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# Politics of Environmental Policy: A Case Study of Alamor and the Yasuní National Park

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# **Politics of Environmental Policy: A Case Study of Alamor and the Yasuní National Park**

**Katie Weber**

**April 27, 2014**

## **Abstract:**

In 2008 Ecuador made environmental history by giving rights to Mother Nature in its constitution and was widely recognized as the most environmentally friendly country in the world. This paper examines the environmental movement in the following years and seeks to understand the primary actors that make

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decisions as well as who benefits and who is harmed when the environment is not protected. In order to answer these questions, the paper focuses on two distinct cases; that of the small town of Alamor in southern Ecuador and that of the Yasuní National Park in the Amazon.

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## INTRODUCTION

I first found out that I would be going to Ecuador as a Youth and Families volunteer in the winter of 2012. After receiving the call from my Peace Corps recruiter I began researching the country in South America that I would soon call home for two years. One of the first things that struck me was Ecuador's apparent biodiversity. For a small country, approximately the same size as Colorado, Ecuador has jungle, mountains, coast, and the world-renowned Galapagos Islands. I felt lucky to have been asked to spend two years in such a beautiful place and was excited to learn more about the biodiversity and conservation efforts in my new home.

My curiosity about environmental issues grew once I actually arrived in the country. I was mesmerized by the beauty of the country while at the same time faced by daily contradictions that often made me question Ecuador's position in the global environmental movement. For example, in the same day, I saw progressive signs by the highway urging citizens to take care of the environment, while at the same time seeing people throwing bottles or dirty diapers out of bus windows. I also heard about an impressive government

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movement to protect an especially biodiverse area and leave its oil underground indefinitely, which I will explain later in further detail. This is the same government that was at the same time drilling and exploiting other areas and leaving communities with higher rates of illness and contamination (Hurtig and San Sabastian, 2002).

Ecuador has long been referred to by many as one of the most biodiverse countries in the world. Its biodiversity, however, is threatened by the large amount of oil that was discovered in Ecuador in 1967 since oil extraction is a naturally destructive process (Beahm, 2011). Many species as well as tribes of people are at risk if the drilling continues. The current government appears to have trouble deciding where it stands on the ecological debate. On the one hand, Ecuador is the first country in the world to give Mother Nature rights within its 2008 constitution and it came up with the innovative Yasuní ITT project, which was designed to leave 900 million barrels of oil in the ground in return for monetary donations from other nations (Holly, 2007).

Yet despite the efforts that have been recognized worldwide as groundbreaking, Ecuador's track record of protecting its natural resources are not as impressive as one might think at first glance as there is an obvious gap between environmental principles and practices. In order to understand

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environmental politics in Ecuador, it's necessary to explore who has the power to make the decisions as well as who benefits and who is harmed by those decisions. In 2008 it appeared that the government and social movements were working together towards a more sustainable future for Ecuador with the approval of the new and environmentally progressive constitution. In addition, the government was also speaking out against and condemning Chevron-Texaco for its role in contaminating a large portion of the Amazon where they had been drilling for oil for decades. Unfortunately, this unity has been unraveling in years since and the goal of this paper is to explain the environmental movement in recent years in relation to the state, social movements and private corporations.

I have been a Peace Corps volunteer for the past year in a town of about 8,000 called Alamor, located in southern Ecuador close to the border with Peru. My town is far from the Amazon jungle but has its own environmental issues. Farmers in the surrounding rural communities have difficulties growing corn and the contamination of streams is a major issue. Environmental consciousness has been growing, but still has a long ways to go. A lot of my work as a volunteer here has been to increase environmental awareness, especially among youth.

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This has included building a vegetable garden, giving sustainability workshops to teenagers, giving information door-to-door about the importance of separating organic and inorganic waste, as well as teaching recycled art projects for children, teens, and the elderly. While my contributions have just been a drop in the bucket, I hope that some of the children I have worked with will think about trash differently and remember how it can be recycled to make incredible works of art and I hope that some teens will feel empowered to grow their own food and may they be stewards and protectors of the natural world.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Environmental politics are complicated in nearly every country as there is often a disconnect between what is talked about, especially around election time, and what actually happens in reality. Even when environmental policies are put into place, compliance is a big issue. Before looking at the local and national level, it's important to first look at how environmental decisions are made by examining what is already known about the interactions between the state, private corporations, social movements and the informal sector. According to Political Science professor Peter Haas, "what is needed is a clearer map of the actual division of labor between the governments, NGO's, the private sector, scientific networks and international institutions in the performance of various

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functions of governance” (2004, p. 8). This is especially important because environmental problems are often global or transnational in nature, thus making implementation and governance all the more difficult (Bäckstrand et al., 2010).

