
Bolivia: Protected areas at the disposal of oil companies

In some cases following a very dubious public participation process and in others, causing strong reaction, the Protected Areas Bill was submitted to consultation. In general, there is rejection of the Bill's attempt to legalize entry of oil and mining companies into protected areas such as the Pilon Lajas Biosphere Reserve and Indigenous Territory, and the Amoro and Madidi Parks. Peasant organizations in Cochabamba stated that if protected areas are for the oil or logging companies, they prefer them not to exist.

Oil companies turn to the highest government levels to obtain the approval of seismic exploration projects, the laying of pipelines and oil exploitation within protected areas and indigenous territories, endeavouring to reduce to the minimum environmental and social requirements and do not respect management and zonation plans. To this is added the granting of mining concessions linked to political power. Eight oil companies obtained 24 concessions to explore and exploit hydrocarbon minerals in nine protected areas in Bolivia according to data from the National Service for Protected Areas (Servicio Nacional de Areas Protegidas – SERNAP). Andina, Total, Chaco, Repsol, Maxus, Petrobras and Don Wong are some of the companies carrying out such operations in Bolivian preservation areas.

If the bill is approved, proposals for sustainable biodiversity use will be dismantled, such as the Indigenous Mapajos Ecotourism Enterprise in the Pilon Lajas Reserve and Indigenous Territory, the community ecotourism projects in the Amoro Park (La Chonta, Mataracu, Villa Amoro) and others in the Eduardo Abaroa Reserve and Sajama Park and in all the protected areas in Bolivia. According to Jose Coello from SERNAP, income from tourism in nature preservation zones can generate more than the returns from oil exploitation. Tourist activity has just started in these areas in Bolivia and has already generated over 4 million dollars, in the Madidi region alone.

The bill establishes the need to re-classify and re-adapt all protected areas to be ratified by the law, implying that the national parks where oil interests exist could be reclassified to enable such activities to enter the areas; this would be the case of the Amoro and Madidi Parks. Although it establishes an exception in the core zones, parks and sanctuaries, protection would be reduced to small conservation islands, such as in Pilon Lajas, one of the most important protected areas in the Andean-Amazon region of Bolivia, part of the Vilcabamba (Peru) – Amoro (Bolivia) ecological corridor.

It is clear that if the bill is adopted, one of the first results will be approval of the Petrobras seismic exploration project, presently on hold at the Ministry of the Environment. To carry out seismic exploration, straight lines 1.5 to 4 metres wide are traced through forests, rivers, plantations or villages, removing the plant cover or other cover in order to locate geological structures containing hydrocarbon deposits by means of detection equipment. In addition to constructing roads, heliports, camps, storage zones for material and equipment causing deforestation of large extensions of forest, pollutants will be dumped in rivers, soils and in the air and there will be impacts on the fauna in the area. Populations in these territories suffer from the invasion of camps of workers from other locations, which totally alter community life.

Most of the legal provisions on protected areas expressly prohibit new oil, mining and logging exploitation activities. Therefore, although sectoral oil and mining laws have defined these activities as a national priority, approval of environmental licences is not guaranteed and has been strongly questioned by ecologists, social and local community organizations. In 2001 the Department of Santa Cruz and many national institutions managed to halt approval of an environmental licence for the Andina (Amoco) oil company, which was attempting to enter the Amboro Park where ecotourism projects, hostels, research and training projects are being implemented, making the area one of the most promoted and important conservation zones in Santa Cruz.

Another basic aspect questioned in the bill is that for its authors, biodiversity is an issue of flora, fauna and micro-organisms. They forget that the laws in force in the country define biodiversity as having an "intangible" component referring to collective knowledge or associated cultural life. These same laws recognize local community protection of this component.

The bill not only legalizes oil, mining and logging activities in protected areas, but places the "users" of these activities on Management Committees as "actors in the management of Protected Areas," forgetting that it is precisely these activities and companies that are the main causes of contamination and degradation problems where they operate.

Article based on information from: "Proyecto de ley de Areas Protegidas a la medida de las petroleras", 25 August 2003, FOBOMADE press release, e-mail: comunicacion@fobomade.org.bo ; "Las áreas protegidas afectadas por 24 concesiones petroleras", El Deber, 26 June 2003, http://www.el-deber.net/20030626/nacional_6.html