

**Yasuni-ITT:  
The Politics of Maintaining Oil in the Soil  
and Money Grow on Trees**



**Written by: Jilles Mast  
Student number: 3168182  
Tutor: Diederick Raven**



## **Acknowledgements**

First of all, I would like to thank all the people I got to know during my time in Ecuador for their ideas, inspiration and friendship. I hope that this work can contribute, even if it is a little bit, to helping to save Yasuni. Secondly, I am grateful for my friends and family who have patiently put up with me during the (isolated) months I spent writing. Last but certainly not least, I would like to express my gratitude to Diederick Raven. Our conversations always inspired me to think further than I would have otherwise. I think that is the best thing that a mentor could do.

# Contents

§		Page nr
	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
	<b>Structure</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Yasuni-ITT</b>	<b>8</b>
	<b>1.1 introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
	<b>1.2 The proposal</b>	<b>10</b>
	<b>1.3 Dependenvy</b>	<b>12</b>
	<b>1.4 New government, New constitution, New Paradigm</b>	<b>16</b>
	<b>1.5 New Constitution</b>	<b>16</b>
	<b>1.6 National Development Plan</b>	<b>18</b>
	<b>1.7 Rebuilding the state</b>	<b>19</b>
	<b>1.8 New extractivism</b>	<b>20</b>
	<b>1.9 Oil and <i>Campo Armadillo</i></b>	<b>21</b>
	<b>1.10 Mining in the <i>Cordillera del Condor</i></b>	<b>24</b>
	<b>1.11 Addicted to development</b>	<b>26</b>
	<b>1.12 Back to Yasuni</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Waorani and the shift from modernity to environmentalism</b>	<b>33</b>
	<b>2.1 Introduction</b>	<b>33</b>
	<b>2.2 Procurement</b>	<b>35</b>
	<b>2.3 The 'savage' as the problem of modernity</b>	<b>38</b>
	<b>2.4 The accidental conservationist</b>	<b>42</b>
	<b>2.5 The noble savage: the solution to the problem of modernity</b>	<b>43</b>
	<b>2.6 Reconnecting</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Appendix 1</b>	<b>Map of Yasuni National Park</b>	<b>57</b>

## Introduction

*“a big idea from a small country”*

-the Yasuni-ITT proposal-

“A proposal to change history”. That is how the Yasuni-ITT<sup>1</sup> initiative is presented to the global public. The Ecuadorian government's way of changing the history of the world is to leave 846 million barrels of oil underground in Yasuni national park. Instead of exploitation it consciously chooses for the preservation of the park's incredibly high biodiversity, ensuring the survival of three Amazonian tribes and preventing the output of 407 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> (Larrea, 2011; Larrea and Warnars, 2009).

Changing the world is not something that Ecuador can do on its own. It needs the financial support of the international community. Being a relatively poor country it simply cannot afford to leave billions of dollars worth of oil underground. The target that the Ecuadorian government has set to preserve Yasuni is 3.5 billion dollars. If the international community is willing to contribute this amount of money the oil in will remain underground indefinitely.

Ecuador is explicit in that it is not asking for charity, claiming instead that Ecuador is giving 7 billion dollars to the world, the money that it loses by not exploiting. For this purpose it has included the selling of carbon credits in Yasuni-ITT's financial scheme. “What we ask for”, Correa has said, “is not charity, but a just compensation for environmental services we provide to the world. We as a country did not cause climate change but we are willing to carry co-responsibility. The rich countries however, should contribute more<sup>2</sup>.”

In spite of initial enthusiasm the countries that are supposed to contribute have so far been reluctant to do so. Until now, a mere 115<sup>3</sup> million dollars have been collected. Far too little and if wealthy nations do not step up, the government has announced that it will commence drilling. Even changing the world a little bit is hard. To put things in perspective, the amount of oil in Yasuni is the equivalent of only 10 days of worldwide oil-consumption.

---

<sup>1</sup> ITT stands for the three parts of block 43: Ishpingo, Tiputini, Tambococha

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mA-Hdlu8Kus>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.elcomercio.com/sociedad/aporte-Yasuni-concreta\\_0\\_613138773.html](http://www.elcomercio.com/sociedad/aporte-Yasuni-concreta_0_613138773.html)

Yet the implications of the proposal reach far beyond this. To even consider the option of not exploiting a valuable resource like oil, is not something that happens everyday. In general the movement has been the other way around. The rising prices of oil and other valued primary resources have led to a rat-race on the earth's already scarce resources. The social and environmental consequences of this are usually delegated to the sideline.

The Yasuni-ITT initiative could serve as an example for a new way of thinking about and acting upon nature; to tackle environmental problems like the loss of biodiversity, the depletion of resources and climate change, in a new way; to accompany the necessary transition from an era where man made capital was the limiting factor, to an era in which remaining natural capital has become the limiting factor of economic growth (Daly, 2005).

It is because of this potential that I decided to write my thesis on the Yasuni-ITT proposal. I have set out to investigate just what happens when an environmental scheme like this is developed. I wanted to understand where it came from, what it proposed to change and how this works out. Furthermore I wanted to see what other changes accompany the kind of shift regarding nature that yasuni-ITT suggests. What other processes are set in motion, and how are these embedded in local, national and international political economics. I wondered if the proposal was part of a more structural change towards nature and its role in economic development or just a mask allowing 'business as usual' to continue. And if the latter is true then what could we learn from the Waorani, indigenous to what is now Yasuni national park. In what way could they contribute, or inform us on a different way of relating with nature.

The answers to these questions, however tentative and inconclusive, are what form this thesis. After finishing this work it is my hope that the reader will at least have an idea of the contradictions that are part of the Yasuni-ITT proposal and the politics surrounding it. I also hope to have shown how in times of transformation institutions of power hold on to their privileges. And, most of all, how behind good intentions a tragedy occurs: We are aware of the ecological crisis, feel the necessity to do something about it, yet seem to be unable to stop due to the pressures of capitalism and the basic functioning of states. The Waorani, in spite of all the misconceptions that exist regarding their way of life, can inform us on how to better relate with nature.

## **Structure**

This work is divided in two parts. The first chapter is about the Yasuni-ITT proposal itself and its place in (inter-)national politics. I will make the argument that from the Ecuadorian perspective, the proposal can best be seen as an acknowledgment that oil has worked against an inclusive and

sustainable economic growth in Ecuador. Yasuni-ITT is part of a wider paradigmatic change towards nature and the country's indigenous groups, which is hung up on the concept of *Sumak Kawsay*, Quichua for 'the good life'. Behind this discursive change however the pressure on nature and Ecuador's dependence on extraction has not diminished, leading the government to commit the same errors that in its discourse it claims to wish to avoid. After this I will analyze and criticize the use of carbon credits to 'sell' the Yasuni-ITT proposal to the world.

In chapter two I zoom in on the Waorani. A hunter-gatherer tribe living in and around Yasuni national park. I will give a description of how the shift from modernity to environmentalism, which can be seen as the shift from oil-extraction to the Yasuni-ITT proposal, has affected these people. I will argue that where before the Waorani were considered as a problem to be solved through modernization, now the idea has become prevalent that they are actually the solution to the problems of modernity. What both ideologies have in common is that the subjects on which they base their claims do not exist, yet are powerful enough to define a marginal group like the Waorani. In spite of these pressures the Waorani have maintained their a sense of cultural distinctness and I will claim that therefore they can best be seen as procurers than as hunter gatherers, using the opportunities provided by modernism and environmentalism for their own purposes. I will end this chapter writing on how I think that the way in which the Waorani I got to know during my time in the community of Yawepade related to their environments, can contribute to a 'western' way of doing so.

## Chapter 1: Yasuni-ITT

### Introduction

*“It is not we who lord it over things, it seems, but things which lord it over us. But that's only because some people make us of things to lord it over others. We shall only be freed by the forces of nature when we are free of human force. Our knowledge of nature must be supplemented with a knowledge of human society if we are to use our knowledge of nature in a human way.”*

-Bertolt Brecht, In Sokal and Bricmont, 1998-

Ecuador may seem like an unlikely candidate to forgo billions of dollars in oil revenue to preserve a national park. The country is ranked 83<sup>th</sup> on the Human Development Index<sup>4</sup>, and is, after decades of political and economic turmoil, eager to get its foot on the ladder of economic progress. Yet, when we take a closer look it is not that surprising that this particular 'big idea' (Yasuni-itt) should come from this small Andean country. The costs of oil-extraction have been high, both socially and environmentally.

With the Yasuni-itt proposal the Ecuadorian government attempts to move away from a neoliberal model of development and its narrow focus on material progress and individual wellbeing. It is an attempt to reestablish the importance of other values than those economic and to reassert the state's vital role as their keeper and promoter. The Yasuni-itt proposal is where this process has led to. Keeping oil underground is what happens when cultural and environmental values are incorporated in ideas on economic development. Yasuni represents, from my point of view, the shift humanity as a whole needs to make from an economic growth model based on infinite wants and needs, to one that incorporates the natural limits of the planet. While I will also be critical about the proposal I wish to stress that what Yasuni-itt attempts to do should be applauded, since it may prove vital for the wellbeing of humanity and its natural environment.

This does not mean that there is no economic rationale in favoring non-exploitation. There most certainly is, and, to be honest, the survival of Yasuni national park is dependent on it. If the government of Ecuador is not compensated by the international community, oil-drilling will take place. This contradiction is what makes the proposal interesting in my eyes: that some things change, while other things stay the same. The changes that the initiative proposes are linked to maintaining precisely those practices that are in need of change. Critiques of an overly economic view of the world go hand in hand by their affirmation

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/ECU.html>



The Yasuni-itt initiative is accompanied by other changes as well, most notably in the Ecuadorian government's political discourse. A new development model is being proposed where more respect is shown towards the indigenous inhabitants and, very much related to this, nature itself. In the name of *Sumak Kawsay*, the good life, Ecuador claims to seek not just an alternative model of development, but an alternative *to* development. But here also, what remains the same is the necessity of a state to answer to the needs of its population. In a representative democracy the measure in which governments do so, form the basis of their legitimacy. To obtain money to comply with the desires and needs of the population, the Ecuadorian government has had to make the same errors that in its discourse it claims to be eager to avoid. In this way it reenacts the tragedy of its history: the awareness of the necessity to change, and the (perceived?) inability to do so.

This tragedy does not only concern Ecuador, it is world wide. Everywhere around us the results are visible of an economic development model that is detrimental to both humans and the environment. What economists call the 'externalities' of unabated economic growth: Climate change, ecological disasters, the depletion of resources et cetera. These are collateral damage, the side effects of our way of life, not even important enough to incorporate them in standard models of economic development (Bauman, 2011).

It is so far unclear as to how we are to solve the collective problems that humanity faces today. The world's overwhelming complexity makes it unclear who is responsible and for what. Since it is, one is inclined to say by default, easier to give responsibility away than to take it, we see that solutions so far provided do exactly this. Case in point are the market solutions provided to combat for climate change. Redirecting responsibility towards the 'hidden hand' makes it possible that if things do not work out as planned to say that it the result of a 'market failure'.

However, it is not only ignorance that is the problem. We also need to look at who benefits and who loses. The complexity of the world should not serve as an excuse for those in privileged political and economic positions to preserve their status quo. If we take seriously Brecht's remark at the start of this introduction, than we need to look at how during times of transition institutions of power hold on to their position (Bond, 2012).

In this chapter I will set out to describe how we can understand the Yasuni-itt proposal. I will claim, that basically Yasuni-itt it is an acknowledgment of a necessity to change, but that change is hard to accomplish. I will start by describing the proposal itself, just to make clear what exactly we are dealing with. After this I will focus on what it is that the proposal attempts to change by briefly describing Ecuador's troubled relationship with oil-extraction. This is the context in which the Yasuni proposal gained legitimacy and popularity. It is also what gave rise to a left wing government that promises to do things differently. The third part of this chapter looks at how the

government of Rafael Correa formulates its ideals by looking at the discourse used in the new constitution and national development plan. However, as I said, the changes the government proposes are hard to accomplish. This is the subject of part four, where I will look at how apparently the government cannot escape the trappings of development through extraction. In the last part of this chapter I return to the ITT proposal and argue that because of its financial structure it does not solve the problems Ecuador and the world are facing.

### **The proposal**

Yasuni-itt proposal suggests leaving 846 million barrels of oil, one fifth of the country's total reserves, underground indefinitely. In this way ensuring the survival of three amazonian tribes living in isolation within Yasuni; the protection of the parks incredibly high biodiversity; and preventing the emission of 407 million tons of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>). In return Ecuador asks from the international community that a compensation be paid for lost revenues. This compensation will be transferred to a United Nations fund over the course of 13 years. The total amount of money Ecuador asks is roughly two-third of what it would have gained if it were to exploit the petrol. Including interests and money gained from avoided deforestation this will according to Vallejo (2012) amount to 8,245 billion dollars.