When one thinks about how countries manage their natural resources as well as how they take care of their natural environment, it is common to only think about the government as the primary actor. After all, they are the ones managing the national parks and passing and enforcing laws. It is very important, however, not to discount the other actors that impact decision-making. This is especially the case since over the past two decades there has been a “hybridization of governance arrangements” and it has become more common for state and nonstate actors to work together to accomplish common goals (Armitage et al., 2012). This is generally a good thing as empirical studies have shown that when a diverse group including scientists, policy makers as well as others, work together on ecological issues, the outcomes are better than if these groups work alone (Forbes et al., 2006). Also, according to Davidsen and Kiff (2013) collaborative ties strengthen global eco-states and make them stronger than any state could be by itself.

Social movements are one of the most important of these groups as they are often able to accomplish a lot. Sidney Tarrow (2011) names the confrontation



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between collective actors and elites or other opponents “contentious politics.”

These movements have been around for quite a long time, however, modern technology has facilitated the ability to coordinate and diffuse information.

Ecuadorians, for example, were among the protestors at the famous World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle in 1999. Ecuadorian anti-dam protestors gathered with thousands of other activists from around the world to make their voices heard and their dissatisfaction with neoliberal policies known (Edelman, 2009). This collective action made headlines worldwide and surely provoked subsequent protests, which Hirschman called the “conservation and mutation of social energy” (1983, p. 4).

Decades prior to the WTO protest, Huntington (1968) argued that the increasingly more powerful political institutions would foster violent political protests if they did not find a way to include the general public in decision-making. Tilly, on the other hand, did not agree with the negative connotation that Huntington put on political protestors and did not think that they would automatically use violence. Instead, he suggested that collective action is not necessarily bad and that it is actually a sensible way for people to try to improve their situation (Goldstone, 2010). Tarrow (2011) adds that these movements have been around for much of history and that the interactions between these movements and the state “are a duet of strategy and counterstrategy” as each

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actor works to fulfill their needs. While larger social movements tend to attract more media attention, they do not have to be large to have an impact. Even small and temporary groups can have a very powerful effect on the state (Ibid).

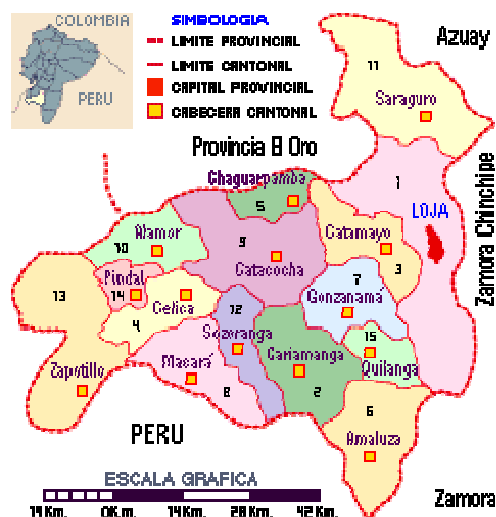
Corporations, on the other hand are often harmful to the environment because they generally tend to put profits above all else. Multinational corporations have gained a lot more power in recent decades as is evident by their significant increase in foreign direct investment, which is one indicator of their economic and political power (Arnold, 2003). Profits were clearly the number goal with the Chevron-Texaco oil scandal in Ecuador as will be explored in more detail later in the paper. In order for corporations to be environmentally responsible, they usually need to be held accountable by the government or the people, or both.

This can be a slippery slope, however, when that same government is financially reliant on the profits made by the company. Petroleum is the most important aspect of Ecuador's economy and this can create a dilemma between the government's need for money and its job in protecting the wellbeing of its citizens, even those living in the oil-rich Amazon. In this case, it was up to the indigenous groups to try and protect themselves and they did so in a number of ways; they did not stay passive as their lands were exploited (Bernal, 2011).

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The world appears to be shrinking due to globalization and ever-expanding corporations and because of this the environment is increasingly becoming just another commodity. Even carbon credits, something designed to protect the environment, can be bought and sold and allow some countries to pollute more than their designated amount. While global networks have indeed improved the ability for ecological groups to form and transmit information, globalization has more visibly led to the resource exploitation of poor countries by wealthy countries (Kütting, 2004).

