

### [New Internationalist](#)

Tim Gee investigates Ecuador's failure to 'keep the oil in the ground', and the activism that could yet secure the future of the national park.

A kingfisher flits by, then a heron, an osprey, a flock of parrots. In the branches, one, two, three hoatzins: a bird species that links us to our prehistoric past. The tree-trunks are so wide they exceed the arm span of any human being. The butterflies are bigger than my hand. The bees are the size of dollar coins. This is Yasuní, Ecuador, one of the most biodiverse places in the world. Here there are pumas, jaguars, sloths. Animals confined to picture books or cages for most of the world here live freely alongside many thousands of others.

Follow the water's edge, though, and there is a new species to be seen: boatloads of petroleros (oil engineers) roar down the river, causing the traditional wooden boats at the bankside to lurch hazardously. Every so often even bigger beasts pass by: oil trucks precariously perched on barges barely bigger than the lorries' girth. PELIGRO! (Danger) is emblazoned in bold on their sides.

Yasuní gained international fame in 2007, when Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa was the face of an unprecedented initiative. He told the UN General Assembly that his government would not drill in Yasuní's oilfield, if the international community compensated his country for some of the oil revenues that would be lost. Only a fraction of the hoped-for money was raised, however, and on 15 August 2013 the President announced that it was time for Plan B: drill the oil.

### Toxic hangover

How did such a dream turn sour? To find out requires a look into the story of the movement. It begins upriver in the place where the oil-towns of Coca and Nueva Loja now stand. Within living memory this was lush rainforest, inhabited by indigenous communities hunting and gathering among ancient trees. Today, the landscape is dominated by oil wells, oil trucks and more PELIGRO signs. The towns are dirty grids of polluted streets, poverty and imported workers in Halliburton uniforms. They are cautionary tales of how the future might look. But there is also resistance from those with a different view of how the world could be.

In Nueva Loja I met Donald Moncayo, one of the most active members of the *de Afectados de Texaco* (UAT – the *of People Affected by Texaco*). With protective gloves in one hand, and a

small cylindrical earth sampler in the other, he showed me around his modest family farm. He didn't need to dig deep before the unmistakable smell of petrol filled the air. A little investigation revealed a thick, sticky treacle, insoluble in water, irremovable from his gloves. This is a piscina (wastewater pool), a toxic hangover from Texaco's time in the country. Put your nose close and it is unbearable. Even though the company says it has cleaned up, Donald tells me locals like his family can't drink the water any more.

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It is here that the roots of the movement to protect Yasuní lie. Communities affected by Texaco opened a court case against Chevron – which had since become the parent company. Elsewhere in Amazonia, groups of indigenous people rose up to occupy oil platforms in protest at the effect on their communities. And in Quito, urban activists made links with affected communities in the countryside, to take up their cause in the cities.

When the population of Ecuador installed Rafael Correa as their president in 2007 (the seventh in a decade), an opportunity arose. In a country that had given short shrift to any ruler who prioritized the interests of US corporations over those of Ecuador, the new premier had to show that he was different. Faced with a choice of sides in the long-running battle between affected communities and the oil companies, he chose the communities. He ended the practice of dumping waste in piscinas. He visited spill-affected areas – as he still sometimes does – to plunge his hands into the dirty ground and demonstrate for the TV cameras what still needs to be cleaned. And, perhaps most significantly for the Yasuní proposal, he appointed his one-time mentor, the environmental economist Alberto Acosta, to his government, first as Minister for Energy, then as President of the Constituent Assembly, which recognized the rights of nature for the first time.

The door open, the UAT joined with other NGOs, including Pachamama and Acción Ecológica, to propose that the government should not drill in Yasuní. And so the Yasuní-ITT initiative was born. For the six years that followed, the government educated the world and the country about the biological importance of Yasuní, and proclaimed with pride the project's pioneering potential to prevent hundreds of millions of tonnes of CO2 emissions – if the international community paid up. It didn't. Now things are very different.

Compelled to drill

Another policy of the time might help to explain why a man until recently hailed as an environmental visionary has turned into a cheerleader for the exploitation of the rainforest. In the early years, the government changed the oil contracts so that the bulk of the proceeds would flow to the country rather than the corporations. Without doubt, the move brought to an historically shortchanged treasury fresh investment that has funded anti-poverty schemes, free education and better transport infrastructure. The debt burden has been lightened by oil deals with China. But in turn, without additional funds from elsewhere, progress has become dependent on the extraction of fossil fuels and the systems of globalization. Such are the contradictions of our global economy that a president best known for his environmentalist, anti-imperialist and anti-debt rhetoric feels compelled to drill oil to sell to the US to pay foreign debt.

