

[Miami Herald](#)

BOGOTA, Colombia -- Ecuador is killing an ambitious conservation program intended to leave more than 800 million barrels of oil beneath a pristine swath of the Amazon. But on Friday it was clear that the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, as it's known, won't die easily.

A coalition of environmental and indigenous groups is vowing to keep the government and oil companies out of the area, which is rich in animal species and isolated tribes.

"The government doesn't have the right to dissolve the Yasuní-ITT Initiative because this doesn't belong to them," said Esperanza Martinez, the president of the Acción Ecológica environmental group, which is part of the coalition.

"The initiative was a proposal that came from civil society."

The groups are planning a series of marches, protests and legislative actions to rescue the project. Humberto Cholango, the president of the powerful Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador said his group would do "whatever is necessary" to block oil exploration in the area.

The confederation is asking the National Assembly to call a referendum on drilling the ITT. But if the body, which is controlled by the ruling party, shirks its responsibility, Cholango said his group will collect enough signatures to trigger a plebiscite.

In 2011, President Rafael Correa called a referendum to outlaw bullfighting, Cholango said. "This issue is far more important."

The Yasuní-ITT Initiative was supposed to work like this: Ecuador would leave more than 840

million barrels of oil beneath the ground in perpetuity, keeping more than 400 million tons of climate-changing carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere.

In exchange, the international community would provide \$3.6 billion — or about half the market-value of the crude when the program was designed. But the idea never caught on, and there was only \$336 million in various trust funds established to receive donations.

To complicate matters, the crude is sitting beneath Yasuní National Park, a United Nations biosphere reserve, which is one of the most biodiverse spots on the planet, thriving with unknown animal species and at least one tribe living in voluntary isolation, the Tagaeri-Taromenane.

On Thursday, Correa said the world had turned its back on the initiative, forcing him to pull the plug in what he said was "the most difficult decision of my entire government."

Although the project was a financial failure, it was one of the administration's most popular programs. The initiative put Yasuní National Park on the map and recent polls show that more than 80 percent of the population supports the project.

Hedging against a backlash, Correa accused his critics and conservationists of being naive in their defense of the environment. Poverty, he said, destroys nature faster than the oil industry — as subsistence farmers extend the agricultural frontier and villages without sewage treatment contaminate rivers.

On Thursday, Correa said that drilling the ITT oil block would affect less than 1 percent of Yasuní National Park, and that the oil could be worth \$18.3 billion.

"The real dilemma is this: Do we protect 100 percent of the Yasuní and have no resources to meet the urgent needs of our people, or do we save 99 percent of it and have 18 billion to defeat poverty?" he said.

Read more here:

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/08/16/3567831/conservation-groups-vow-to-save.html##storylink=cpy>