This also happens at the national level. In countries where there are large indigenous populations, such as in Ecuador and its neighboring countries, it is common for the indigenous to be taken advantage of in terms of their lands and resources. While land rights for indigenous are universally recognized they are not universally respected (Barsh, 2001). This paper will explore the ways the indigenous have had their land taken advantage of as well as how they have fought back as well as additional ways that environmental movement has evolved in Ecuador.



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## ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN ALAMOR

As I mentioned before, Alamor is a small town in southern Ecuador.

Alamor is located in the canton of Puyango and the province of Loja. Puyango is one of sixteen cantons that make up the province and it is further divided into six

parishes with Alamor being the county seat and thus the place where most political

Map of the Loja Province. Arrow points to Alamor and the canton of Puyango.

decisions are made. The population of the county is around 16,000 and is almost entirely *mestizo* and there are very few, if any, indigenous living in this area.

Despite the fact that Ecuador is a small country, the environmental problems in each area are quite distinct as well as the way the problems are resolved.

Alamor is in the transitional zone, which is located between the coast and the mountains and has lush green vegetation, especially during its wet season that runs December-May. The rest of the year is dry and dusty and it rarely rains. In recent times, however, the climate has become more erratic and temperatures have become colder than town elders remember from the past and most believe that unsustainable human practices and global warming are to blame for the changes in their climate. They are convinced of this because they commonly hear about climate change on the television and the radio as well as just from their

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experiences. Rainy season has become more intense and mudslides that used to be rare are now a regular occurrence.

In Puyango, the Municipal Government in partnership with the prefect and his team of environmental engineers based in the provincial capital of Loja are responsible for making most of the environmental decisions for the canton. Agreements are drawn up between the two groups and the engineers regularly visit Alamor to check on progress and document it with photos. Unlike in the Amazon as I will explore later, Alamor does not have private corporations trying to exploit their resources and there are few large businesses. Most locals make their living by running a small store on the first floor of their house, working for the municipality or have a small farm. Therefore large corporations have very little impact on environmental outcomes in the region.

Social movements in the area are also almost nonexistent. Local elections occurred recently and while almost everyone in the town participated in some way, either by painting their house the color of their political party or by driving around honking their horns and waving campaign flags, social movements that are not political or religious in nature are invisible in the community. When I've asked locals as to why this is the case, especially in regard to the environment, I have most often received the answer that they see that as part of the local

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government's job. Schools have their "eco clubs" and sometimes paint murals depicting the need to keep the city clean and save the planet, but their work rarely leaves the schools walls. It is likely that the environmental situation in Alamor is not bad enough for people to run the risks of participating in contentious politics. It takes a good reason and a common purpose for people to come together and be willing to make the necessary sacrifices (Tarrow, 2011). While contentious politics are not an issue in Alamor, they are in the Amazon as we will see in the next section of this paper.

Based on interviews with locals and personal experience, contamination of the rivers is the main environmental problem in Alamor. While in town, municipal workers clean from nearly dawn to dusk keeping it trash-free, but on the outskirts where they do not labor, it is common to see heaps of trash left by citizens either unaware or indifferent to the pollution they are creating. In order to protect the contaminated streams, the local government in collaboration with the prefect, has started a greenhouse located at the Alamor dump and they grow special trees that help to purify the water. They also grow a wide variety of other trees including fruit and hard wood trees that they plant around the community and offer for sale at a reasonable price to locals.

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In addition to combating contamination, the greenhouse also strives to counteract another environmental problem and that is clear-cut logging without permission by the informal sector. Permission is needed to log an area, yet many prefer to log without securing the needed documentation and prefer instead to pay the minimal fine, which is little more than a “slap on the wrist.” According to the Ecuadorian Constitution, if one tree is cut another must be planted in its place (“En Ecuador la naturaleza tiene derechos,” 2012). This problem goes way beyond Alamor since for the past several years Ecuador has had the highest deforestation rate in Ecuador (Bass et al., 2010). However, when I ask Ecuadorians, both in Alamor and in other provinces, if there is compliance with the law, my question is usually met with a laugh signifying that while the policy is a good one, enforcement is a major issue. A recent interview with an environmental engineer revealed that the government plans to make fines much more severe in an effort to increase compliance.

The greenhouse is not the only progressive feature of the dump in Alamor. Organic and inorganic waste is picked up on different days and workers at the dump use the organic waste to make compost. The compost is used in city parks and also to the public for \$5 a sack. Bottles, paper and cardboard are also separated and sold to recycling companies. This is one of the few instances where the government works in partnership with a private corporation and the

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environment benefits. Inorganic waste that cannot be recycled is covered daily and because of this, when one visits the dump it is hard to even know what one is looking at since it just looks like a big pile of dirt. In the future, the local government is also planning to harvest the methane gas from the dump, a tactic that will help produce an alternative form of energy as well as help reduce the greenhouses gases being released into the atmosphere.