This is one of the two options of the Yasuni-itt proposal, the so called option A. Under option B the oil is exploited. The total income hereof is estimated by the national oil company, Petro-Ecuador, to be roughly 13 billion dollars. The environmental impact of this operation would be quite large due to the infrastructure that has to be laid down. The three main constructions are the exploitation sites themselves, about 200 km of oil pipelines towards the city of Coca, and an electrical plant. The latter is needed because the oil has a low API (14.7°), meaning that it is thick and needs to be heated before transportation. Because of the large-scale building that has to take place it is estimated to take at least five years before a start can be made with the exploitation of oil. The construction of a road to this remote part of the jungle is not part of option B. Fear of further colonization and an advancing agricultural frontier in the amazon has led to the decision to use helicopters and planes to connect the oil-sites with the rest of the country (Vallejo et al, 2012).

Option A and option B have always existed side by side. This is why for a long time many people involved were - and most still are- skeptical of how serious the Correa administration takes the proposal. By now however, the state has invested large amounts of money in the promotion of the proposal<sup>5</sup>. It has also been presented at the COP15 climate summit in Copenhagen, the UN

---

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.elcomercio.com/sociedad/Cerca-millones-gastaron-Iniciativa-ITT\\_0\\_616138535.html](http://www.elcomercio.com/sociedad/Cerca-millones-gastaron-Iniciativa-ITT_0_616138535.html)

general assembly and more recently at the RIO+20 summit on sustainability.

Money is obtained by selling Certificados de Garantia Yasuni (CGY). These are carbon credits that everyone can obtain by giving a donation to the fund. If Ecuador is to exploit the oil in Yasuni it is required to pay back the amount of money received from its contributors, but only in the case that the sum paid is larger than 50.000 dollars (Martin, 2011). While private donations are sought as well the bulk of the money has to come from states. Ecuador has made a list identifying which Annex 1 countries<sup>6</sup> should contribute and specified according to their BNP how much they ought to pay.

The mechanism that Ecuadorian financial technicians have developed to obtain money from the international community, are the above mentioned CGY's. One CGY is the equivalent of one ton of CO<sub>2</sub> (Rival, 2009). The aim is that these become tradable at international (voluntary) carbon markets. Especially the European Union Emission Trading Scheme (ETS). Much in the same way as happens now, these carbon credits can be bought and sold in order to compensate for the emission of carbon dioxide, as was established in the Kyoto protocol.

The novelty of the CGY's is that they compensate CO<sub>2</sub> before it is emitted to the atmosphere. What is being paid for is to prevent damage, not to repair damages already made. The CGY's then are to persuade the international community to become involved, since there is an economic benefit in it for them as well. Yet part of the problem of obtaining the necessary funds that Ecuador now experiences stems from the CGY's discrepancy with the international norms and policies surrounding climate change (Martin, 2011). While numerous efforts have been made, they have so far been unsuccessful in implementing this new type of carbon credits in international protocols. Due to this the fund has only obtained 120 million dollars so far.

The money the government obtains through the selling of CGY's cannot be used to balance state budgets or in other ways become part of structural finances of the state. This, of course differs from the way in which oil-money could be used. Instead Ecuador is to invest directly in projects that promote sustainability and environmental protection. The Yasuni Steering Fund Committee is responsible for making the decisions on the allocation of received money. In the committee there are three representatives from the Ecuadorian government, one representative of civil society and two representatives of contributing countries (Ibid.). The Ecuadorian government has the final say in what projects it approves. However it was no small feat to achieve this<sup>7</sup>. The focal points of

<sup>6</sup> For the full list of Annex 1 countries as established under the Kyoto protocol see: [http://unfccc.int/parties\\_and\\_observers/parties/annex\\_1/items/2774.php](http://unfccc.int/parties_and_observers/parties/annex_1/items/2774.php)

<sup>7</sup> The former Yasuni Steering Committee committee was disapproved by Correa. He ordered his diplomats to renegotiate voting power. In the previous make-up the international community had more weight in making

investment aim at developing a sustainable energy production, social development in Yasuni (in the form of agriculture and eco-tourism), scientific research, and at preventing deforestation and promoting reforestation (Vallejo, 2012).

## **Dependency**

*Where opulence is most opulent, there - in this land of contradictions - misery is most miserable.*  
*-Eduardo Galeano-*

In the introduction I claimed that the Yasuni initiative should be seen as an acknowledgment that things have gone wrong in the past. For Ecuador the tragedy has four parts: (1) a peripheral (dependent) position in the world system, sustained by (2) its status as a primary export producer, especially oil, making (3) made its economy vulnerable, while having severe social and environmental impacts (4).

According to Cardoso (1979) a dependent relation exists when “the accumulation and expansion of capital cannot find its essential dynamic component inside the system”. For Latin America, ever since its colonization, this meant being an exporter of primary commodities: the infamous silver mines of Potosí in Bolivia, the gold mines of Brazil's Ouro Preto, the sugar and rubber plantations, the banana industry and so on. Capital came from Europe or the USA, which was also where the surpluses eventually headed. Labor power, which until far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century took the form of slavery, was exploited by the local elites leaving barely anything for the workers themselves. Economic activity in Latin-America chiefly came down to serving development *elsewhere*. Trade was controlled by Europeans who used the gold and silver they sacked to finance its industrialization. Europe's factories in turn refined Latin-America's primary commodities into consumer ready products, which it could sell back to the continent (Galeano 1971, Mangan, 2005).

Plentiful as the continents' resources have always been, they have not, and could not lead to sustainable economic growth and prosperity. Its embeddedness in a relation of dependence prevented this. As Galeano writes “The existence of wealthy capitalist centers in our own time cannot be explained without the existence of poor and subjected outskirts: the one and the other make up the same system” (Galeano, 1971:30). In this way the supposed development or modernization of Latin America meant the “development of inequality” (Galeano, 1971:3), both internally and international. Up until this day many Latin American countries still depend heavily

---

decisions on where the funds' capital would be spent on.

on the export on a few primary commodities.

Ecuador is no exception to this. Throughout its history primary commodities like cacao, bananas, rubber and oil have been the spearhead of the national economy (Acosta, 2009). Because of its focus on the export of agricultural products and the availability of very cheap indigenous labor power the development of industry in Ecuador has traditionally been weak (Uquillas, 2006). Telling also is that while Ecuador has been exporting oil for a bit more than a century it does not even have a refinery of its own.

Ever since the discovery of oil-deposits the Ecuadorian economy has been dependent on the production and export of petrol. Ecuador began extracting oil on a large-scale in 1972, shortly after which it joined OPEC. Production rapidly increased from 791.000 barrels in 1972 to its peak of 185 million barrels in 2008. In recent years production has slowly declined. The value of Ecuadorian exports multiplied thirteen times in the seventies and its average BNP grew by 50 percent (Acosta, 2011). Profiting from the oil-boom of the 70's the military dictatorship of the time invested heavily in social development (Yashar, 2005). However instead of diminishing dependency, the increasing weight of petrol in exports caused Ecuador to become all the more vulnerable to price fluctuations on the notoriously volatile oil market.

Initially petroleum exports stimulated economic growth and social improvement, but in the end oil-exploitation could not live up to its promises (Sawyer 2004; Acosta and Martinez 2010). Being a member of OPEC one could even say that Ecuador took part in digging its own grave. During the rapid increase in oil prices in the seventies and eighties OPEC members started pouring so much money into banks that interest rates dropped sharply (Graeber, 2012). Banks looking for ways to invest their money saw in Ecuador an attractive target for lending (Acosta, 2011). Seduced by the low interest rates, the Ecuadorian government borrowed massively. The country's foreign debt grew in ten years by a factor of 22. In the beginning of the 1980's Ecuador total debt ended up being the highest per capita of the whole Latin American continent (Sawyer, 2004). Eventually interest rates rose again. In 1986 this led to the astonishing situation where Ecuador had to use all its gains from the export of petrol to pay the interests of its foreign debt (Acosta, 2011).

Burdened by debt Ecuador was forced by the IMF to 'restructure' its finances. The IMF needed to make sure Ecuador paid back its loans in order to maintain international financial stability. The IMF serves as the world's debt enforcer<sup>8</sup>, but has often turned a blind eye to the social consequences in the countries where its structural adjustment packages were applied. In Ecuador

---

<sup>8</sup> David Graeber (2011) describes the IMF somewhat jokingly as "the high finance equivalent of the guys that come to break your legs".

neoliberalism translated into “a cluster of government policies that aimed to privatize, liberalize, and deregulate the national economy” (Sawyer, 2004:7). Cuts were made in health care, education amongst other sectors (Larrea in Fontaine, 2006). Generally speaking the role of the state diminished and changed in character. No longer was the state the primary agent responsible for social development. Instead, it became a ‘manager’ with the purpose of increasing foreign investment and intensifying export production (Sawyer, 2004).

All in all, the Ecuadorian economy has grown only 0.7 percent annually since it became an oil exporter. During its neoliberal adjustment period in the eighties and nineties the economy did not grow at all (Vallejo et al., 2012). The result of extracting billions of dollars worth of oil has been a poverty rate of 42 percent in 2009 and a high degree of inequality (CEPAL, 2011).

Renowned Ecuadorian economists like Carlos Larrea, Teodoro Bustamante and Alberto Acosta all come to the conclusion that dependency on oil has been detrimental for Ecuadorian society. Bustamante said that “Ecuador is an addict to petrol, to extractivism in general. Our dependency on natural resources is what creates our other dependencies and this makes us vulnerable”. Acosta published a book on the Ecuadorian economy titled “the resource curse”. Larrea comes to the conclusion that “it seems that the oil-export has been more of an obstacle, than a good way to develop, because it inhibits the development of a more diverse economy, it does not generate sufficient employment and it deepens social inequality” (Larrea, 2006:). In spite of this dependency on oil endures. In 2008, 70% of Ecuadorian exports still consisted of oil (Cristian Espinosa).

The social and environmental impacts of oil production in the Amazon have been severe. If Ecuador as a country is exploited worldwide, than its indigenous population (alongside nature) can be characterized, as Galeano does, as “the exploited of the exploited.” Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Amazonian tribes had been relatively free from processes of colonization, but after discovering the black gold a process of internal colonization started. It was especially during the oil-boom that the Shuar, Quichua, Achuar, Waorani, Siona, Secoya, Cofan and Zaparas, were forced to step out of the shade of the canopy “into the harsh light of nationhood” (Bhabha, 1994:IX). I will write in the next chapter on what happened to the Waorani during this time. For now it suffices to say that their fate has, sadly, not been very different than that of the other groups. The problems of racism, exclusion and a lack of rights ensured their almost total exclusion from the benefits of the wealth taken from their (former) territories (Gerlach, 2003).

The place where the most precious resource of the country is found is also the most destitute. According to *Accion Ecologica* activist Cecilia Cherez, “While they are the center of

Ecuador's' wealth, the provinces of Sucumbios, Napo, Pastaza and Orellana are the poorest of the country, and have the highest incidence of cancer and other diseases.” In 2006, the percentage of people in the Amazon living in poverty was 66.8%, compared to 49.1% nationwide. Cancer rates are at 31% in the Amazon, whereas nationally they are at 12.3%. A study made by Sebastian and Hurtig (2001), suggests that the incidence of cancer is related to oil-exploitation.

If you ask any Ecuadorian about the environmental impacts of oil production she or he will always refer to the spills related to Chevron-Texaco's activities in Orellana between 1972 and 1992. Because of the social and physical distance from the rest of the world this environmental disaster went by unnoticed for a long time. It was not until Ecuadorian environmental activists started a lawsuit in name of 30.000 (mostly indigenous) inhabitants of the region, that the magnitude of the spills and contamination became clear. The estimated amount of oil spilled by chevron-Texaco is 17 billion gallons of petrol<sup>9</sup>. Throughout Texaco's the zone of operations in Lagro Agrio, pools filled with petrol are still found (Manuela Ima). Recently an Ecuadorian court ordered the company to pay an indemnification of eighteen billion dollars. Chevron-Texaco however, has not accepted the verdict claiming that the ruling of the court is “a clear example of the politicization and corruption of the justice system in Ecuador”<sup>10</sup>. This particular lawsuit, started in 1993, still has not come to a close. It probably never will, because Chevron has no incentive to pay since it no longer operates in Ecuador. This particular case did much to deteriorate petrol's image even further. The idea that a foreign company brings home billions of dollars in profits while the inhabitants of the region are stuck knee-deep and disease ridden in the oily mud it left behind. But it is not only Texaco that is responsible for the environmental damage caused by exploitation. The Ecuadorian government had been very generous handing out environmental permits even for exploitation-technologies that have long been illegal in other countries (Sawyer, 2004).

The cleaning up of spills is still going on. Along the road that leads to the Yasuni national park I counted seven oil spills, and only at one place were laborers active cleaning up. The water contamination that is caused by this, poses a serious health threat. Rivers form an important part of daily life for many people living in the Amazon. Pepe Acocha told me that, “fish die out; people cannot go swimming; they cannot wash their clothes or drink the water”. Looking me straight in the eye he asked me “is this development?”

The answer to Pepe's question can only be no. The Yasuni-itt initiative, I believe, can be seen as a part of the response.

---

<sup>9</sup>

From the documentary 'Crude: the real price of oil.' See: <http://www.crudethemovie.com/>

<sup>10</sup>

<http://chevrontoxico.com/>

To sum up, I have argued that Yasuni-itt comes forth from the recognition that oil has increased Ecuador's dependency, that it has not led to economic growth and that it has been very damaging environmentally and socially –especially for its indigenous population. The Yasuni-itt initiative, then, is a way of saying that the time has come to do things differently.

