

The territory of the Huaorani people traditionally covered an area of approximately two million hectares, between the right bank of the Napo River and the left bank of the Curaray River. They maintained their independence and defended their territory through acts of warfare. Ongoing contact with the outside world did not begin until 1958, with the establishment of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) by US missionaries.



The Huaorani are hunter-gatherers who require a considerable area of land to maintain their traditional modes of production and consumption. As a hunting and gathering society, they must be able to move across large stretches of territory. As a result of the pressures exerted by various factors over subsequent decades – the concession of land to oil companies, the sale of forested areas to logging companies, settlers taking possession of tracts of land declared by the government as areas for colonization – the territory in which they were able to move was reduced to the stretch between the Tivacuno and Curaray Rivers.

The work of the US-based evangelical Christian missionaries of the SIL, paved the way to clearing the area for the entry of US oil companies. The SIL proposed the creation of a Huaorani reservation which was finally established in 1983, encompassing 612,000 hectares.

In 1990, the Ecuadorian government officially recognized the Huaorani people's rights over an area of 612,560 hectares of land.

The oil companies influenced the creation of an organization to represent the Huaorani in its dealings with companies and the government, the Organization of the Huaorani Nation of the Ecuadorian Amazon (ONHAE), which basically serves as a liaison with the oil industry. The 20-year “Agreement of Friendship, Respect and Mutual Support” signed between US oil company Maxus and ONHAE established that the Huaorani “do not oppose the exploitation of hydrocarbons in their territory, and therefore will no longer request a moratorium on exploration and drilling and will collaborate closely with the oil company.”

Moreover, the Ecuadorian government declaration that granted the Huaorani “ownership” of the land set aside as a reserve specifically stipulated that this ownership did not extend to the subsoil, which would still be administered by the government, and therefore the Huaorani are prohibited from “impeding or obstructing mining or hydrocarbon exploration and/or exploitation activities undertaken by the national government and/or legally authorized individuals or companies.”

Today, many members of the Huaorani community have lost their hunter-gatherer traditions. Their former fierce independence has given way to dependency on the oil companies. This dependency on the food and medicines provided by the oil companies has led to profound changes in their dietary habits. The entry of oil workers into Huaorani territory has also led to serious diseases like hepatitis B, malnutrition and severe cultural impacts. Population settlements have been formed within the park which are inhabited by Huaorani but where the lifestyle and relationship with the environment is very different from the traditional way of life.

Three other indigenous groups living in the area – the Tagaeri, Taromenane and Oñamenane peoples – have voluntarily chosen to live in isolation from the outside world, and have managed to maintain their traditional way of life until now because of the limited entry of outsiders into their territories.

In 1996 the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE) and ONHAE presented a case before the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights accusing the Government of Ecuador and the oil companies of threatening the rights of indigenous populations. The accusation led to a visit by a Commission delegation and the subsequent publication of a report with recommendations.

The examination of the human rights situation in the Oriente or Amazonian region of Ecuador was prompted by the filing of a petition on behalf of the Huaorani people, which alleged them to

be under the imminent threat of profound human rights violations due to planned oil exploitation activities within their traditional lands. CONFENIAE asserted that these activities would irreparably harm the Huaorani, threatening their physical and cultural survival, in violation of the protections accorded by the American Convention on Human Rights and the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. The Commission recommended the adoption of measures to prevent these impacts.

On 10 May 2006 the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights granted precautionary measures in favour of the Tagaeri and Taromenami indigenous peoples. These precautionary measures imply taking action to protect the rights and safeguard the lives of these indigenous groups. The Commission “requested that the Ecuadorian State adopt the measures necessary to protect the territory inhabited by the beneficiaries from third parties.”

On 18 April 2007, President Rafael Correa announced the adoption of a governmental policy to safeguard the lives of these peoples, assuming responsibility for protecting their basic rights and pledging to make efforts aimed at confronting the threat of extermination and guaranteeing the defence of the collective and individual human rights of peoples who live in voluntary isolation.