The canton of Puyango won a third place award in 2013 in a nation-wide contest of best local practices in the category of environment and cleanliness, a notable achievement for a remote canton of its size (Cajililma, 2012). While definitely a moment of pride for the community, it also sparked tensions among the employees. The mayor, town council men and women and environmental engineers participated in the award ceremony and took home the prize, yet not one of the eight workers that spend their days sorting and covering the trash were invited to the event. One worker said he and his co-workers felt it was unjust and that their work is like that of “anonymous soldiers.” They do all the hard work to keep the dump running smoothly and rarely receive credit for its success. This is an example that shows that while conflict in making and carrying out environmental decisions in Alamor is minimal, tensions do exist.



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Environmental politics in Alamor, unlike in the Amazon, are primarily a government affair and the people have no main objections. Social movements and corporations play a very small role in enacting change so it is therefore up to the government and the people themselves to improve the environmental situation for future generations. While the local and provincial government mandate most of the environmental policies as well as offer trainings and workshops, it is ultimately up to the people whether or not they will follow the policies and attend the workshops. Education is key and more is needed so that people understand why it is so important to put trash where it belongs as well to cut down trees in a responsible and sustainable way. The health and well being of children of future generations in the canton depend on it.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN ECUADOR**

In each and every conversation I've had regarding the environmental situation in Ecuador, I always ask if environmental consciousness has increased or decreased within the past few decades and every single person, no matter their environmental views, has responded that consciousness is on the rise. The disagreement is to why it is rising; is it a movement of the people that the government is trying to minimize or are the government's policies creating environmental awareness among its citizens? Not surprisingly, activists have

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told me that environmental consciousness is increasing due to their perseverance, while government employees credit their projects and workshops.

Despite the widespread agreement that environmental consciousness is on the rise, Ecuador is still facing numerous serious ecological problems such as deforestation and water pollution, as was mentioned are big problems in Alamor (CIA Factbook). In addition desertification, soil erosion and pollution resulting from oil production are also major issues that will get worse if they are not addressed by all sectors, including the state, private corporations, social movements and the informal sector.

Perhaps the best-known case in recent Ecuadorian environmental history of the intersection between these four groups is the oil drilling and subsequent lawsuit against Chevron-Texaco on behalf of 30,000 people. Between 1964 and 1992, Texaco (that later merged with Chevron), drilled 339 wells in the Amazon of Ecuador on over a million acres of land. Their inadequate environmental policies led to billions of barrels of wastewater being dumped in rivers of streams and oil spills, which have had far reaching consequences. Two indigenous groups, the Tetetes and Sansahuaris, that lived in that area have disappeared. An estimated 1,000 people have died from cancer because of the

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contamination of the waterways and billions of dollars of damage has been done (Acosta, 2011).

The trial, known in Ecuador as the “trial of the century,” united people, nonprofits and even the government against the company. Shortly after taking office President Correa visited the former oil extraction site with members of the Amazon Defense Coalition as well as the plaintiffs’ lawyers and denounced the barbarity committed by the company. The trip was highly publicized in Ecuador and Correa’s purpose of going was “to verify the environmental, social, and cultural impacts caused by hydrocarbon exploitation, in particular that of the U.S. company Texaco” (Texaco Petroleum, 2009). During this time, Correa worked together with social movements, such as the Amazon Defense Coalition to fight for justice on behalf of those who were affected by Texaco’s pollution and had the support of indigenous leaders.

### ***The Constitution of 2008 and Sumak Kawsay***

The people were given hope by Correa’s fight against Texaco and that increased with the approval of the new Constitution of 2008. Correa called it a “historic victory” and in addition to promising many new rights for its citizens, the Constitution also brought a lot of international media attention to Ecuador for it having the first Constitution in the world to grant Mother Nature rights

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(Whittenmore, 2011). According to Amina Buenaño, the Ecuadorian ambassador to Spain and translated from Spanish, “we have understood that man is an extension of nature and that we cannot divorce ourselves from that, she is our mother and source of nutrients and to go against her, would be to go against ourselves (“En Ecuador la naturaleza tiene derechos,” 2012). While other constitutions in the past have included assurances to protect the environment, Ecuador’s constitution is unique in that it “now treats the environment as a right-bearing entity alongside and equal to humans” (Whittenmore, 2011 p. 660). And because of this, it has been dubbed “the most progressive in the world” (Kendall, 2008).