In the following paragraphs I will try to explain just how the government proposes to do so. I will start out by describing the most important changes in the new constitution. After this I will focus on the new development paradigm the government proposes. This is part of a further elaboration of the argument made in the beginning of this chapter. Namely the awareness of the tragedy that is occurring: The acknowledgement of the necessity to change.

### **New government, New constitution, New Paradigm,**

*“Correa is the best president we ever had, but then again this being Ecuador, it does not say much”*  
-Amador Jorge Lopez-

I mentioned in the introduction that the Yasuni-itt initiative has been accompanied by other changes as well. It is part of a broader acknowledgment made by the government that historically grave errors have been made regarding ideas on development and the marginal position that was occupied by the indigenous population and nature. Because of his success in channeling the general discontentment among the Ecuadorian population, Rafael Correa made a successful bid to power.

Graduated in economics, Correa is going to be the first Ecuadorian president in eighty years to finish his first term. His approval ratings have remained high during his presidency and he is likely to be voted into office in the coming elections of January 2013. He is a charismatic personage and despite my reservations, I have to admit, that seeing him speak in public I too was taken with his charm and discursive qualities. Besides his charisma his popularity stems from the fulfillment of the promises made when he ran for first term: Rewriting the constitution, rejecting any free trade agreement with Washington, the cancellation of payment of 'illegitimate' foreign debt and the closure of a US military base in the city of Manta (Fuentes, 2012).

### **New constitution**

Shortly after being elected Correa wrote out elections for a constituent assembly that would write the new constitution. After several months of writing this document became vigilant on September 28, 2008. According to Alberto Acosta, who presided the assembly, this constitution is “the most



Ecuadorian of all times” (in Harnecker 2011:244) It is estimated that 150.000 people were directly or indirectly involved in its formation. After its completion it was approved in a referendum by 65% of the population (Ibid).

In its preamble<sup>11</sup> we can read that “ We, women and men [...] celebrating nature, the *Pacha Mama* of which we are a part and which is vital to our existence [...] hereby decide to build a new form of public coexistence, in diversity and in harmony with nature, to achieve the good way of living, the *Sumak Kawsay*.” What is striking in this text is the prominent place occupied by the indigenous peoples, nature and the relation between these two. Living in harmony with each other and nature is the recipe for obtaining the *Sumak Kawsay*, the good life. The use of Quichua words like *Pacha Mama* and *Sumak Kawsay*, shows a shift in the discourse used by the nation to identify itself. The indigenous populace, long excluded from the national imaginary, now occupies a prominent place in the nations defining document.

The extension of rights to the indigenous population is elaborated further in Article 1, which states that Ecuador is an “intercultural and pluri-national” state. In article 3 we can read that one of the primordial duties of the state is to promote “national unity in diversity”. Furthermore indigenous territory is considered “inalienable, untradeable and indivisible” (ART. 57.4). The state maintains the monopoly to extract subsoil resources, but is required to give “free, prior informed consultation within a reasonable period of time, on the plans and programs for prospecting, producing and marketing nonrenewable resources on their lands” (ART. 57.7). The state also pledges to conserve and promote the indigenous practices in the management of biodiversity and their natural environment

Secondly nature occupies a prominent place in the new constitution. Ecuador positions itself as a green nation by linking 'the good way of living' with the establishment of a harmonious relation with nature. Ecuador was the first country to officially recognize nature as a subject of rights. On the instigation of Alberto Acosta, who also plays a prominent role in the Yasuni-itt initiative, and other ecological and indigenous activists, article 71 was adopted. It says “Nature, or *Pacha Mama*, where life is reproduced and realized, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes”.

Under the new constitution it becomes possible for “all persons, communities, peoples and nations to call upon public authorities to enforce the rights of nature”. Everyone can start a court case on the basis of a breach of the rights of nature. Furthermore this can be done by an inverted burden of proof in the determination of environmental damages. This means that it is the accused

---

<sup>11</sup> For a complete version in English of the Ecuadorian constitution see: <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Ecuador/english08.html>

that has to prove that there is no pollution, lowering the opportunity costs to sue.<sup>12</sup> (Echevarria, 2010). Not surprisingly, the constitution of Ecuador is seen as one of the most progressive and green constitutions in the world.

### **National Development Plan**

The constitution provides the legal framework in which a new model of development was thought out that considers pluri-nationality and nature in a new light.

This was worked out in more detail in the *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2009-2013*<sup>13</sup> (PND), which is the central document guiding government policy. The PND claims nothing less than a change of paradigm when it comes to development and the role of nature in achieving this. The PND has as one of its main objectives to “guarantee the rights of nature and to promote a healthy and sustainable environment”. The document observes that “for too long nature has been seen solely as a resource, subjected to human exploitation; valorized only from an economical perspective” (PND, 77). It acknowledges the importance of “the satisfaction of human necessities and the expansion of human capacities”, but holds that this should be “sustainable, not through a mortgage of the future”. The government seeks to incorporate the vision of economic benefits derived from nature with awareness of the environmental consequences. It does so by taking the responsibility “mitigate” these, and by “responding with new alternatives”, like Yasuni-ITT. The proposal is mentioned as the ‘central axis’ of policy towards sustainability

The paradigmatic shift the PND suggests, is a turn away from neoliberalism. The PND starts out by stating that “the dominant concept of ‘development’ has entered a profound crisis, not only from a colonial perspective, from which this model originates, but above all from the results it has had in the world. The current multidimensional global crisis, the document claims, shows the impossibility of staying on the current path: “extractivist and destructive of the south, with unequal power and trade relations between south and north, whose unlimited consumption will lead the entire planet to its collapse, because it surpasses its capacity to regenerate” (Ibid:17). Echoing the conclusion of most post-colonial studies, the document rejects the vision that the developed nations are seen as ‘the model to follow’ and that all who lag behind are considered “savage, primitive, retrograde, pre-modern (Ibid.)”

The PND proposes a moratorium on the use of the word ‘development’ and to replace it with

---

<sup>12</sup>

This is not to be confused with taking responsibility for environmental damage. Here the principle of 'innocent until proven otherwise', still stands

<sup>13</sup>

For a full text version of this document in English see: <http://plan2009.senplades.gob.ec/web/en/presentation>

the concept of 'Buen Vivir' or 'Sumak Kawsay', meaning 'the good' or 'the full life'. According to the PND it is the central contribution of "the indigenous people" to the new model. It goes on saying "the notion of development is absent in the cosmovision of these people, because the future is behind them. It is what we cannot know. The past we have in front of us, we see it, we know it, it formed us and with it we walk through life" (Ibid:18). It is this connection with the past that underlies an idea of connectivity with other humans and nature, "it unites us with our ancestors, our community and nature. We share our lives with all these beings that have life and are part of us. From here damaging nature is tantamount to damaging ourselves"(Ibid). To obtain *Sumak Kawsay* it is necessary "to reach total harmony with the community and the cosmos (Ibid.)."

Sounds beautiful, does it not? However, as we will see later on, when things sound too good to be true, they usually are. Behind the discourse of *Sumak Kawsay* hide some ugly truths. But what is interesting about this type of discourse is that it works in adding moral persuasion to the preservation of nature. The fabrication of an 'indigenous cosmovision' which is 'harmonious' helps Correa's government to present itself as green and progressive, making it easier to persuade a western public to donate its money to save Yasuni. I do not wish to sound overly cynical, but it seems hard to deny that the type of discourse that the government is using is not very convenient for an environmental scheme like Yasuni-itt.

The most important message in the PND as well as in the constitution is the acknowledgment, implicit and explicit that things have gone wrong and need to change. The call for change is answered by revaluing nature itself, its indigenous people and the knowledge they (supposedly) have in relation to the environment. Both documents can also be seen as a reassertion of the state itself: An expressed wish to move away from dependency and to follow its own path towards wellbeing.

### **Rebuilding the state**

From the start the self-proclaimed 'government of the civil revolution' set out to rebuild the state, hollowed out after two decades of neo-liberal reforms. The state budget has risen from 12,2 billion dollars in 2007, to 24,9 billion dollars in 2011. Government expenditures taken as a percentage of GDP have risen from 23.55% in 2006 to 38.3% in 2011<sup>14</sup>. Spending on social welfare rose from 0.7% to 1.8% of GDP. According to economist Jayati Ghosh the most notable rise in expenditure has occurred in the fields of health care and education with a respective rise in budgets with 129%

---

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.economywatch.com/economic-statistics/Ecuador/General\\_Government\\_Total\\_Expenditure\\_Percentage\\_GDP/](http://www.economywatch.com/economic-statistics/Ecuador/General_Government_Total_Expenditure_Percentage_GDP/)

and 300%<sup>15</sup>. The creation of a so called *bono solidario*, a form of direct financial aid for the poor and vulnerable, has helped reduce poverty rates from 37.6% in 2006 to 28.6% in 2011 (Ray and Kozameh, 2012). This significant reduction in poverty is all the more admirable if we consider that the world suffered in those same years from the biggest economic crisis since the '30's. Rates for inequality, the GINI index have dropped as well, from .54 to .47 (Ibid.). These numbers are telling of the government's aspirations and its success to develop a state that is "the new warden of the economy", and an economy "which is social and solidary"<sup>16</sup>.

Increasing government expenditure has to be accompanied by increasing revenue. This is accomplished by the setting up of new tax regimes, in particular for extractive industries such as mining and petrol. Taxes on profits for transnational oil corporations have risen from 13% to 87%<sup>17</sup>, and foreign mining companies are by law required to hand over at least 51% of profits made.

It should be mentioned that it is quite something for a small country like Ecuador to tell oil corporations that they have to pay more taxes. Ecuador is dependent on their technological know-how and capacity to invest. The problem Correa's government tackled is usually called the 'race to the bottom': the way in which multinationals use their ability to mobilize capital to settle in countries where rules (Taxes, environmental regulations, labor conditions) are less stringent. In short, where higher profits can be made. Yet, Ecuador was successful. Petrol companies have not left the country because of the increased taxes. "Only a small percentage did, the others saw that there was still enough profit to be made" (Gabriela Ruales). The companies (seven in total) that left represented 14% of the total production of oil (Martin, 2011).

### **New extractivism**

The government is in need of revenues with which to finance its social development programs. These programs are the basis of the government's legitimacy as well as the source of their popularity. The drive for revenue is accompanied by a similar drive to extract resources that under the new tax regimes have become increasingly profitable. In the coming paragraphs I will take a closer look at oil extraction and the development of large-scale copper mining. These two activities are crucial in balancing state budgets.

The argument I will make is that in spite of changes in government discourse, there has been

---

<sup>15</sup> [http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=767&Itemid=74&jumival=7866](http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=767&Itemid=74&jumival=7866)

<sup>16</sup> Pedro Paez, minister of economic affairs.

<sup>17</sup> Tax on windfall profits has even increased to 99%.

an overall increase in dependency on natural resources. Furthermore this has led to a dynamic that is similar to the behavior regarding the indigenous people and nature that the government criticized so heavily in the PND. Indigenous rights are trampled on and development still takes place by the exploitation of nature. This, I suppose is the tragedy of the current regime. It knows what is wrong yet in having to respond to its populations needs it has do things that cannot be considered in line with their own ideals. It even results in behavior that is simply unethical.

The drive for the extraction of valuable natural resources is the other side of the coin of governmental policy. Better put, extraction *is* the coin with which the government pays for its 'civil revolution'. Telling is Correa's statement that " we cannot sit as a beggar on a mountain of gold." The problem is that the state in its new active role in commercial activities surrounding extraction, "has to follow the rules and functions of productive processes oriented to enhance competition and increase profits to classic criteria of efficiency, including the externalization of social and environmental impact (Gudynas, 2010:). This causes the government to step into the pitfall it claimed to be so eager to avoid, the neoliberal error of seeing nature "solely as a resource, subjected to human exploitation and valued only from an economical perspective"(PND:77) and the perception of indigenous as an obstacle to development.

### **Oil and *Campo Armadillo***

In the area of oil production the government has planned the opening of 21 new petrol blocks in the south-east of the country. Three of these have already been granted<sup>18</sup>. Block 31, which overlaps both Waorani legal territory and Yasuni National Park<sup>19</sup>, will see exploitation from the second half of 2012. Ecuador's production has been declining in recent years and it is interesting to see how, coupled with high oil prices, this leads to the opening of camps that are considered 'marginal'. Manuela, president of the Waorani female organization (AMWAE) told me that "What we see is that they are going to get out the last drop of oil, until there is nothing left: no petrol and no forest."

One of these marginal camps is called the *Campo Armadillo*. The attempt to exploit oil here shows the limits of the government's adherence to natural preservation and the rights of indigenous tribes living in 'voluntary isolation'. It becomes clear that while the government has become more directly involved in the process and benefits of extracting natural resources, this does not necessarily mean that they do a better job than private companies. I will reproduce this story as it was told to me by Eduardo Pichilingue Ramos.

---

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.vistazo.com/webpages/pais/?id=19839>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.eluniverso.com/2011/12/21/1/1356/ecuador-perforara-2012-campo-apaiko-bloque-31.html>. And :

When I met Eduardo I was actually hoping to join a tour with Moipa, the president of the Waorani federation of the province of Pastaza. This tour would pass several Waorani communities to check on the general wellbeing of the people living here, and in particular the quality of schools. Or that was the idea. Moipa had actually organized the tour because he was trying to get a foothold for the amplification of the current Waorani territory. Present at this tour were the minister of education, the minister of justice, some other high government officials and a couple of crews from the national press. This quite impressive presence of political VIP's is telling of the importance of the region due to its deposits of oil.