For all of the laudable speeches, some rainforest activists wonder whether the government ever really believed in the Yasuní initiative. In a coffee shop in Quito, a veteran campaigner explained that in meetings with grassroots groups the government had argued that Plan A (save the rainforest) and progress towards Plan B (drill the oil) should and would proceed simultaneously. With time, some even wondered if the Yasuní initiative had become a convenient way of keeping the movement quiet while the state prepared the way. Plans for a giant oil refinery began,<sup>1</sup> and operations came closer to the borders of the ITT oil fields. Alberto Acosta resigned, or perhaps was pushed: different people have different stories. Either way, the effect was the same: the defenders of the rainforest were forced into the wilderness.<sup>2</sup>

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And so, after six years and changes to staff and plans, the president announced that the initiative had failed. For the continuation of his government's progressive projects, drilling would have to take place. He insisted the platforms would cover less than one per cent of the Yasuní National Park and that the exploitation would be 'eco-friendly'. I asked Donald whether he thought the drilling would be eco-friendly. 'It's a lie,' he replied. Extraction practices may have improved since the current government took over, but there have still been hundreds of spills in recent years. If they can't get it right in Nueva Loja, with all its infrastructure, what hope is there in remote Yasuní?

The Yasunidos

For some, especially youngsters who learnt about the project at school, the abandonment of the initiative was the abandonment of a dream. In response, a new generation of environmental activists has emerged. In the days that followed the president's announcement, a group met on the grassy patch outside the offices of Acción Ecológica, and founded a new movement – the Yasunidos. Despite having only a shed to use as an office and a canvas-covered outdoor area as a meeting room, they resolved to work together to collect the 600,000 signatures necessary to force a referendum on the issue. If successful, it will be the first time Ecuadorian civil society has initiated such a ballot, and possibly the first time anywhere in the world that a referendum has been called to defend the constitutional rights of nature. But that isn't their only problem.

Some nonviolent activists report having been followed by police. Some are behind bars. And one of the organizations that came up with the Yasuní initiative – Pachamama – has been banned altogether. The stated reason was that some of the participants in a protest in which Pachamama also participated became violent. Campaigners believe it was an attempt to neutralize the movement trying to protect Yasuní. They may once have been allies, but the government now denounces opponents of drilling as enemies of development.

Victor R. Caivano/AP Photo

In for the drill: President Rafael Correa has approved the exploitation of the rainforest. Victor R. Caivano/AP Photo

Campaigners respond that the extraction plans are a model of short-termism. If the country pursues oil-dependent development, what will happen in 20 years' time, when the oil runs out? They also say that some of the money has been spent on policies that result in more cars, more CO2 emissions and more roads – which they call 'veins' between the cities and the drilling sites. Finally, they take issue with the government's claim to be demonstrating some new version of socialism. As one activist put it to me: 'You can't fight for a new model if you don't fight to keep the oil in the soil. If we want to fight capitalism, we need first to fight oil.'

The Yasuní-ITT initiative was a compromise. Ecuador's green groups have always stood for a complete end to drilling. But it was a compromise born of a balance of power, which was in turn born of the efforts of a progressive population. The government might be hugely popular, but on its plans to exploit Yasuní it is out of step with the people.

So now there is a new wave of campaigners out on the street every day, passionately and energetically collecting signatures. They don't have resources, and they are up against the combined force of the state and Big Oil. But they do have the backing of a youthful country with compulsory voting and a history of supporting progressive causes. To reflect that the future of the world is in the hands of the young is said so often that it almost begins to lose meaning. But in the case of Ecuador, the young seem determined to prove that it is true.

Find out more at [yasunidos.org](http://yasunidos.org) and [texacotoxico.org](http://texacotoxico.org)

Donations can be made to the Yasunidos through the Global Green Grants Fund.

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Initially it had been intended as a facility for Venezuelan oil. When the deal fell through, China stepped in. Campaigners argued that only domestic extraction on the scale of Yasuní could fill the capacity. □

- Alberto Acosta was the candidate for a group of leftist and indigenous parties in the 2013 presidential election, garnering three per cent of the vote. □

- See more at:

<http://newint.org/features/2014/04/01/yasuni-ecuador-cautionary-tale/#sthash.Rc5wFPvw.dpuf>