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The UN and the Ecuadorian government have embarked on a joint mission to save one of the world's most bio-diverse forests. And it needs everyone's help.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) today announced it is now accepting donations of all sizes to its trust fund to preserve in perpetuity a vital section of Ecuador's Yasuni National Park in the Amazon rainforest.

Underneath the forest lie nearly one billion barrels of oil and the funds would help prevent the region from being drilled. The trust, which is part of the Yasuni-ITT (Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini) Initiative, was previously only open to governments and corporations pledging over \$100,000. Now, individuals and businesses wishing to contribute amounts as small as \$25 may become involved in this effort to save one of the world's natural treasures that is home to an incomparable number of species.

Yasuni is one of the only sections of the Amazon where life was virtually unaffected by the last Ice Age. The region teems with "unparalleled levels of amphibian, bird, mammal, insect, and plant life, in addition to indigenous tribes living in voluntary seclusion", the UN said.

It highlighted that it is one of the world's most pristine reserves, and could hold untold medical and scientific discoveries. One hectare of land there contains more species of trees than in all of North America.

"Extending this effort to private citizens who want to get involved at any level not only helps raise more money to protect this sacred land, but also raises awareness of how important Yasuni is to our world. People care deeply about the protection of Yasuni, and want to contribute whatever they can. Ultimately, increased small-donation participation helps us galvanize support and spread the word", said actress Bo Derek, Goodwill Ambassador appointed by President Correa to the Yasuni-ITT Initiative.

For a few years the Ecuadorian government has been under pressure to start exploring oil

underneath Yasuni's Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini fields as it could generate an export revenue of \$7.2bn. One third of the country's population lives under the poverty line and the oil revenue could provide a financial boost to those people. But neither the people nor the government are willing to dance to the 'drill, baby, drill' chant.

In 2006, Ecuador chose to forego half of the estimated \$7.2 billion in revenue. The alternative path chosen was to appeal to the international community to help recoup the other half of the lost potential profits that selling the oil would bring in.

That's where UNDP came in. In 2010 it agreed with the plan and partnered with Ecuador to establish the fund through which to administer the fundraising. The raised funds will go towards investment in sustainable, alternative energy, with a view to steer the country away from oil dependence. The funds will also go towards social programs in Ecuador and building infrastructure such as hospitals and schools.

"Meeting the fundraising goal of \$100 million by the end of the year will indicate whether or not the project is viable and if the international community is vested enough in preserving this untouched ecosystem", UNDP said.