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STAFF REPORT

More than 100 scientists from around the world, including Texas State researchers, have submitted a statement to the Ecuadoran government urging that the biodiverse Yasuní National Park not be opened for new drilling.

Scientists Concerned for Yasuní submitted a statement to the Ecuadorian Congress detailing the park's biodiversity of the park and warning that it would be compromised by new oil drilling in its core.

"The scientist's statement details and reaffirms that Yasuní National Park may very well be the most biodiverse place in the world," said Shawn McCracken, a postdoctoral research assistant at Texas State. "It is a remarkable convergence of global peak diversity levels of amphibian, bird, insect, mammal and tree species."

The Ecuadorian Congress is debating President Rafael Correa's proposal to open up the remote northeast section of Yasuní National Park, areas known as oil blocks 31 and ITT, to a potentially massive new oil drilling operation. Since the area is within a national park, Congress must declare the projects to be in the national interest.

President Correa's new aggressive push for oil drilling comes after he announced the failure of a six-year initiative seeking international financial compensation in exchange for leaving the oil permanently underground.

McCracken and Michael Forstner, Regents Professor and holder of the Alexander/Stone Chair of Genetics at Texas State, conduct research supporting the scientific basis of Yasuní's record biodiversity and the impacts of oil development in Ecuador's Amazon rainforests. McCracken was initially involved in the recognition of Yasuní National Park as one of the most biologically

diverse places on our planet in a 2010 PLOS ONE publication.

As a Ph.D. student during this time, McCracken investigated the impacts of oil access roads in Yasuní on the amphibian communities that live in tank bromeliads as high as 45 meters or more in the rainforest canopy. His research found that even an oil access road through primary rainforest with minimal forest disturbance in Yasuní had a significant negative effect on the amphibian communities of these bromeliads within 100 meters of the road.

McCracken's dissertation research contributed to the description of two new species of frogs that live their entire lives high in the canopy of Yasuní and surrounding rainforests.

McCracken and Forstner also have investigated the evolutionary relationships of these canopy bromeliad inhabiting amphibians using molecular techniques. They said they believe there are more species to be discovered in Yasuní, and that molecular evidence may also uncover novel developments in the evolutionary trajectory of canopy-dwelling amphibians in comparison to their ground-dwelling relatives.

The park's diversity is likely due to the park's unique and strategic location at the intersection of the Amazon, the Andes, and the Equator.

"The diversity of Yasuní National Park really is quite stunning when you realize the extreme richness spans across all biological groups," said Anthony Di Fiore of the University of Texas, who has worked in the Yasuní region for almost two decades. "From monkeys to birds to frogs to woody plants, Yasuní is among the world record holders in almost every category."

The Scientists Concerned for Yasuní, first formed in 2004 to establish the scientific basis against oil drilling plans in Block 31, indicate that it is unfortunate that they must fight this battle again.

"The campaign is much direr this time because the government drilling plans are much more aggressive and extensive than in years past," said Matt Finer of the Center for International Environmental Law. "They are not nibbling around the edges of the park anymore, but going

deep into the core of one of the most important protected areas in the world."

By targeting the core of the park, the drilling projects also threatens some of the world's last remaining indigenous people living in voluntary isolation.

"Countless future generations will not understand why we carelessly destroyed the most biologically diverse areas of our planet, nor why we destroyed the indigenous cultures of people who lived in them," Finer said. "The Yasuní is exceptionally rich in species and home to diverse cultures — including some living in voluntary isolation. Its protection defends nature and peoples. Destroying it would be a particular tragedy."

The Scientists Concerned for Yasuní statement ends with a number of science-based policy recommendations. Specifically, the group calls on the Ecuadorian government to not allow new oil exploration, development, or access roads into Blocks 31 and ITT in the core of Yasuní National Park.

"Yasuní represents the possibility of protecting populations of as many as 10 percent of all the species on the planet," said Kelly Swing, Director of the Tiputini Biodiversity Station. "Tiny Ecuador could thereby be seen as absolute world heroes for conservation with the political decision to manage the remaining sectors of this unique reserve for maximum protection."