As part of the 2008 Constitution, the government also published the *National Plan for Good Living* (called *Buen Vivir* in Spanish or *Sumak Kawsay* in Kichwa).

*Sumak kawsay* implies more than improving the population’s quality of life, [it also involves] developing their capabilities and potentials, relying upon an economic system that promotes equality through social and territorial redistribution of the benefits of development, guarantees national sovereignty, promotes Latin American integration, and protects and promotes cultural diversity (Consejo Nacional, 2009, p. 24).

The main goal of the plan was to reduce poverty and inequality across Ecuador and it seeks to do so by “reverting neo-liberal policies and building a new,

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socially-inclusive Ecuador” (Rawe, 2013). The “good living” plan suggests an alternative form of development based on the indigenous ways of life that focuses on the collective and not on the individual. Communities, especially those previously considered at a disadvantage, would receive significant budget increases. The plan also reveals that future development would take into account the financial externalities associated with the extractive model and will focus on a more ecologically sustainable model for growth (Radcliffe, 2012). Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of the plan is that it shows that the government places a value on indigenous tradition and culture by replicating the idea of *sumak kawsay* into a framework to govern the whole country and it has certainly gained recognition and support worldwide.

Ecuador was recently in the environmental spotlight again, as the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, a group that was founded in 2010 by Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund (CELDF) held a conference in Otavalo, Ecuador to discuss the Rights of Nature in January of 2014. CELDF was involved in helping Ecuador draft the 2008 Constitution and is now committed to helping a range of countries around the world establish their own laws that give ecosystems the right to thrive (“CELDF in Otavalo,” 2014). The conference also included an Ethics Tribunal chaired by the world-famous activist, Dr. Vandana Shiva, and included judges from all over the world. It was decided that

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the conference would be held in Ecuador in solidarity because of its government that is more “committed to exploiting the natural abundance of the country for financial profit than to honouring nature’s rights, or the needs of all people to a healthy, unpolluted environment” (Mead, 2014).

While the conference is likely seen as a step forward in the eyes of environmentalists, the closure of Fundación Pachamama by the Ecuadorian government a month earlier, is a definite step backwards. The foundation, which was started in 1997, is a partnership between the Pachamama Alliance and members of the Anchuar tribe. It has been one of the most important social movements in the country that advocated tirelessly on behalf of the indigenous in the Amazon. The Anchuar people have lived and thrived in the Ecuadorian and Peruvian rainforests for centuries, however the encroachment of their lands caused them to seek outside help to have their voices heard. Since 1997, the Anchuar people, with help from the foundation, have secured the title to 1.8 million acres of rainforest land (“The Anchuar: Visionary Warriors,” 2014). Despite the fact that the organization was successful, or perhaps because of it, government officials shut down their offices on December 4th, 2013.

The shut down came unannounced though just days after Correa accused foundation allies of “fomenting dissent and violence” on his weekly Saturday telecast (“Government of Ecuador,” 2013). More specifically, he blamed

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foundation protestors of attacking Chile's ambassador and one other person as they left a presentation regarding oil concessions in the Amazon (Hadden-Leggett, 2013). While Fundación Pachamama admits to being against the oil concessions that they say will affect three million hectares of the rainforest as well as a number of indigenous groups, they adamantly deny any wrongdoing. Instead, they published a report defending "the right to protest peacefully and reject the use of violence from any side" ("Government of Ecuador," 2013).

The foundation has denounced the shut down as illegal and are fighting to reopen their offices. The government cited Article 26 of the Rules of Operation of the Unified Information System of Social and Citizen Organizations, which is more widely known as Decree 16 as their reason for closing the NGO. The decree states that organizations can be shut down if their actions deviate "from the aims and the objectives for which it was created" as well as if they "engage in partisan political activities" (NGOs support the Coalition's declaration," 2014). The decree is a new one; it was ratified by the government in June of 2013 and Fundación Pachamama is the first organization that has faced closure under this new policy. In March of 2014 the foundation went before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to have their case heard. Although the Ecuadorian government was asked to send a representative, they announced that they would not be going and did not want to partake in the "political show" (Giler, 2014). While the

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results of the hearing are still pending, it is clear from the government's actions that they like to make decisions and prefer to not have any social movements getting in their way.

In addition to the closure of Fundación Pachamama, many activists have been arrested for their peaceful protesting. In a recent interview with an indigenous activist, author, and lawyer, Dr. Carlos Perez acknowledged that he had been threatened and arrested five times during the administration of President Correa. He is passionate about his work and despite the government threats will continue to fight access to clean water for indigenous communities as well as for the protection of the Yasuní National Park. He maintains that “we are not doing anything that goes against the law, nor are we looking to destabilize the government, we are just against this extractivist model” (Celleri, 2014).