I was told I could not come along for 'security reasons'. Initially I was disappointed yet thanks to this I met Eduardo, who turned out to be a more than valuable source of information. The tour itself, as I found out later, was a disaster. All but one of the communities allowed the group to enter. Eduardo had also been hoping to tag along on the tour, but as it turned out he was not allowed either. Since we both unexpectedly had the day off, we spent the rest of the day conversing about almost anything having to do with politics, oil and the indigenous people of Ecuador.

Eduardo is a former employee of the ministry of the environment. He stood at the head of a research group investigating the presence of the '*pueblos aislados*', groups of people who live in so called 'voluntary isolation'. He had worked in 2007 on the establishment of the Waorani territory, negotiating directly with representatives of oil-companies, the Waorani and environmental NGO's. I later found out through Manuela, the president of the AMWAE, that Eduardo had played an important role in creating an 'intangible zone', which is exempt from any form of extractive activities. She told me that "if it was not for him the oil companies would have been there for a long time already and we would have nowhere to live". This experience turned out to be formative for Eduardo and ever since he has maintained close contacts with the different Waorani social movements. He helps them out with their bureaucratic ordeals, such as the legalization of their territory, obtaining funds and so on.

Eduardo was fired in February 2010 after going public with a report establishing the presence of indigenous tribes (Taromenane and Taegeri) in Campo Armadillo. Campo armadillo is what is called a 'marginal oil-camp', meaning that it is estimated to produce less than 1% of the total national production, which stands at 460.000 barrils a day. The site is located in the center amazon, just south of Yasuni national park.

Under ILO convention 169, any type of disturbance to indigenous people in isolation is prohibited. Oil extraction is off course such a disturbance. According to Eduardo, "Campo Armadillo is the area where we have encountered most evidence of the presence of isolated tribes. There were three loggers killed in 2009 and we had found traces of settlements. Also Waorani living in the area told

me they sometimes traded with the Taegeri”. The Taegeri were formed by a Waorani named Taega who wished to avoid catholic missionaries. Trade with the Taegeri was often mentioned when I spoke with Waorani. This usually takes form of the Taegeri leaving stuff at certain known sites in the forest, like hammocks or spears. In turn the Waorani give machetes, something the Taegeri are unable to make. Before Eduardo informed me about the importance of establishing the presence of isolated tribes I did not understand why they mentioned trade so often. As it turned out the Waorani, aware of the ILO convention, use it as a means to fend of extractive activities close to their communities.

Eduardo went on, “evidence abounded, so that was the conclusion of my report: We cannot go into this area and drill for oil. Yet after sending the report to my supervisor (this would be the minister of the environment, Marcela Aguiñaga Vallejo), she refused to give me a stamp that makes it official that she received my report. After waiting for a while I started sending her emails, calling her in her office, but she just ignored me. She did this because when Correa came to power, he restructured the organization of the ministries. He assigned five ministries as being of 'strategic importance'. Amongst these are the ministry of the environment and the ministry of non-renewable resources - the latter are the bosses of the national public oil company Petro-Ecuador.” At first people applauded this move. It was the first time that the ministry of the environment gained such prominence at national level. But it is a deception of the public. The reason that the ministry of the environment is made of 'strategic importance' was to make them work closer with the ministry of non-renewable resources. They now have weekly meetings, which makes it far easier for Petro-Ecuador to get the environmental permits that it needs to start drilling. It has little to do with environmental protection or anything like that.”

Continuing, “so if the ministry of the environment would have accepted the report she would by law have had to prohibit extractive activities, and this was not the plan. What worries me most is that we are talking here about a marginal camp. There is at this moment no infrastructure whatsoever and the amount of production will be only 3000 barrels a day at its peak. What I mean to say is, if even here these rights are not respected than what will happen to the rest of the isolated tribes, like those in Yasuni, where there is much more oil than in *Campo Armadillo*?”

After pondering it for a while Eduardo came to the conclusion that he was “working for the enemy”. He decided to go to the press. “when I send out the press release to the international media it got a lot of attention. I was even called by CNN and FOX. Funny enough though, in Ecuador they only found out what happened after I gave an interview to a local station here in Coca”. Shortly after this aired he was fired. “By the president himself”, he said with a grin on his face.

The public release of Eduardo’s report was successful in detaining the development of



extractive activities. So far no drilling concessions have been granted for the Armadillo camp, but neither have plans been officially canceled. Up until now the government sees Campo Armadillo as terra nullius and has not officially acknowledged the presence of the isolated indigenous tribes in the area, making its future unsure.

### **Mining in the *Cordillera del Condor***

Besides the income rise derived from oil-exploitation, a new important source of revenues will come from mining. Ecuador has planned the opening of five large mines. Most of which are situated in the amazon and within, or near indigenous territory. In the case of *Campo Armadillo* the government was, at least for a while, able to pretend that the indigenous people did not exist. In the case of the mine in the Cordillera del Condor, it could not and had to resort to other measures to justify exploitation.

The signing of the 1.5 billion dollar contract for the building of the Cordillera del Condor mine took place on the fifth of March 2012 in the Chinese embassy. The government came to an agreement with Ecuacorriente, a mining company owned by the Chinese CRCC-Tongguan, one of the largest construction companies in China and the world. The company will construct a large scale open air copper mine. The president of the Ecuadorian mining federation, Yepez Davilá referred to the contract as 'historical': "This opens many new future possibilities, above all the strong intention that in the coming years Ecuador situates itself as a mining country of great magnitude<sup>20</sup>". Under the new mining law Ecuacorriente is required to pay 52% taxes on profits.

The government expects that the building of 'mega-mines' will be accompanied by an investment of 5,4 billion dollars and create new jobs for the population. Yet many wonder if it will work out this way. Environmental activists, indigenous organizations and other critics like Alberto Acosta, called into question how much money mining will actually yield the country. They point out that money needed for investment will be borrowed from China against relatively high interest rates. Also, that it is unclear just how much copper there actually is, since estimations are done by the mining companies themselves "who are thinking mostly about their stockholders" (Acosta). And thirdly how much fulfilling the constitutional obligation to repair the damages done to nature will cost, and who will pay for this.

To give voice to these and other criticisms of government policies the country largest indigenous organization CONAIE, organized a march, called the march for water and life. It started the 8<sup>th</sup> of march in the *Cordillera del Condor* and arrived two weeks later in the Ecuadorian capital

---

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.vistazo.com/webpages/pais/?id=19231>



Quito. For the CONAIE the most important reason to take to the streets was that that the government had not consulted the indigenous Shuar, living in the area. Pepe Acocha, the vice president of the CONAIE told me in an interview that “they do not respect our territorial rights; there was no previous consultation of the people living there, let alone did they consent. We want the government to respect the constitution, the rights of nature and of the indigenous people. Before we marched to change the constitution, now we march to see that the laws that have been written are applied.”

Correa reacted to the march for water and life by announcing his own counter-march. This march 'in defense of democracy' would take place the same day the CONAIE reached Quito. As happened before in Correa's politics he denounced the indigenous march as being the work of foreigners “who do not even know where Ecuador is on the map, yet think they have the right to tell us about human rights”. The march was according to him a plot to destabilize the government and under the influence of the right oligarchy. Cutting the grass underneath the CONAIE's feet and tapping into his 'green' image, he announced that “everyday should be 'nature-day’” and that mining would help the country develop. Later he even said that environmentally speaking the *Cordillera del Condor* would be “better than it is now<sup>21</sup>.” His remarks echoed through the public. People there told me that the CONAIE refused to dialogue and were prone to violence. Correa concluded that for every person that would be marching against the government he would get out ten to march in his favor.

During two weeks Ecuador was under the spell of the march for “water and life” and the counter-march in “defense of democracy”. With the conflict building up the limits of the government's adherence to indigenous rights and rights of nature became apparent. Government discourse took a 180 degree turn. In a propaganda video which aired on national television, the government denounced the organizers as being corrupt opportunists, the indigenous leaders as 'criminals'<sup>22</sup> and the ecologists as 'infantile' and wanting to go 'back to the stone age'. Near the end of the video the voice over claims that, “the protesters are against the development of the *Patria* (fatherland)”.

Note here that the indigenous people themselves are not targeted as a group, only their political organization. Correa would be foolish to do otherwise. Instead there was nothing less than a race to see how much indigenous people would turn up for each march: “let's see how many they

---

<sup>21</sup>

In one of his weekly talks on television Correa explained that the water reservoir the size of 200 Ha, which serves as a waste basin, can become a beautiful lake.

<sup>22</sup>

There are at this moment 197 running investigations on activists and social movement leaders .

(the CONAIE) are able to mobilize and how much *indigenas* we will mobilize” (Correa). Correa's confidence stems from the money the government has invested in rural areas, which is where most indigenous people live. Especially regarding health care. He also expected that the promise to give Zamora, where the mine will be located, 100 million dollars for the building of schools, hospitals and infrastructure, would tip the balance in his favor.

I found it intriguing that the success of the demonstration was measured by the amount of indigenous each organization was able to mobilize. At first it made me think that, indeed, the indigenous population has come a long way. Yet, mere recognition is not where the indigenous struggles stop, as we could also tell from Pepe Accocha's remarks. The situation that has arisen in Ecuador is what Zibechi (2011) calls a state of reverse hegemony: A dominated class, in this case the indigenous people, become the moral compass of society, telling right from wrong, yet without having any real political power.

The day of the march itself Correa was able to put out far more people than the CONAIE, but not more indigenous. However, during the ten years I have visited Ecuador and the numerous marches I attended, I had never seen so many indigenous flags during a pro-government march. The material benefits the government has allocated to indigenous communities have had an effect.

### **Addicted to development**

So in spite of appearances it can be said that Ecuador is still dependent on primary resources. In the near future it will intensify this dependency through copper mining. As Marrero (2012) writes, “basically, the leftist revolution runs on oil”. According to minister of agriculture Carvajal, 43% of the state budget for 2010 came from oil. He defends this by saying that “We would like to not depend on an extractive economy, but the fact is that we can't, our economy would crash and with it our political project (Harnecker 2011:272). government official Ricardo Patiño adds to this that “in the future we have planned to reform our economic model and pass from an economy of primary export towards a service and knowledge economy. However we need our resources to do so, we cannot stop using them” (Ibid).

If we consider the development of large scale mining we can say that instead of diminishing, extractivist activities are increasing. While the effort may be genuine, many wonder if this will work out as the government has planned. On a mural I saw in Quito the government's reasoning was compared with “fucking for one's virginity.” In a radio interview<sup>23</sup> Alberto Acosta put it a bit more nuanced, saying “either we are a green country, living on bio-knowledge and tourism, or we are an

---

<sup>23</sup> <http://marchaporlavidanet/>

extractivist country. we cannot be both.” After all money needed for investment in any type of economic activity can only be spent once.

At a debate I attended on how to construct a post-petrol Ecuador, Teodoro Bustamante referred to the mining controversy by saying that “Ecuador is an addict to its resources. And just as you cannot cure an addict by switching drugs, so too will this country not be helped by changing the resources it extracts.” The anthropologist Victor Breton added to this that actually “Ecuador is not so much an addict to oil, or copper, or banana, but to development in its traditional sense. This whole concept of *Sumak Kawsay* is an invented tradition. It acknowledges the high social costs that 'development' has had for the indigenous people, but without really doing anything about it. It's funny”, he went on, “that where before the indigenous people in Ecuador were a problem to be solved by modernity, they are now the glue that ties the new model Ecuador proposes to the rest of the world. However, it is clear that behind this new discourse and its 'indigenous character', it's business as usual.”

Concluding then, the idea of *Sumak Kawsay*, life in harmony with nature and each other, crumbles under the pressure of having to satisfy the needs of the population. The government resorted to the same methods of bribes, discrimination, and the creation of *terra nullius* that were deployed in other times and that have caused so much damage to this ‘land of contradictions’. So while the government claims to search for an alternative *to* development when push comes to shove the ideal of material progress moves aside other considerations, even though the government knows this should not happen.

### **Back to Yasuni**

Above I described how the inherent tensions between modernist development and preserving biological and cultural diversity come to the foreground as soon as a conflict arises. The way the government dealt with these tensions in the cases of *Campo Armadillo* and large-scale mining in the *Cordillera del Condor* has led many to believe that the proposal of Yasuni-ITT is a form of greenwashing. They see it as a way for the government to build up a ‘green image’, which allows them to intensify extraction in other places of the Amazon. “The situation that Correa has created for himself is one in which he cannot lose. If the Yasuni-itt proposal is successful he will be applauded for his conservationism. If the proposal fails he can wash his hands and point at the international community, which has left him with no alternative but to exploit the oil” (Gabriela Ruales). This may be true, but as I said before, I do think that the government takes the proposal serious, and, also that it is serious about diversifying the Ecuadorian economy. Yet in this historical time it can only achieve this through diverting responsibility towards the international community.

