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While the rest of the world succumbed to the last ice age, an ecological haven avoided the freeze. Today, it is one of the most biodiverse areas on the planet, an unspoiled goldmine for scientific discovery, but cursed with an underbelly of almost one billion barrels of crude oil. Actress Bo Derek is an ambassador for a new initiative to save part of the Amazon rainforest and the last remaining voluntary isolated communities, including the Waorani tribe that currently lives there.

The Guardian reported that the recent discovery by the state oil company Petroecuador at Ecuador's Yasuni National Park's Ishpingo Tambococha Tiputini (ITT) oil field is valued at up to \$10 billion.

Derek told The Huffington Post that Ecuadorian President Raphael Correa called on the world in 2006 to contribute half of what the oil was then worth to the country. If successful, \$3.6 billion over 12 years would be contributed towards social development, renewable energy, clean up and reforestation. The country's sacrifice: drilling would be banned at Yasuni, which sits on 20 percent of the country's oil reserves.

To get the project under way, \$100 million dollars is needed by the end of 2011. Derek said achieving this has been a relatively easy process. Last year, the United Nations Development Programme jumped on board and established the Yasuni ITT Trust Fund where donations can be securely made and managed.

"Unfortunately, this hit during this economic crisis, so it is really impressive how many countries are contributing. I think it's symbolic and a show of good faith that the world cares about this," Derek said.

"I think the easy route would be to let an oil company come in and drill, but [the president] won't have it," she said. "As a developing country, it is a big sacrifice for them. Yet 70 percent of the people support this initiative in Ecuador."

Conserving the rainforest will also prevent the release of 1,207 million metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from drilling, the burning of oil and deforestation, according to [yasunisupport.org](http://yasunisupport.org). In 2008, Ecuador became the first country to give constitutional rights to nature, Rights of Nature reported.

In 2010, Ivonne Baki, who created the Galapagos Conservancy Foundation after the 2001 oil spill, was called by Correa to lead the Yasuni National Park ITT negotiations. She told HuffPost that support for the project was even coming from oil companies.

Ecuador is the home of a battle raging since 1998 with oil company Texaco, now Chevron. The company has been blamed for "environmental contamination and illnesses resulting from its operation of an oil consortium from 1972 to 1990 in the Amazon," according to the Associated Press.

However, Baki said: "Oil companies are all supporting the initiative. First of all, for them it is positive because we're not saying that it is drilling that is causing the pollution. ... You can not even go there with the launch of a motor. It has to be a canoe because it is so fragile, this place, that any change, even a sound that is strong, could affect it."

Derek added, "Personally I'm not against drilling. I think we're still dependent on fossil fuel. I

hope one day we aren't, but we're not quite there yet. ... Ecuador is drilling and they're going to continue to drill. It is their largest export. But there are some places that are so unique, so special that we should all support not drilling there."

"Eric Chivian, a Nobel Prize winner, was in Ecuador with many other scientists. Together they signed a letter that for them this place shouldn't be touched, because we have all the medicines in that place to every disease in the world." Derek said.

"We have by far more richness over the land than under the ground," Baki added.

She said other countries were calling the U.N. Development Programme to ask how they managed to pull the project off.

On Sept. 23, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon and Ecuador's President Correa co-hosted an event in support of Yasuni at the United Nations in New York. Reuters reported Correa said Ecuador had received just over \$52 million in pledges. "The international response to our call has been poor," he said. "We're renouncing an immense sum of money. For us the most financially lucrative option is to extract the gasoline," Correa told Reuters.

Baki said, "It's hard to convince people. It is so new -- it is an original idea. They will ask you, 'How can you have oil and you're not going to exploit it?' It's a gift to the world by not taking out the oil, preserving one of the most diverse places in the world."