### ***Yasuní ITT***

The most well-known and divisive environmental issue in Ecuador today is that of the Yasuní National Park. As will be soon evident, the actors and stakes are much different than in Alamor. Yasuní, which was established as a national park in 1979 and as a UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve in 1989, is one of the most biodiverse places on the planet (Bass et al., 2010). It also contains an estimated 846 million barrels of oil, which is approximately the amount the



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world needs to continue business as usual for ten days (Cobeta Perez, 2011).

Yasuní thus, is an interesting case study that allows us to look at the politics of the environment in Ecuador and examine the actors involved and how the different groups go about effecting change. The state, corporations, social movements and even the informal sector have played a role in this pristine territory and will likely continue to in the future.

First, however, it's important to give some background information and show just how unique Yasuní is in the world. Yasuní is located in the eastern part of Ecuador and the edge of the park on the south side shares a border with Peru. In total, the park covers approximately 9,820 km squared and is broken up into various blocks. Yasuní is home to 150 species of amphibians, 121 species of reptiles, over 600 avian species, yet the majority of the species residing in the park are frogs and toads. In this relatively small area, there are more species of frogs and toads than are native to the United States and Canada together (Bass et al., 2010). In addition to the extraordinary wildlife, it is also estimated that 9,800 people from the Huarani, Tagaeri, and the Taromenane tribes live in the forest and make a living primarily through agriculture and hunting and gathering (Davis, 2008).

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In June of 2007, the Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, announced an extraordinary plan to leave the oil in the ground in the Ishpingo, Tambococho, and Tiputini (ITT) blocks, which account for nearly 20% of the total proven reserves of Ecuador (Martin, 2011). The plan, called the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, called on the world to help Ecuador protect the park by asking for monetary donations in exchange for leaving the oil underground. The proposal planned to reduce CO<sup>2</sup> emissions, protect biodiversity and to reduce poverty (Larrea et al., 2009).

It was a progressive plan and according to the former Ecuadorian Minister for Energy and Mining, it called for people around the world to change their “relationship with nature by contributing to the establishment of a new global legal institution that transcended national and private interests. It would be a custodian for the atmosphere and biological diversity, areas in which all humanity has a stake” (Acosta, 2013). According to the government's own website (Yasuní ITT), the plan was a unique one that would reduce climate change by avoiding the emission of 407 million tons of carbon. This is similar to the total annual emission of countries such as Brazil or France and would be a benefit not only to Ecuador but also to the entire world. In addition to the environmental benefits, the initiative would also respect the indigenous communities and habitat of those groups living in voluntary isolation.

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The plan was met by support by the Ecuadorian population while international support was less enthusiastic (Wallace, 2013). President Correa hoped to raise 3.6 billion dollars over the course of twelve years, which would account for half of the expected income from exploiting the area. After hesitation about if the funds would be used correctly, the government agreed to set up an UN-administered account that would fund environmental and alternative energy projects (Ramirez, 2012). Despite an effort on the part of the government and local and international nonprofits, after six years, the initiative had only raised \$13 million and another \$116 million in pledges.

Some countries did not like the “pay or we drill” message that the plan put forth while some others were skeptical as to how exactly the funds would be used. Some critics, such as the German minister of economic cooperation and development, stated that his country would not support a plan of non-action (Chimienti and Matthes, 2013). The United States was one of the countries unsure of how the money would be spent and also was aware of the pressure that Ecuador was under to continue to develop its oil fields. This was never formally announced but came to light when Wikileaks uncovered it and published the State Department cable that was written in 2009. In addition, the United States receives half of Ecuador’s oil exports, which makes up about 3 percent of its net imports and therefore it is also in its best interest to have a

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continuous supply of oil coming from Ecuador (Plumer, 2013). These reasons, along with a lack of strong government support for the initiative in recent years, brought an end to what could have been Correa's chance to show the world he was as green and as concerned about human and environmental rights as he appeared during his campaign.

Instead, the innovative initiative came to an official end on August 15, 2013 when President Correa announced that due to only minimal support from the global community the plan would no longer continue (Chimienti and Matthes, 2013). He said in a televised interview that the world had failed Ecuador and that "it was not charity that we sought from the international community, but co-responsibility in the face of climate change" (Plumer, 2013). Like Correa, the Environmental Minister, Lorena Tapia, blamed the international community for the initiative's failure, saying that the large countries that contaminate the most are prone to double discourse. They state at world forums that they will reduce contamination yet did little to support the Yasuní initiative ("Hay voluntad politica," 2013).