Also, we must not forget that if the Yasuni-ITT proposal is successful, Ecuador will have created the largest environmental fund in the world (Martin, 2011). The country will have a large amount of money it can invest in projects that will have a significant impact on diversifying the national economy. Correa and his team of ministers have often emphasized that Ecuador needs to double the amount of tourists that visit the country each year. Having one of the world's most biodiverse national parks within your borders is off course a great incentive for tourism. The government also wishes to develop a knowledge based economy, which potentially can bring an enormous amount of economical benefits. When I interviewed Andres Viteri, head of a research team in Yasuni national park he said, “We could destroy the amazon, but then we will never know what other sources of value there are. As a biologist it is easy to see the value of biodiversity in itself, but there is also an important economic factor. Like the chemicals frogs use to protect themselves. They can have a medicinal and economic value”. As an example of this economic potential he mentions Epibatidine. A powerful sedative coming from the skin of frogs that Andres claims will be a multi-billion dollar business in the future<sup>24</sup>.

Through diversification the government hopes to diminish its dependency on natural resources and related to this, their peripheral position in the world system. Through Yasuni Ecuador aspires to become a “leader, not just in Latin-America, but worldwide based on its own capacities. It shows this ‘leadership’ by “innovative initiatives that situate the country in the vanguard of worldwide environmental agenda” (PND:108) The realization of this ideal is to be accomplished through the Yasuni-itt proposal. This it does, because Yasuni combines a “profound change in the relation between society and nature, helped by a “just payment of the ecological debt” (Ibid.) that the rich industrialized nations have towards underdeveloped countries.

For Ecuador to assume its ' leadership' it needs the cooperation of the international community. It can not change its dependent position by itself. Dependency is by definition a relation, where one party defines, and is defined by the other. To qualitatively change the nature of the relation - in the Ecuadorian case, to balance unequal economic and political relations of power - both parties need to be involved.

Ecuador has aligned its national interests global ones. For example, the reason that the Ecuadorian government does choose for something like large scale mining, but at the same time attempts to ‘save’ Yasuni national park, has everything to do with climate change and the place that a contaminating fossil fuel like oil has in our imagination. We are all familiar with the images of

---

<sup>24</sup> So far epatitadina has not been used commercially due to its high toxicity. The margins between a dose suitable for use on humans and a dose that is lethal are considered too small.

birds smeared with oil after another spill, but not so much with the environmental impacts of copper production. All the more so, in the face of climate change, the sticky black gold provides a lively picture. This is the opportunity for the Ecuadorian government has stepped into by proposing something like ITT to the community of nations. The country has adapted to global worries about climate change and the international imagination of oil. It has made an original proposal, but it now has to wait for the international community.

In a sense the timing of the Yasuni-ITT proposal is spot on. The world wants to do something about climate change and is very much aware of the role played herein by petrol. On the other hand the timing is completely off, since the countries that are supposed to pay for Yasuni's conservation are currently in economic crisis. Where climate change provided the opportunity for Ecuador to align its own interests to the rest of the world, the economic crisis shows how fragile this connection actually is.

Take, for example, Germany and Italy. Both countries have so far been the largest contributors to the Yasuni-itt fund. Germany has given 40 million dollars in 'technical assistance', and Italy provided 51 million dollars through a reduction of Ecuador's bilateral foreign debt. Yet the German minister of development, Dirk Niebel, heavily criticized Italy for doing so, referring to the southern European country's own debt problems. While this did not lead to Berlusconi dropping to his knees and begging Germany for forgiveness, it clearly shows where the priorities should lay according to this minister Niebel<sup>25</sup>. Spain, another country on the receiving end in the European debt crisis, has even canceled its planned contribution. While Spain had previously donated 1.4 million dollars, its plan for an annual five million dollar contribution will, for the time being, not be pushed forward. Financial stability is at this moment considered more important than anything else.

Yet on the other hand the timing of Yasuni-itt is just right. The consequences of the growing need for natural resources in a continuously expanding global economy, are becoming more and more apparent. The world is worried about the impact of elevated consumption levels in rich countries, high economic growth BRIC countries and continuously growing populations. This awareness is being reflected in the rising prices of primary commodities in world markets. This leads to a paradox that is basic to the functioning of markets. In the capitalist logic what is valued is scarcity. The less there is of a valued resource the more it is worth. The response that markets provide, however, is the exact opposite of what any ecologist, or clear minded individual would want. Another race to the bottom is started. The increasing demand for fossil fuels makes them

---

<sup>25</sup>

Later Germany threatened to draw back its own contribution as well. Supposedly because it was worried how Correa handled freedom of the press in Ecuador

more valuable, leading to the development of oil-production on sites that were previously considered nonviable or unethical to exploit. The most notorious examples of this are Canada's tar sands and the planned oil production around the North Pole – I think that especially the latter, made possible through the very process of global warming itself, should make our heads spinning. Of course it has also led to option B: exploiting oil in Yasuni-ITT, one of most bio-diverse places on earth and home to three isolated amazonian tribes. Again the tragedy prevails: We know and feel the above situation is wrong, yet cannot seem to stop it.

The workings of the market have altered the equation between the preservation and the exploitation of nature. One way of countering this negative spiral is to make nature preservation profitable. This can only be done by creating markets that do exactly this. A product is created, for example carbon credits, that is exposed to the laws of question and demand. In this way the value of nature is set as a reflection of what humanity is willing to pay for its preservation.

This is off course what the Yasuni-ITT proposal does, selling CGY's instead of oil. It counters the failure of markets (See for example Hansen, 2009) by using newly created carbon markets. It provides incentives for sustainability instead of depletion. This is the way through which Ecuador aligns its own interests with that of the rest of the world, but the question is if this works to help solve our environmental problems.

Sadly, as I will explain, the answer is no. Carbon markets, working through so called 'cap and trade mechanisms', have so far not worked to diminish the output of CO<sub>2</sub>. Basically since both cap and trade are lacking.

In a recent report by the NGO Corporate Europe<sup>26</sup> the authors come to the conclusion that climate change policy by the European Union has so far had more to do with increasing European multinationals' competitiveness, than with combating climate change. They note that because companies were allowed to make their own estimations of their output of CO<sub>2</sub>, there exists a structural surplus of carbon permits. Every year the cap has been set higher than the total emissions of all 30.000 corporations involved. In 2012 there was a total surplus of 970 million of these permits. If this scheme were a building, it would mean that the ceiling is 970 million stories higher than the architect would have deemed safe.

The absence of trade is the reason the report calls this system a gigantic subsidizing scheme. Carbon permits did not have to be bought from the European Union, they were given. And since they were given too many, companies could sell them for lofty profits on the international markets. In turn lowering the prices of carbon credits, thus furthermore reducing the incentive to 'clean up'.

---

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.corporateeurope.org/news/eu-ets-failing-third-attempt>

The report estimates that power companies<sup>27</sup> and other energy intensive industries alone, have received 90 billion Euros in subsidies under the disguise of permits since the ETS (European Trading Scheme) came into being.

This is the type of market the Yasuni-ITT proposal suggests to use for the selling of 407 million tons of carbon-dioxide. Just as the country dug its own grave in its debt crisis, it now seeks affiliation with a carbon-market that increases competitiveness of companies in Europe. History never repeats itself, but it rhymes every so often. In its attempt to diminish dependency, to alter international relations, it ends up reinforcing its marginal position.

Despite its novelty of preemptive compensation, the problem of CGY's is that they allow other companies and nations to keep on polluting. Once again this is known by the government. Even Rafael Correa himself has admitted that "Market exchanges will not solve the world's environmental problems."

When the proposal was originally formulated by social activists at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the CGY's were not included. It was only after the Ecuadorian government made the proposal part of its official policy that this financial mechanism was developed (oil in the soil). This disappointed those involved in the campaign surrounding Yasuni, yet they understand somewhat the pressure on the government to do so. "We do not think that carbon markets are going to help solve the problem", said Gabriela Ruales, "but at least it is better than to exploit the oil. If this is the way to prevent destroying Yasuni, then so be it".

At its most fundamental the Yasuni-itt proposal is, or should be about how to organize collective responsibility for the world's environmental problems. The CGY's and market mechanisms that are supposed to do so are more precisely a way to *avoid* collective responsibility. The implementation of the CGY's in the Yasuni proposal can best be seen as the means by which different nations' individual interests are aligned. Ecuador wants to make money out of preserving the rainforest and has found in the CGY's a way to do so. Governments in rich nations have to nominally do something about climate change to appease their constituents, while at the same time protecting its businesses.

The ambivalence of the Yasuni-itt proposal is that due to its dependence on external finance it does not help to solve the problem it purportedly wishes to tackle - the problem of climate change. The selling of the CGY's is merely the way to open the international money faucet. Yet if Ecuador would not define Yasuni-ITT in this manner, the money would not come their way. In that case both the amazon and the climate would lose

---

<sup>27</sup>

Power companies passed on the 'bill' they did not have to pay, to their costumers.

What the Yasuni-ITT proposal shows often encountered in the ways in which environmental issues are dealt with. It is hardly ever possible to come up with a solution that is perfect for everyone, at its most it is the least worst of all possible worlds. This is a reflection of the fact that the success or failure of this type of proposal is related to, and deeply embedded in the force fields of economic logic and rationality. The Ecuadorian government can be said to be primarily pursuing money fast and clean and to have found in Yasuni a way to do so. Internationally we see that other nations will be far more likely to contribute if there is something in it for them. And even then, only when there is no financial crisis or debt crisis to deal with. domestic and global economic pressures easily surpass an environmental scheme like Yasuni-itt in importance.

To end this chapter on a more hopeful note I wish to emphasize that the change of thinking as proposed in the PND is new to us. It has been only forty years in our two million years of human existence that we have become so acutely aware of the finality of the earth's resources and human's precarious place in its ecology. We should not be utterly disappointed then, that this awareness has so far not really surpassed the level changes in discourse or symbolic actions: the signing an agreement here and there about the importance of biodiversity, the establishment of natural parks, or saving the panda bear. In spite of all the criticisms we can make of Yasuni-ITT, it is still a step in the right direction. Just because the necessary structural change has not been made yet does not mean that it is impossible. Let us just try to do so before it is too late.



## Chapter 2: Waorani and the shift from modernity to environmentalism

### Introduction

*“the forest is like the world's largest supermarket, but here, everything is free.”*

-Penty Bahua-

When I started working on the Yasuni-itt proposal I was somewhat disappointed at its employment of (carbon) markets to obtain funding for maintaining ‘oil in the soil’. The fact that the survival of this park, its human and non-human inhabitants, depended on the amount of money that the international community would give, in my eyes undermined its moral value. This was besides the more practical question whether or not carbon markets are actually helping to reduce climate change. Why was it that in the hierarchy of values that inform the Yasuni proposal its monetary value remained so firmly on top? Not to say that other values, like that of biodiversity, the rights of indigenous people living in isolation and so on, were not mentioned. They were, and often so. But, at the end of the day, Yasuni’s fate would be decided not by the discovery of a new species of plants, trees or animal but by stone cold cash. This seemed to me a crucial impoverishment of the way in which humans relate to the non-human world.

It was for this reason that I wished to spend time with the Waorani who live in and around Yasuni national park. I believed/hoped to find here what I was missing in the Yasuni-itt proposal: A way of relating directly with nature that was somehow more profound. That went going beyond the sheer instrumentality of money, that is now its decisive factor. Using the data I was to acquire, I would inform a western audience on how the disconnect from nature we moderns are said to have was to be repaired. Since it is this disconnect that is often mentioned as the source of our current predicament (for example Ingold, 2011). The aim of describing the way a non-industrial, hunter-gatherer tribe relates with their surroundings was to find an alternative also for, or to (?), economic development than through ‘the destruction of our natural surroundings’ (Lewis, 2008:14). What better place to find this than by going to the heart of the Ecuadorian Amazon to live with a people that had only been ‘contacted’ a mere forty years ago?

Wanting to be a social scientist I too however had to deal with what Milton calls “the tortuous task of studying that of which they are a part”(1993, P1).Off course, I was not the first to have to deal with this problem. The necessity to somehow cope with this has been existent in much of the history of the social sciences. Basically it comes down the question of authority. From where does the authority arise that makes it possible for a social scientist to ultimately decide what it

*really* is that people say, do, feel and think. Especially since they are subjected to the same societal processes that affect the research objects and that influence the what of their social research, as well as the how and, most importantly, the why.

One way of coping with this, as described by Bauman (2011), is to silence the research subjects. Either an investigator can claim that his subjects' convictions are wrong by burying him under an avalanche of scientific data, or one can cloak one's findings in a discourse the research subjects are unable to understand. The result of this is basically works to increase science's borrowed authority. Even more so when it is coupled with political power and used to inform policy that directly affects the lives of people and societies that were the subject of inquiry. This coupling of scientific knowledge with political power is the way in which social sciences contribute to, and become part of the hegemonic discourses in society. This, off course, cannot to be understood as a good thing.

A better option would probably be to skip the middle man. Letting people speak for themselves. Shamefully our political system does not work in a way that is conducive for this. We are so accustomed to 'professional' representation that it feels strange to even consider this as a possibility. The translation needs to be made between ordinary daily experience and how this is to be understood at a political level. While I certainly see the potential in this, it was not in the scope of this research to do so. What I was left with was the confrontation with my own preconceptions. These concerned the 'nature' of the Waorani relation with nature that I mentioned above. Luckily, I might say, I did not find what I was looking for, which is probably when scientific research is at its most enjoyable. What I did find out that my quest of looking for a better, more sustainable way to relate with nature, finally said more about me than I could possibly have said about the Waorani.

