
[A Different Vision of “Doing Conservation:” The Kawsak Sacha of the Kichwa People of Sarayaku, Ecuador](#)

Most governments, NGOs and corporations are promoting more Protected Areas and conservation areas around the world. But what does conservation mean? Marlon Santi of the Kichwa people of Sarayaku explains to us what the Amazonian peoples of Ecuador consider to be conservation.

Kawsak Sacha: Living forest and forest of beings.

As Amazonian peoples and nations, we practice a system of life that is built around coexistence with nature. It is a true incarnation in our bodies and spirits that ensures vital functions for each one of us, and for the living beings that surround us.

For the indigenous peoples who live in the Amazon, the rainforest is life. Each space has its masters and keepers. In each one of these spaces, there are Llakta (villages) with populations of Runa, which are also the houses and sanctuaries of sacred animals.

Everything that is a part of Kawsak Sacha is intertwined. (1)

Most governments, NGOs and corporations are promoting an increase in Protected Areas and conservation areas around the world. However, this model of “conservation without people,” or “conservation as a fortress,” has intensified the imposition of a colonialist and racist vision of conservation at the global level. In creating Protected Areas or conservation areas, it is not questioned who controls the land, who lives in these areas, or what activities inhabitants engage in to sustain themselves.

On the other hand, the creation of more conservation areas is useful for the “offset” market—whether it be for carbon emissions, biodiversity loss or other alleged environmental or ecosystem “services.” In other words, more “protected” areas are established to offset the increasing contamination and destruction taking place elsewhere. This approach reinforces a policy that allows companies and governments to continue to destroy forests, build large-scale infrastructure and extract more and more raw materials, etc. — as long as an “equivalent” amount of “protected” or “re-created” nature is established.

Therefore, the push to increase Protected Areas is directly or indirectly tied to forced evictions, harassment, violence, human rights violations, deforestation and militarization of territories, etc.

Thus, this dominant conservation model does not consider Indigenous Peoples or other forest communities as key agents in the preservation and care of forests. On the contrary, most Protected and conservation areas not only prohibit Indigenous Peoples from using their forests like they have for generations, but they prohibit the presence of humans altogether.

Below is an interview with Marlon Santi of the Kichwa people of Sarayaku, a village that has historically resisted the entry of oil, mining and logging companies. In this interview, he explains what the Amazonian peoples of Ecuador consider to be *conservation*.

WRM: As the Kichwa people of Sarayaku, how do you preserve the forest and your territory? That is, what does “doing conservation” mean to you?

Marlon:

For us, “conservation” is seeing the forest as a living being, or as a living forest. Only in this way do we understand what kind of “conservation” we must do.

This is a philosophical concept of ours, because we believe that the rivers, lakes, trees, air and mountains are alive. The other world, the Western one, does not understand this philosophical precept. But if it did, the meaning of life and the meaning of mother nature and human beings—who are a part of her—would change greatly. Where this has not been understood, many living spaces have been turned into National Parks. However this is just a front, because the Ecuadorian state can violate this Protected Area when it wants to exploit any “natural resource” found therein. So it is clear that they do not understand the meaning of life, or of a living forest, either.

It has been shown many times that the best preserved forests in the world are in Indigenous People’s territories, even compared to forests in Protected Areas.

WRM: What is the Impact of Protected Areas?

Marlon:

The creation of Protected Areas deprives us of our relationship with the other living being, that is the rainforest. For decades, this prohibition has cut off the right to rituals of coexistence with nature. Government controls appear, but they do not guarantee our survival.

In this way, the social dynamics of our daily coexistence with nature has changed. Sacred spaces have ended up inside Protected Areas, and people have not been able to return to them.

We need Indigenous Peoples’ territories to be the new “conservation” spaces, and we should be the ones to protect them. States must respect our ways of thinking and preserving forests. In the case of my Kichwa village of Sarayaku, we want recognition of the categorization of KAWSAK SACHA, which means Living Forest.

WRM: What do you think is essential in order for forests to be preserved? And what is the role of Indigenous Peoples?

Marlon:

We have a close relationship with mother earth, in which respect prevails over greed. That is called “harmony.”

In order to live well and for forests to be preserved, it is essential that the word “development” not be used, and that spaces not be destroyed beyond repair. How can you return water to the lake when oil is spilled or when chemicals are released? Because this changes our world, and I say world referring to this living space.

This has been happening for centuries, from the industrial revolution to the present day. This

business of polluting in order to exploit seriously endangers our lives. When there is contamination, they are not only violating rights, they are violating the circle of an entire life process. This pollutes water, sound, the sky, trees, air, etc.

Indigenous Peoples have prevented this from happening. But now, many Indigenous People's territories are bordering Protected or "conservation" areas. And for the most part, these areas prohibit human entry; and they separate communities from their agricultural lands and/or livelihoods, and from their ancestral territories. And generally speaking, violence results from the "eco-guards" who prevent the entry and passage of people in these areas. This makes it harder to take care of the forest and avoid its destruction.

More information about *Kawsak Sacha* can be found in the following videos:

[*Kawsak Sacha for the world*](#)

[*Kawsak Sacha, Living Forest*](#)

(1) [*Sarayaku, Kawsak Sacha – Living forest*](#)