While the government was quick to point its finger at the rest of the world, many Ecuadorians think that Correa is instead to blame for giving up so easily on the proposal. Humberto Cholongó, the president of the Indigenous Nationalities Confederation (or CONAIE), called the lack of protection for the

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park a government failure and called on Ecuadorians to “defend Yasuní and the indigenous people who call it home” (Rey Mallén, 2013). Economist and former Minister for Energy and Mining Alberto Acosta said that what was needed most was “coherent and consistent government action” on the part of the Correa administration in order for the protection of Yasuní to succeed and that “he should have stayed committed to the initiative” (Acosta, 2013). Patrick Alley, founder of a human rights and environmental organization agreed, saying that “it could have signaled a new way of thinking and it failed because global leadership isn’t putting nearly enough thinking into this issue” (Bawden, 2013). Many Ecuadorian citizens obviously agree with Cholongó, Acosta and Alley because dozens gathered at the presidential palace in Quito the day after Correa’s announcement to protest what they saw as the government’s failure to not just protect one track of precious land, but also for what it means in the fight against global warming (Ibid).

Now that the initiative has come to an end, it is not surprising that the government has changed its tune a bit. The Environmental Minister has come forward assuring the public that the impact in Yasuní will be minimal and that the government will “use the best technology and the strictest control” (Rey Mallén, 2013). Assembly member Carlos Viteri says that the extraction of petroleum will actually be a benefit to the Amazonian communities because they

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will be the principal beneficiaries and therefore will have the resources necessary to build plumbing infrastructure and potable water plants. In addition to reducing poverty in the area, he added the government will “do justice” in the Amazon (“Hay voluntad politica,” 2013). A sentiment that is not shared by the majority of indigenous people living in the Amazon based on their fight to protect their lands from extraction. President Correa claims that only a small fraction of the park will be affected and that “Ecuador simply will not continue to be a ‘beggar sitting on a sack of gold’ just because a few environmentalists are not willing to accept some ‘minor sacrifices’” (Swing, 2014).

The political clash between the government and indigenous and environmental groups that are trying to keep drilling out of the ITT oil fields has been ongoing. Soon after the government announcement about the end of the Yasuní project, thousands of Ecuadorians took to the streets to show their opinion about the president’s decision. While the majority were unhappy with the outcome, there was also a group that came out to support their leader. Police concerned about violence between the two groups, quickly separated them and there were no injuries (Cevallos, 2013). Protests have continued in the following months, though possibly without the initial fervor of the protests in August and September 2013.

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Despite the fact that Yasuní is located in a national park and drilling is prohibited there, a majority vote by congress allows the government to get around their legislation and move forward with their plans to extract within a small section of the park. Under Ecuadorian law, the only way to reverse the decision is to hold a referendum. The president has said that a referendum is not necessary because the Ecuadorian people believe in him and his government and they know that he does what was best for the country (Rafael Correa, 2013).

Time, however, has proved otherwise as activists were able to collect more than the necessary 584,000 signatures needed by April 12, 2014 (Swing, 2014). On April 11, 2014, environmentalists announced that they had gathered a total of 727,947 signatures (“Ecuador faces vote,” 2014). Those who signed were able to first see the following referendum question: “Do you agree that the Ecuadorean government should keep the crude in the ITT, known as block 43, underground indefinitely” (Swing, 2014)? Despite the fact that more than enough signatures have been turned in, they still need to be verified by the electoral authorities and then it will be up to the Constitutional Court to issue the referendum.

The group that gathered the signatures was a mix of environmentalists and indigenous groups that came together to form *Yasunidos*, a coalition that made the collecting of so many signatures possible. According to *Yasunidos* member Carla Espin, “[w]ith these signatures we are certain that the popular

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consultation vote will go ahead" ("Ecuador faces vote," 2014). However, not everyone is so optimistic. President Correa has already said that he doubts that the support is there and even before the necessary signatures were collected, he had already commented that he expected 40 percent of them to not be legitimate (Swing, 2014). If electoral authorities find this to be the case then they will easily be able to throw out the petition and there will be no referendum.