I am far from alone in this. The same goes for the specific ideologies that are the subject of this chapter, modernism and environmentalism. I aim to show how these two ideologies attempt both in theory and in practice to create new types of subjects but in a sense fail to do so. Simply because the subjects that inform these ideologies do not exist.

Seemingly opposed, yet fundamentally similar, both ideologies have been part of the hegemonic discourses of Ecuador and beyond. Their similarity is most apparent in their hegemony. Both exhibit a certain 'way of knowing' (Harris et al., 2007) the world and ideas about the place humans are supposed to occupy in it. As Agyrou (2005) points out both these ways of knowing are deeply implicated in the domination of others. For the Waorani this has translated into the attribution of certain traits, cultural or otherwise, that are in fact more telling about those making the discourse, than that they are accurate descriptions of the ways in which these people live their lives. Acknowledging this convenience for hegemonic discourse opens up the possibility to understand

the Waorani as building blocks for both modernism and environmentalism. Unwillingly they become part and parcel of national development programs, without having much to say about them.

In the previous chapter I wrote that while Ecuador may have changed from being a neoliberal country towards a more state-led economic structure this has not diminished pressures on nature. In this chapter I will argue along the same line that the coinciding shift from modernism to environmentalism has not profoundly altered the Waorani's marginal position in the Ecuadorian nation. They may have shifted from being 'savages' to being 'noble savages', but savages they still are. I will follow the argument made by Agyrou (2005), who writes that the paradigmatic shift from modernism to environmentalism coincided with seeing indigenous peoples as a problem modernism had to solve, towards 'Waorani culture' as the solution towards the world's environmental problems, as caused by modernity. The shift is more a mirror of changing global circumstances than anything else. And, it has not changed the fact that it is the Waorani who must adapt to the standards that are set by 'us' (see also Pearson, 2009).

### **Procurement**

As I said, I did not encounter among the Waorani the key towards a sustainable future on our planet. What I did find was that reality was far more ambiguous and contradictory. The Waorani seemed at first to be in full transition, 'betwixt and between', so to say. More and more their former ways of doing things were becoming impossible, while the 'new' way of doing things looked far from being fully appropriated. For example, children are taught how to manage themselves in the jungle, yet they are also required to attend school five days a week learning Spanish; social movement activists attempt to restore cultural traditions and talk about the importance of community, yet spend most of their time in offices in the cities of Coca or Puyo; Waorani women are involved in the production of handicrafts using 'all natural products' yet sell these in a store that is provided and paid for by an oil company; an elder spends two days preparing his blowpipe (*cerbatana*), yet opts for the rifle, which is much lighter, when the hunt is on; Some Waorani fish using dynamite, others use a stick they find in the forest because they do not want to run the risk of losing their hands.

Saying that Waorani traditional culture has become 'somehow' infected by modernity would, however be a wrong description of what is happening. The juxtaposition between their natural, traditional way of life and the supposed pollution by modernity does not hold if we look at the way the Waorani themselves are coping and have coped with the constant changes in Ecuador and the world.

Neither to the Waorani live up to the hopes of environmentalist. The hope that since they are hunter-gatherers - living the most 'natural' way of life a human being can live - they must be

respectful of nature, live sustainable and in harmony with their natural surroundings. Instead, I will argue in this chapter that: (1) the ambiguity I just mentioned is by the Waorani themselves, not seen as such, and (2) that the Waorani should not be seen as a problem to by modernization, nor should they be portrayed as the solution for the problems of the modernist paradigm.

Yet, I do believe that there is something we can learn from the way in which the Waorani relate to their environment. Most importantly this is a certain sensitivity towards changes, however subtle, in their surroundings. This sensitivity is in itself maybe not a 'tool' but it is a vital precondition for the possibility of the development of such tools in the first place.

The sensitivity is often said to have been lost in modern societies. The trajectory of the development of modern thought and its premises is too long and complex for the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, I will briefly turn to them in order to better explain why sensitivity can be an important element in relating sustainably with nature.

'Detachment' is a term often used to describe the gap between modern man and the nature, "for the world can only be 'nature' for a being that does not belong there..."(Ingold 2000:20). The starting point of the separation between man and nature originates in the philosophy of Descartes. His severance of the mind from the body has become an important element in much subsequent western philosophy. "In the western ontology the point of departure is that of a mind detached from the world and which has literally to formulate it to build an intentional world from consciousness, prior to any attempt to engagement"(Ingold in Milton, 1993:119). 'Intentionality' is that which according to Engels separates humans from animals. Engels was convinced, according to Ingold, "that the measure of man's humanity lay in the extent to which things could be contrived to go according to plan" (2011:4). In other words our measure of control through our minds of our physical surroundings is what makes humans unique. Or, turned around, that what makes us human, or 'man', is the result of mastery of nature. Labor and production became in modern times the quintessential expression of what it meant to be human (Rival, 2000).

The European ('western') attitude towards the physical world is often said to be a conquering one (Lewis, 2008; Agyrou, 2005). "In the nineteenth century nature came to be perceived also as an intractable domain of danger and above all, utility to be mastered by man and brought under its control (Agyrou, 2005:4). Agyrou shows how this domination of nature was closely connected to domination of 'others'. "For European man the measure in which he dominated nature provided the ideological grounds for his superiority and ideological grounds for the legitimization for expansionism (Ibid, 4).

It should come as no surprise that hunter gatherer tribes, like the Waorani, occupy a marginalized place in this type of imagination: somewhere between animals and humans. "It is acknowledged

that hunter gatherers have ideas and intentions, it is just that these remain models of the physical worlds, rather than as blueprints for its actual transformation”(Ingold in Ellen and Fukui,1996:148). If to be human is measured according to the capacity to transform the world, the perceived inability to do so automatically makes one less than human and the potential object of civilizing missions.

The use of the term ‘hunter-gatherer’ itself, is already telling in this regard, since it implies the mere collection of foodstuffs from a ‘giving’ environment. A better term to describe what it is that hunter-gatherers actually do when they are engaged in subsistence-related activities is ‘procurement’. This term, coined by Bird-David merges elements of ‘productive’ and ‘foraging’ activities. It holds that “care, sophistication and knowledge is applied to their resource-getting activities; ranging from collecting whatever the environment gives to prevailing upon it, persuading it and managing it in order to get resources” (Bird-David, 1992:40).

Saying that the Waorani procure resources better explains why, for example, they engaged in wage labor for oil companies. It is not that they are opportunists, lacking in ideological convictions and doing everything necessary to get by. But, as Rival shows, cultural mechanisms, such as 'demand sharing' and 'nature as a giving environment', can include human outsiders, who in turn become “naturalized, as part of their surroundings”(Rival). This commitment is deeply integrated into their experience of the world and of themselves. It is not dependent on the continuous pursuit of hunting and gathering. They procure natural products as well as a variety of additional resources, as opportunities arise (Bird-David, 1992).

In the coming paragraphs I will focus on two often encountered generalizations concerning the Waorani and their way of living that underlay the seeming ambiguity I encountered in the field. These generalizations form the basis on which the ideologies of both modernism and environmentalism ground their legitimacy.

First is the view as it is often encountered in everyday conversation. The idea that the Waorani, especially the men, are lazy, thieves and alcoholics: “They are not to be trusted; especially when they are drinking...they can be dangerous” (Kendall); “they will do anything for money” (Jorge)”. Or as Samuel Caento who himself is half-Quichua, half-Waorani and a long time activist, put it “the only thing that they are capable of is holding up their hands to the *petroleros*, like beggars”. Anthropologist Laura Rival summons these views up as follows, “Waorani are [depicted as] marginal, impoverished, de-cultured, exploited by other social groups, and, above all, dominated by – and entirely dependent on- powerful transnational companies exploiting oil in their territories.

In this first view the Waorani’s encounter with the rest of the world in its modern state, has uprooted them. Efforts made to modernize them – as we will see later on, first by evangelicals, than

by big oil - with the aim of freeing them of their supposed ignorance and superstitions, have both failed, and made them lose their identity

### **The 'savage' as the problem of modernity**

Let us look closer at the view that the Waorani are de-cultured, exploited and completely dependent on oil companies. Before we start I would like to mention some characteristics of this view. First, the people that are quoted above obviously see the Waorani as having lost the essence of what they are, but it is rarely mentioned that this is (partial) result of an interaction between two different 'cultures' with rather extreme imbalances of power between them. Secondly, what is this supposed essence? Is there even one to begin with and can we say that it has been lost? I will talk more about this in the second part of this chapter. Third, with the risk of stating the obvious, there is enormous diversity within the Waorani ethnic group that is not acknowledged in this view. Some Waorani live in the city, some in a protectorate, others live alongside oil-roads and still others have chosen to live in isolation. Lastly, I would like to point out that this condition the Waorani find themselves in, in turn serves as a legitimation for further development projects. Cases in point are the further development of agriculture, the selling of 'ethnic artifacts' and 'ethnic/eco-tourism'.

The root causes of the supposed deculturalization of the Waorani lay in the evangelization mission of the US-based Summer Linguistics Institute (SLI). The SLI is a missionary organization whose goal it was to 'pacify' the Waorani and, off course, convert them to Christianity. The name of this enterprise was "operation Aucas". The use of the term Aucas is telling of why this mission came into being. Aucas is the pejorative name Amazonian Quichuas use(d) to denominate Waorani, meaning 'savages'. The evangelicals, according to a time magazine of 1956, knew that no man is lost before the eyes of god so they 'bravely' attempted to salvage them.

The SLI mission was to civilize the Aucas, by giving primary and religious education and the basics of agricultural production (Carlotta). For the SLI the easiest way to convert Waorani was to huddle them all together. For this purpose the Ecuadorian state allowed the establishment of a so called 'protectorate'. Seduced by gifts the SLI threw out of airplanes and curious about what was going on the Waorani were lured into this area (Rival 2002). While the SLI held the carrot, the 'stick' was handled by oil-multinational Texaco aided by the Ecuadorian army. They forcefully put Waorani into helicopters and flew them towards the protectorate (Oilwatch, 2004). Initially conflicts erupted here, but after an army intervention things calmed down (Manuela; Cabodevilla 2004). Eventually 85% (approx. 600) of all Waorani were placed in an area that was 10% of the size of their former territories.

The result was that the Waorani were made sedentary and riverine (Rival, 2000). The former

practice of establishing a distance between communities of a six day walk, to avoid possibility of hunting on each other's territories, disappeared (Yima). The amount of killings between Waorani also diminished. According to Steve Nate, 60 percent of the Waorani deaths were violent before his father, the missionary Nate Saint, began the pacification. The high amount of violent deaths is often given as an argument for the legitimacy<sup>28</sup> of the civilizing mission of the SLI (Saint, 2004)

It was predicted that after this crash course in modernization the Waorani would soon be absorbed by national society (Rival, 2002). Around 1980, however, the missionaries became aware that they could no longer keep the Waorani in the protectorate (Rival, 2002). After protests then president Hurtado banished the organization from the country. While the majority of the Waorani remained living in the reservation, many others spread out after the size of the reservation was increased tenfold in 1990(Oilwatch, 2004).

Spreading out from the reservation the Waorani encountered oil-companies on their former hunting grounds. While they were away Ecuador had become an oil-producing country<sup>29</sup> and its economy already depended heavily on the export of crude. The construction of the *Via Auca* for the purposes of oil-exploitation had also attracted a significant amount of colonists. The agricultural and petrol frontier had moved into the territories that the Waorani considered theirs. This led to, sometimes violent, confrontations (Bebbington, 2003, Finer et al 2009), until in 1993 the Waorani and Maxus signed an agreement of 'mutual trust and friendship' (Narvaez, 2009).

This agreement is valid until 2013 and its purposes are to provide funds and coordinate all governmental and nongovernmental actions concerning health, education and economic improvement (Rival, 2002) through the further development of infrastructure and commercial activity (Narvaez, 2009). Not much changed when Maxus merged with Repsol in 1995. In Repsol's annual report on corporate responsibility 2010, we can read that the stated goal is to help the Waorani "how to best make use of their resources". Something they apparently had been unable to do thus far. This last remark is especially telling of the recurrent idea that the Waorani need to be taught something.

'La Compania' then, which is the name Waorani often give to oil multinationals, became the primary agent of development. While the ties with the SLI were broken, new connections were made with Maxus-YPF and later Repsol.

Part of the agreement also allowed the possibility of Waorani men engaging in labor-

---

<sup>28</sup> After the death of five missionaries in 1956 Time magazine called the Waorani "the worst people on earth".

<sup>29</sup> That the missionaries became active at the same time as Texaco started drilling for oil is by many not seen as a coincidence

activities for Maxus. These jobs mostly consisted of helping out during some weeks in path clearing or the guarding of (future) production sites. Rival (2002) estimates that 90% of Waorani men have at some time been employed by an oil company. By now however they are no longer needed since exploration activities are no longer being performed. Also, Colombian immigrants and Afro-Ecuadorians have taken their place as guards, because they are considered to be easier to work with. Not in the least because “people think they are just as scary as Waorani” (Maria).

