of hectares more, most of them within the Yasuni National Park.

* The route chosen for the oil pipeline, flow lines and road cross a mature forest over hills, alluvial plains, crossing 8 rivers, 110 swamps and is –among all the possible proposed routes- the area where biodiversity is highest.

* The technology proposed for the oil pipeline does not comply with international standards established for the construction of oil pipelines and in various parts of its route, the oil pipeline will be above the surface.

* There has been no analysis of the impact of the workers on the PNY ecosystem. In most cases, the impact of the environment on the workers is analysed; this is not part of an EIA but rather of an Industrial Security Plan.

* the waste from drilling will be left in situ, in spite of the fact that it is very contaminating, generating serious impacts on aquatic ecosystems and on the water table due to infiltration.

* There is no indication of whether or not gas will be burnt, or about how much or the impacts involved.

* Constant contradictions are evident with relation to the risk of erosion and sedimentation. In any case, no measures are proposed to address those problems.

* A good system for storing toxic chemicals is not proposed, nor is there an adequate contingency plan in the event of accidents.

* The collective rights of the Indigenous Peoples are ignored. The right of the Huaorani people to their territory is not even recognized.

* The study makes incorrect anthropological statements regarding the Huaorani communities that settled along the Maxus highway, stating that they live better than most Ecuadorians, ignoring the fact that they are unable to practice their traditional ways of life and that they are living at the expense of the oil company. This is an indication of the poor way Petrobras Energia Ecuador will manage its community relationships.

* The social study was incomplete and ignored the foras for traditional leadership of the Huaorani people.

* The impacts of Petrobras' operations on the fauna and flora have not been adequately analyzed, and on the contrary, an attempt has been made to minimize potential risks. This is also an important aspect due to the fact that Petrobras will operate in a zone which is highly vulnerable from an ecological stand-point.

* The impacts on water have not been properly analyzed, nor has the interference with water bodies (emissions or removal of water for industrial operations). It is stated that an alteration of up to 10 per cent of the flow is allowed.

* The company will use other resources from the zone that are not being assessed, such as water, timber from the trees, gravel and sand.

* Neither the contingency measures nor the risk assessment address different scenarios, their recommendations are extremely general and do not represent a guarantee to conservation.

* Typical oil activity risks in the tropics are ignored: fires, spills, floods, earthquakes and others.

* Monitoring proposals are too general and in some cases, inapplicable."

On the basis of these considerations, Acción Ecológica concludes that:

"The foregoing explanation reveals that neither the Environmental Impact Assessment nor the operational practices proposed by Petrobras Energia Ecuador guarantee the conservation of the Yasuni National Park. Worse still, they do not offer any guarantee enabling the Indigenous communities affected by the project to freely exercise their collective rights, as recognized by the Political Constitution of Ecuador and ILO Convention 169.

The project is also a violation of the constitutional right of all Ecuadorians to live in a healthy, contamination-free environment.

With this background we recommend that the Ministry of the Environment does not grant an environmental license to the Petrobras Energia Ecuador oil company."

Article based on information from: "Petrobrás en el Yasuni. Comentarios al estudio de impacto ambiental del bloque 31", Acción Ecológica-Oilwatch, May 2004, sent by Elizabeth Bravo, e-mail: ebravo@hoy.net ; "Petrobrás promoverá injusticia ambiental ao ameaçar a integridade do Parque Nacional Yasuni e da população indígena Huaorani", distributed by Julianna Maleaba, e-mail: brsust@fase.org.br , and Jeffer Castelo Branco, e-mail: jeffer@acpo.org.br