The Yasuní case shows the interesting intersection between the state and social movements, both national and international. Private corporations were involved behind the scenes in drilling negotiations with the state, but their role in the media was minimal. The idea for the initiative was originally conceived by a group of environmentalists and activists even before Correa became a presidential candidate in 2006. Once elected, Correa quickly signed off on the plan and thus began the initiative. The political climate at that time was such with the Chevron-Texaco trial that it was in Correa's best interest to appear as an environmentalist. The initiative quickly gained popularity among the people and received a lot of international attention. It sought the help of foreign governments, NGO's and individuals alike. Some polls suggest that the support to protect the ITT block may be as high as 70 percent (Swing, 2014). It appears that while the Yasuní Initiative has been supported by activists and environmentalists from the beginning and more recently by the majority of the



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general population, the support from the Ecuadorian government was fleeting and the project was shut down when the donations did not add up to their target goal.

The government claims that the drilling is necessary for Ecuador to continue its fight against poverty. According to Correa, the “real dilemma is this: do we protect 100% of the Yasuní and have no resources to meet the urgent needs of our people, or do we save 99% of it and have \$18bn to defeat poverty” (“Ecuador Scraps Plans,” 2013). Advocates against Yasuní drilling, however, say that the government generated 51 billion dollars from drilling in the Amazon between 2007 and 2013 without managing to rid country of poverty. Therefore, they say, that another 18 billion, the expected profit if drilling occurs in the ITT block (more than the original expected amount), will not be enough to solve the poverty problem. Instead, more sustainable methods are needed and they suggest a 1.5% tax on the richest Ecuadorians, which they claim will generate over 20 billion dollars in the next 25 years (Yasunidos, 2014).

Correa argues the necessity of drilling in order to defeat poverty and while this is a noble goal, he pays little attention as to how the indigenous living in the park will be affected. Should they be asked to sacrifice their livelihood in order to help Ecuadorians in other parts of the country? Despite government assurances that disruption will be minimal, environmentalists are hesitant about

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if this will be the case based on the history that the country has had with oil companies. In addition, there are consequences that the government is either unaware of or more likely, unwilling to admit. One such example I was surprised to learn during an interview with a professor of political science at the private university in Loja. Dr. Rodrigo Cisneros pulled up an image of an access road built close to the Yasuní Park and stated that the indigenous tribe living nearby will not cross the road. Of course they physically could as it is a small road, but the important fact is that they choose not to and so the roads being built to transport the oil and equipment has a greater impact on them and their ability to hunt than most people imagine.

It is still unclear what the Yasuní ITT outcome will be; will the environmental social movements get their referendum and if so will the majority of Ecuadorians vote to keep the oil underground as is projected? Or, will the government throw out the case and go ahead with their plan to drill? While the people have done their best to protect Yasuní, the ultimate decision now lies in the hands of the government.

## **CONCLUSION**

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The cases of Alamor, Chevron and Yasuní-ITT have taught us just how complex environmental politics are in Ecuador and how diverse the realities are in different parts of the country. The transitional zone where Alamor is located and the Amazon region where Yasuní National Park is face distinct challenges based on their ways of life and natural resources. The oil-rich Amazon has been a target of corporations such as Chevron that have with government consent pillaged large tracts of territory in an effort to maximize profit. It is because this that indigenous groups have participated in social movements to fight for their land. In Alamor, on the other hand, where the environmental situation is not as grave, the people have not come together to form movements and instead rely on the local government to be responsible for the environmental wellbeing of the community.

While Ecuador may be a small country, it is clear that its environmental decisions have captured the attention of the world and its future decisions will likely impact other countries far and wide. If Ecuador fails to protect its natural resources, there will be consequences for the world and not just Ecuadorians. According to Bass et al. “[i]f the world’s most diverse forests cannot be protected in Yasuní, it seems unlikely that they can be protected anywhere else” (2010, p. 16). And while bleak, this is likely the case.

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For true change to happen, Ecuador needs to step up to the challenge and stop the internal blame game for its environmental failures. The government blames the corporations for their lack of environmental standards yet continues its plans to drill; it blames the international community for not supporting the Yasuní Initiative, activist groups for causing trouble, as well as the informal sector for doing environmental damage without obtaining the necessary permits.

Corporations, such as Chevron, for their part claim innocence and blame the corrupt Ecuadorian legal system for trying to extort billions of dollars from their company (Acosta, 2011). At the same time, social movements and individuals that make up the informal sector, blame the government for giving up too easily on the Yasuní Initiative and for not doing more to preserve one of the most biodiverse places on the planet. In order for Ecuador to continue to be considered a progressive country on the environmental front, the state, social movements, corporations, and the informal sector need to work together instead of against each other so that in the future each Ecuadorian can indeed have *sumak kawsay* or “the good life.”

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