At this moment the Waorani social movements are completely dependent *financially* on the money from oil multinationals. This is hardly surprising if you consider the fact that Maxus helped to form the ONHAE, the Waorani federation. Maxus needed a legal representative capable of speaking on behalf of all the Waorani to make the agreements legally binding. Maxus’ successor Repsol, pays not only the salary of the staff, but also provided computers, the rent of their offices and that of three stores that are used by the AMWAE, the Waorani female federation, to sell handicrafts.

A closer look, however shows how this dependency, while being close to total on paper is subverted, and quite often so, in practice. To start with, social activists are well aware that oil companies are not ‘giving’ the money because they are preoccupied with the fate and well being of the Waorani. Repsol knows that it is operating on what the Waorani consider to be their territory, so they pay the Waorani to be left alone. Secondly, and more important is that, in spite of the financial dependency of Waorani social organizations, this has not inhibited their political activity. The AMWAE, which is the Waorani female organization, has successfully protested against further encroachment of oil on their lands. For example when, in 2005 they successfully protested against Petrobras. This Brazilian oil-company was developing activities in block 31, whose southern border crosses the Waorani intangible zone. “We were not afraid”, says Carlotta, “if the companies come we just go to the place where they want to work and tell them they can not get through”. When I asked AMWAE president Manuela Ima if this attitude does not cause trouble for their financing, she answered: “Our problem is that we need a lot of money to visit all the communities...they are all very far away. The plane tickets, the boat rides, hours and hours of walking. It’s all money we don’t have, but they (the oil companies) do. So what we usually say when we ask for money is that we want to visit this community or that, because we are going to give a class on making handicrafts, or something like that. But, of course we do the political activities. We tell people what is going on, where the problems are, what we are doing about it and ask what they think we should do. But if we say this to the companies they won’t pay for our trips.”

One could even add to this that, if the Waorani would not have caused any trouble for the extractive operations of oil companies, they would have probably been simply ignored. Don’t bite



the hand that feeds you, the saying goes, but before this you need to make the hand aware that it should feed you.

The ONHAE, the umbrella organization of the Waorani, is another example of the pragmatic way in which Waorani deal with the reality of big oil on or near their territories. According to Moipa “We want them to do what they promised. Repsol is more worried about their image than about us. They say there are hospitals throughout the zone, there aren’t any. That the schools are good, they are not. Yet, in spite of the mistrust ONHAE department in the province of Pastaza, the ONWO is looking for new ways to broker deals with oil-multinationals. Its president Moipa said that ‘what we are trying to do is to obtain the titles to our lands. But not just of the communities that live in the *Zona Intangible* but also for those that live outside of the zone’. The reason that land titles are pursued has to do with the oil-extraction sites at these locations. If the Waorani can make a legal claim, based on their territorial rights, the oil-companies have to give benefits to the communities if they want to avoid problems.

This type of reasoning leads to an interesting turn around of events. Like in Yawepade, which is the community where I stayed during fieldwork and which is one of the communities that fall outside Waorani’s legalized territory. This community was built alongside a road constructed by an oil company and finds itself at a mere hundred meters from an extraction site. However it was built after the oil production had started here. The prospect of financial and material benefits likely played a role in choosing this place to found a new community<sup>30</sup>.

The Waorani female association criticizes the attitude towards oil of the ONHAE. Maria, secretary of the AMWAE said, “the only thing the ONHAE wants is to make deals, and more deals and more deals. They want to look good for their communities but they don’t really accomplish anything. If we want to be free we need to turn away from them (oil multinationals)”. Another critique given resonates with arguments by some renowned economists against national oil dependency. Carlotta, my translator and a key informant, put it like this, “what the men forget is: what are we going to do when there is no more oil? We have to think of new ways of gaining money”.

If the Waorani were completely dependent on oil companies, they would not be able to take a critical stance towards them or to organize politically to obstruct their extractive activities. In fact, they could not even be aware of their dependency which people obviously are. The view then that the Waorani are completely dependent on oil turns out to be wrong in a sense. A better way to describe their relation would be that social movement activists realize that it is close to impossible

---

<sup>30</sup>

I should mention that I could not get this confirmed by my informants.

to stop oil-drilling on their territory. Therefore, what rests is to make the best of the possibilities these oil-companies provide, and to try to circumvent the limitations they impose.

The same goes for the missionaries that were unable to prevent the Waorani from spreading out in 1982 and taking up 'old habits'. According to Rival this shows that "[the Waorani] have retained their distinctive way of apprehending the world" (Rival, 2002:14). In spite of efforts made by SLI, Maxus and now Repsol to 'enlighten' and 'civilize' the Waorani, through conversion to Christianity and/or modernity, this has not led to an erasure of the Waorani ethnicity. Even within the unequal relation in terms of power between the Waorani and big-oil, we can see that, instead of one party being completely dependent, both influenced each other. Maxus was forced to change its policy towards indigenous peoples living in their area of operations. The Waorani were forced to adapt to the presence of big oil and changed their way of living by working for these companies and settling close to extraction sites. They did so whenever the opportunity was there, foregoing or lessening for a while(!) other, more 'traditional' activities like hunting and gathering.

That is the strength I suppose of what we call 'culture', that a great economic force, backed ultimately by the armies' physical force, was the only thing capable of 'taming' the Waorani. Even under these adverse circumstances they have retained their cultural identity.

What I believe is important to realize is, that the modernist view just described is convenient to those making the description. It is the presence itself of the SLI and oil-companies that allowed the rise of the idea of the Waorani as a problem to be solved. For the missionaries the problem was that they weren't Christians; for the oil-companies the problem was that they did not allow them to extract oil. The existence of the Waorani's way of living stood in the way of the goals of missionaries and oil companies and had therefore to be altered. This worked only partially, as is shown by the Waorani (pragmatic) resistance against oil-companies on one side, but it did form the basis to the view of Waorani as a de-cultured, lazy, alcoholic and dependent on-oil-money type of group.

### **The accidental conservationist**

In spite of worldwide efforts by governments, civil society activists and the IPCC to reduce CO2 emissions worldwide, the only moments in history when global emissions drop are during economic crises. In 2009 when the financial crisis had begun to affect the 'real' economy of trade, global carbon emissions dropped for the first time since the year 1992. This year was not coincidentally the last of a prolonged economic crisis that started on the infamous 'black Monday'.

The jungle of southern Colombia has large reservoirs of oil, of which only a small part is

being exploited. This is due to the heavy presence of FARC militants. They frequently attack oil-workers and sabotage pipelines, which lowers oil-companies' incentives to further develop their activities in this area.

In the Ecuadorian jungle, on the border with Peru and in one of the world's biodiversity hotspots, live the Waorani, Taromenane and Taegeri. All three groups, of which the latter two live in 'voluntary isolation', have launched attacks on loggers, oil-workers and anyone else they see as intruding on their territories. The development of further oil activities is severely limited due to the presence of these groups.

Ecological preservation in all three of the examples above is the accidental outcome of other processes and can by no means be explained as intentional conservationist behavior. The world's leaders did not suddenly turn green in 2009, nor can the FARC be portrayed as a group of Greenpeace activists gone rogue. Yet, in the third example there is a tendency to overlook this contingency.

The Waorani, as a non-industrial hunter-gatherer tribe, easily fall victim to what Milton (1993) calls the 'myth of ecological wisdom'. This myth is part of widespread popular conceptions of the Waorani and can be said to be typical of our view of hunter gatherers. People in this type of society are often portrayed as living the most 'natural' way of life, especially in comparison to our modern industrial societies. Most notably in environmentalist discourse we encounter the idea that "the most ecologically sound ways of living are assumed to be those that conform most closely to what is seen as a natural existence" (Milton in Ellen and Fukui, 1996:109). The argument that processes of modernity have caused the disappearance of a prior way of living that was seen by the Waorani themselves as sustainable, can however not be sustained. We simply cannot know with any precision whether the Waorani, based their relationship with nature on 'respect' and saw themselves as the guardians of 'Nature' (not just of their territory), although this seems unlikely.

### **The noble savage: the solution to the problem of modernity**

In the case of the Waorani one can easily find descriptions along these lines. Like on the following website<sup>31</sup> that specializes in Waorani community tourism: "The Waorani are proud warriors and guardians of the rainforest, who have defended the area now known as Yasuni since before written history...they are committed to protecting the forest for future generations...the "giving" ecosystem that is their home, represents the best opportunity for sustainable conservation in Yasuni." Here the Waorani are the protectors of the forest, the only thing that stands between the possible destruction

---

<sup>31</sup> <http://huaoraniintangiblezone.wordpress.com/about/>

of the ecosystem by big oil and their knowledge of nature the best possibility for sustainability. In a Yasuni-itt propaganda video<sup>32</sup> made by the government we encounter the same view. At one particular moment we see Waorani walking through the forest and the voice over says: “The oil will remain underground. Covered by [...] the indigenous communities, their ancestral rites and their harmony with nature.

The most startling irony of the existence of this view is that it completely ignores the changes that have occurred in Waorani societies in the last fifty years. One does not usually portray the activities of oil companies and their employees as sustainable or environmentally friendly, since, basically, they are not. Yet, in spite of the many Waorani men that have worked, albeit for a short while, for the oil companies, they are still pictured as “the best opportunity for sustainable conservation in Yasuni”.

The paradox is that the Waorani are depicted as ‘natural conservationists’ at exactly the moment they are no more. Before they were ‘contacted’ the Waorani were most likely living in what we could refer to as a ‘sustainable way of living, ‘in harmony with nature’, as in not over-exploiting it. But it is almost impossible that they framed their relationship with the non-human environment in terms like ‘respect’ and ‘sustainability’. And even now, of all the Waorani I spoke with during my stay in Ecuador and the community of Yawepade, the only ones that mentioned the importance of the conservation of nature (as apart from their survival as a social group) were those active in the Waorani social organizations. As ONWO president Moipa told me “what they (the government) want is to protect the national park, what we want is to protect the Waorani territory.

It would be strange indeed if the Waorani were ‘natural conservationist’ because, as Lu explains this “is not akin to being left or right handed; it is a set of social understandings and behavioral patterns that can emerge when there is an agreement by a group of people to temper their resource use in the expectation that others will do the same” (2005:204). A problem in the availability of treasured resources needs to arise before social mechanisms are developed to counter this problem.

In the case of the Waorani the resource issue never arose before they were contacted, but it has arisen now. Lu (2005) calls this the catch 22 that hunter-gatherers living in ecologically rich but fragile areas, often find themselves in: “the conditions some biologists extol as compatible with conservation are precisely the ones in which we would not expect conservationist behaviors to emerge. Instead, this emergence is more likely to occur in the current situation of increasing resource use pressure and increasing awareness of resource scarcity”. Ecological balance then,

---

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DogBX9PxG8>

according to Milton, is an incidental consequence of human activities and other factors rather than being an ideal or a goal that is actively pursued (1996:113).

According to Rival (1993, 1996, 2000) the Waorani do exhibit what at first sight seem to be conservationist practices. For example, leaving fruits for birds and animals to eat, allowing their reproduction. Also they have shamans implore Jaguars, who are seen to distribute the amount of animals over their territories, to restore the amount of game. Yet, both of these practices follow a cultural pattern that Rival calls demand sharing. This is part of the way the Waorani relate with their environment: the environment gives, and should give, incessantly to its human inhabitants. So in the case of leaving fruit, the animals are said to be stealing the seeds from their rightful owners, the humans. As for the shamans, their role is to implore the jaguar to send monkeys, birds and other game their way. Making them come closer to the community, facilitating the hunt.

In Yawepade there were no shamans: “we are all Christians now”, as Imela said, although people do go to other places to visit shamans, but this had more to do with psychological needs. The practice of leaving fruit, however, was much alive. On the way towards the *chakra*, a small plot of agricultural land in the jungle, we encountered several *Chonta* palm trees, whose red fruits can be eaten. We stopped every time to get some but never left the tree void, even though they were filled with ripe berries.

Another central term that Rival applies to the way in which the Waorani relate to nature is that of ‘natural abundance’. Rival defines natural abundance as capturing ‘the indigenous representation of the relationship between living people, the forest and past generations’ (Rival, 2002:88). The forest is seen as a giving environment, asking nothing in return, like a parent almost. “Here (in the forest) we can live free, we take what we need and there is always enough (Carlotta). Another former member of the ONWO (the Waorani federation of Orellana) named Penty Baihua, called the forest “the world’s largest supermarket, but here everything is free”.

For children, the forest is more the world’s greatest playground. When they are walking through the forest they practically destroy everything in sight. Stones are thrown at termite nests, frogs found at river beds “learn to fly”. This was a big difference with my own way of being in the forest. Especially in the beginning I had the feeling that I was rather walking through the world’s largest museum. Admiring the plants, the birds, I tread carefully in order not to do damage anything. I almost shouted out of enthusiasm for having found the ‘wild’ frog who later took a flying lesson.

The Waorani are not the only hunting and gathering people that see the forest as an abundant and giving environment and according to RA the contrast with the way ‘the west’ conceptualize the value of nature could not be greater. Where we tend to value scarcity, as in Yasuni being a ‘singular place’ and take that as an important reason to try to preserve it, the Waorani value their surroundings

because of their abundance: there is so much of what nature provides for the physical survival of the Waorani.

