
Costa Rica: Will it be declared free from oil exploration and extraction?

A few weeks ago we visited the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica --from Limón to Manzanillo-- and we were really impressed. We are not referring to the scenic beauties of the area nor to the friendliness of its local inhabitants that of course we were able to appreciate. We refer to the threat to open up this beautiful zone to oil exploration by North American companies, with the blessing of the government and of the multilateral financial institutions.

Fortunately, the local population has shown itself to have far more intelligence and long-term vision than the national government and has carried out a successful struggle to stop its attempts to sell the country, its environment and the health of its people to the highest bidder. It is impressive for visitors to see everywhere --even in the most unlikely places, such as at the side of a highway police station-- posters against oil exploration and extraction (see photos at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/countries/CostaRica/photos.html>). It is equally impressive to observe the level of awareness and militancy existing among the local population when talking about the problem.

Of course this is not the fruit of the population's farsightedness, but the result of an arduous job carried out with perseverance by many people and organisations, recently summarised in a book (in Spanish) with the suggestive title of "Se vende lindo país" (Beautiful country for sale). We recommend you to read it.

Among many other things, we find out here that the hydrocarbon law --preparing the conditions to launch oil extraction-- was approved as part of the measures to comply with the provisions of the Structural Adjustment Programme agreed on in 1993 with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. We also learn that the main company interested in oil extraction is Harken Energy, that "just happens" to have had the present president of the United States, George W. Bush as one of its main shareholders. Mr. Bush still maintains close ties with this company.

The book also describes the possible impacts of oil extraction --and also those that have already occurred during the exploration stage-- on the country's marine and terrestrial ecosystems. Some experience already exists on the impacts of oil extraction with regard to forests and in fact, during the eighties, exploration was carried out in Talamanca. Marina López, one of the leaders of the Bribri Women's Association says that at first "we did not have very clear experience so the leaders agreed to the exploration. But after it was done we realised that the environment was affected and it was causing the destruction of forests..." Justa Romero, a member of the same indigenous women's organisation adds that "the indigenous peoples have existed for thousands and thousands of years but they have always conserved the forests. Many times the government uses politics, saying 'conservation!' but in fact, those who have conserved the land have been us, the indigenous peoples. You will only find forests in the indigenous areas..."

It seems incredible that a government such as that of Costa Rica, which has invested so much in the promotion of a "green" international image to attract millions of tourists, is willing to throw the environment overboard to satisfy the appetite of transnational oil companies. As Tatiana Lobo says in the introduction to chapter 5 of the book: "We want to know the deep mystery behind this

tremendous attack on our greatest wealth: clean and abundant water, dense forests, prodigious seas, flora and fauna. To sacrifice all this enormous energy in the twenty-first century for some barrels of crude oil is more than an inconceivable stupidity: it is territorial suicide.”

According to the latest information, the triumph of the anti-oil movement is practically ensured, converting into reality the public manifesto submitted by hundreds of groups and individuals in September 2000 at the Legislative Assembly building, which declared “Costa Rica to be free of all oil exploration and extraction and inviting our government to become a world example by doing this.”

We hope this will be so and that Costa Rica can show the world --and in particular the industrialised nations-- the oil-free path that we must necessarily follow in order to ensure the survival of the planet and of those who live on it.