The point is that the concept of 'natural abundance' does not sound as being very sustainable. In fact, it sounds very much like the way 'the west' has seen nature for a long time and which in part caused of our current predicament. For the Waorani seeing resources this way, was no problem. At least, before they were contacted. They have lived in the Amazon for centuries without having a similar impact on the environment as the one that 'modern' society has had in the past 50 years.

The answer to why this is so, is actually quite straightforward. The Waorani occupied a large tract of land and were very few - approximately 670.000 hectares for 600 people. If we take the ecological foot print of the Netherlands of 6,2 hectare per person, a simple calculation shows that the Waorani could easily live sustainable on their territory even if it had the material living standards of the Dutch. Waorani populations were kept this low not so much because a lack of resources but more due to inter-communal killing, the absence of modern technology and infrastructure connecting them to markets.

The Waorani have historically been a relatively isolated tribe. So much so that their language, Wao-Tedano, is considered by linguists to be a language isolate, having no direct links with the languages spoken by neighboring tribes. This relative isolation is another important factor explaining their coincidental sustainability. In the absence of 'leakages', such as trade, actual sustainability can be easily maintained.

The concept of 'natural abundance' became problematic when the Via Auca and later the via Maxus were built for the development of the petrol industry. Instead of hunting only for subsistence, Waorani started trading meat on the markets of Pompeia and Coca. The amount of game was endangered: "In order to hunt we had to walk more and would not come back for a long time", Ocatta mentioned in this regard.

Another factor is the advent of new technologies, like shotguns, introduced by the SLI and oil companies. These have to a certain extent replaced spears and blowpipes, "they scare the animals" (Ocatta), but "it is easier" (Moipa). As I could see a shotgun takes a lot less time and effort than readying a blowpipe. The cleaning of the pipe itself, the preparing of darts and making the *curare* poison are time consuming. Since the military increased its presence along the two roads that lead into Waorani territory the amount of meat sold at markets has almost vanished. The roadblocks that were created to detain illegal logging and further colonization also closed the leak in the trade of meat.

Agyrou (2005) mentions that often indigenous peoples are portrayed as having knowledge

and skills that are critical tools to deal with the ecological crisis, but that it is rarely mentioned just what these tools are. The above suggests does suggest something of a way out, but population 'control' and the absence of incentives to increase trade and the technology to do so, are rather the opposite of tools. The irony is that it is precisely this absence of 'tools' promoting sustainability, that serves as a proof that a society is in fact sustainable.

Much in the same way as the Waorani have incorporated the presence of oil companies in their lives, so to, do they adapt to and use the more environmentalist discourse. Such as the making of handicrafts that are sold in Ecuador and around the world. Belen, working in one of the shops told me proudly that they only use natural products. "we do not allow the women to use chemicals and synthetic materials. They have to use what they can find in the forest, and paint using traditional natural colorants." The development of the production of handicrafts in this specific way was suggested by an American women volunteering for the Peace Corps, as Carlotta admitted. "We already knew how to make the hammocks, so it was easy for us to learn, but she taught us how to do the weaving for the bracelets and necklaces because the customers like these". Hammocks and the earrings made of Balsa wood have long been made in Waorani society, but most of the items sold in the store and on-line are completely new. They are recent inventions and finely attuned to the 'conscious consumer' in the west looking for fair trade and ecologically friendly products.

To sum up, the concept of natural abundance, coupled with leakages and new technologies made that the Waorani became 'unsustainable'. Yet in spite of this the view that Waorani are conservationists has gained prominence and is by now actively pursued, also by the Waorani themselves. Why this is so should by now be obvious. Its basis lays in the changing (or at least the attempt to do so) Ecuadorian economy. The shift from an oil-producing country towards a country that values the conservation of nature.

## **Reconnecting**

So, tools may be somewhat absent, yet I do believe there is something we can learn from the Waorani. This has to do with how their relationship with nature is constituted by learning processes that start with direct engagement with the environment. Taking "the practices of environmental interaction"(Ellen 1996:103), as a starting point. As Ingold put it "One gets to know the forest, and the plants and the animals that dwell therein in much the same way that one becomes familiar with other people, by spending time with them, investing in one's relations with them the same qualities of feeling and attention"(In Milton,1993:129). Spending time in the forest, immersed in nature, is the basis for the development of a sensitivity that may well have been lost in modern industrial societies. It stands in contrast to the deeply embedded Western idea that the world has to be grasped

conceptually [...] as a precondition for effective action (Ingold, in Ellen and Fukui, 1996: 120). This sensitivity should be seen, I believe, not so much as a tool for conservation of the environment or the development of sustainable economic growth but as a necessary precondition to grasp in a deep sense the relational constitution of being.

In the Netherlands “nature is a place that we visit”, Geert Mak wrote in “How god disappeared from Jorwerd”. To live in it, to be directly dependent on the resources our environments provide is very different than the indirect relation with nature that is so common in modern societies. The development of sensitivity towards changes in our environments is for many people confined to news about environmental degradation instead of directly experiencing it. We notice differences in the availability of important resources in changes in the prices of, say, gasoline or milk. To live 'in' challenges this typical modern distinction between nature-culture; between the natural environment and man-made environment.

In the community of Yawepade this distinction is much harder to draw. What I think is telling of this directness is the apparent lack of the distinction between the forest and the community. Or, at least, the diffuse nature of the borders between the two. Small patches of *yuca* fields seamlessly melt into the forest, which is ever only three steps away. Following the numerous paths leading to equally abundant small rivers, used for drinking, washing and bathing, one is immediately immersed in the thick vegetation typical of the Amazonian environment. Within the community there is much vegetation as well. Small plots of *yuca* and banana, trees with edible nuts and bushes carrying the seeds used to make handicrafts, grow within the spaces between houses. It is this overwhelming presence of 'nature' both within and surrounding the community that speaks for the apparent absence of a distinction between nature and culture. Something as simple as the absence of a door also challenges the similar distinction between inside and outside

Also within the forest itself, what I at first inclined to call 'virgin jungle', there is evidence everywhere from human activities. Reminding of what Tsing in her description of the Dajaks of Indonesia calls the 'social memory of the forest'. Varying from half an hour, to three hours walking from the community there are *Chakras*. Small plots (maximum of ½ hectare) where banana trees, Yuca and sometimes Cacao are cultivated. People go here almost every day. After a while some *Chakras* are abandoned and left to be recovered by fast growing tall grasses. To replace them new *chakras* are opened up.

According to Carlotta these new ones are increasingly closer to the community than before. She worries that there is a risk that people become lazy. This is something she repeated numerous times and was also mentioned by some of the elders in the community. Increasing 'laziness' is not the only reason she implored *chakras* coming closer. “It is that people do not know the forest



anymore”, she said. This is an interesting contingency of having to take a long walk towards a *Chakra*. Namely that people spend much time in the forest, even if it is only to collect some banana's, although people rarely come back carrying only this. It is during these walks they get to know the forest, learn how to navigate through it, where certain types of plants grow and where and when different trees bear fruit. The primacy of movement then becomes clear in the cognitive processes of the Waorani. People learn while walking along the paths through the jungle; as Ingold (2011) would say, by constantly moving along the multiple lines that constitute their lifeworld.

It is during these trips as well that children are learned the properties of plants and develop skills in navigation, fishing, walking and so on. Almost always during our walks in the forest we were accompanied by children and it was clear that these trips are fruitful learning experiences. Sometimes they are directly taught how to pick nuts from tall trees. For example, when we were collecting *Chonta* a contraption was made in minutes, consisting of a large branch to which a knot made of *Oné* (rope) with a hole in it, was attached. While the young boys were trying to climb the tree, Carlotta showed another girl how to use the contraption. Shy at first, because of me watching her every move and after a few failed attempts, she finally pulled the *Chonta* to the ground and beat the boys to it.

At other times children learn more indirectly, standing around as I was explained the properties of the flora and fauna we encountered along the paths. Or looking at the places where the older children were fishing. Also at a young age children learn how to operate the *Cerbatana* used for hunting. Some of the children practiced by shooting darts at a worn teddy bear. Shooting darts through a 4 meter long heavy wooden pipe is already quite hard, but simply carrying the thing is already asking a lot from a seven year old.

The difference with the cramped little school building in Yawepade could not be greater. Instead of running, playing and learning while they are doing so, kids sit in rows listening to a teacher summing up the basics of mathematics. Moipa, an ONWO directive and in whose house I spent my time in Yawepade said that they wanted to change to way the schools worked in Waorani communities. “They should be better...even my children find them boring. They don’t like sitting still”. Among the numerous projects that Moipa is involved with, is the introduction of Montessori type of basic education. His wife Yima who studied pedagogy in Puyo stressed that this type of education would be better because it can combine theoretical knowledge with the practices of living in the forest.

No one that has spent any amount of time with Waorani can be left unimpressed by their ecological knowledge. A seemingly endless amount of different species are known, though not always by their name, but always by their function(s). It is this knowledge that makes the diversity

of the forest visible. Where an outsider is seeing a green wall of vegetation my guide and translator always saw difference, diversity. Plants that cure indigestion, plants that cause indigestion, plants used to build the roofs of longhouses, or to make baskets to carry yet another species of fruit, berry or nut.

Any single plant can have many different functions. Like the Oné mentioned above. The meat of its nuts is boiled and eaten. The nuts themselves are grounded and used against parasites. Its sharp needles are used to pinch holes in earlobes and its leaves, after having been boiled become the rope of which hammocks, bracelets and necklaces are made.

And it does not stop here. Not only are the specific attributes pertaining to a specific plant well known, but also its ecological functions. As I already described above the *Chonta* palms red colored nuts attract birds and always some are left for them to eat. The hunter knows where and what its prey eats and rarely comes back from a hunting trip without success.

Changes in the environment are noticed at the moment they occur. Recently a new species of red ants was discovered in the community's surroundings which were particularly ferocious. The people blamed the Brazilian oil-workers of having introduced them deliberately to scare the Waorani away. Whether or not this is true, the thing is that the inhabitants of the forest noticed them. No small feat if you consider that when at any given moment one looks at the ground it is possible to discern at least five different species of ants.

Continuous direct engagement with the environment and learning through the development of skills instead of depending only on theoretical knowledge goes some way in explaining the sensitivity towards the environment. The connection of everything with everything, of plants with birds, birds and humans and humans with plants, is something no one needs to explain to a Waorani. The interdependence of elements within an ecological system is something that is learned playfully by even the smallest children, just as they learn to develop the skills that are required to benefit from the 'natural abundance' of the forest. I found myself thinking often on the stark contrast with western ways of learning. All the time we spend struggling in the working groups at the University to understand what Ingold meant when he spoke of the 'relational constitution of being'.

Agyrou (2005) has a point when, criticizing the idea that indigenous people are 'natural conservationists', he writes that "apparently they are good to think *with*". The Waorani are good to think with since they show different ways of conceptualizing, or rather the lack of it, and relating to the environment. Learning through practice is not the same as learning theoretically. This is not to say that learning theoretically is useless, but what the Waorani can show us, is where the limits of this way of thinking are. As well as what goes missing when we do only depend on theoretical approaches from the world of our minds.

To engage directly, to be immersed day in day out, with nature instead of visiting it on a free Sunday gives one a more refined understanding of what it means to dwell on this planet. It nurtures the development of sensibility and responsivity towards changes in the environment.

To show how this differs with us the difference we can turn again to climate change. It took scientist almost 200 years since the industrial revolution to find out that the burning of fossil fuels releases a gas that potentially has disastrous effects on life on earth. Thanks to scientific and technological developments we eventually did find out something was wrong. We were 'sensitive' then, in a way, but over a time span of two centuries. And, ironically, using the same type of scientific knowledge that produces some of the problems we face today. Even now it is difficult, also for me, to realize on a hot summer's day that this is somehow linked to my own behavior as a consumer or to the forces of capitalism on production processes. Compare this to a person plucking all the berries from a tree and finding out the next day while hunting that there is no bird to be found anywhere near the tree they usually nest.

Concluding, In this chapter I have described in what way the Waorani can be seen as building blocks for modernity and environmentalism. I have also written that, while both ideologies have influenced Waorani way of living, this should not be seen as if the Waorani have lost their cultural identity. By adopting the view of the Waorani as procurers we can understand better how they adapt to changing circumstances. Even though, their resilience is laudable we must not lose sight of their marginality. The power to define is not theirs, the only power they have at this moment is to resist the definitions given by others or use them to their own advantage. While being aware of the pitfalls of the environmentalist view I have ended this chapter arguing that there is something we can learn from the Waorani. Namely their knowledge of the amazonian ecological system and the sensitivity towards changes herein as caused by their continual engagement with their environment.

## Conclusion

Conclusion are hard to draw when writing on ongoing processes. The Yasuni-ITT proposal is far from finished. It will evolve further just as the politics, nationally and internationally, that surround it. With this in mind, it is for the sake of clarity that I will summon up the argument I have made.

With the Yasuni-itt proposal the Ecuadorian government attempts to move away from a neoliberal model of development and its narrow focus on material progress and individual wellbeing. It is the result of what happens when cultural and environmental values are incorporated in ideas on economic development. This is part of a larger political project of the left wing Ecuadorian government, which shows an improvement in the way the country's indigenous groups and nature are talked about. This however, is not enough to hide the fact the behind the discursive changes, business continues largely as usual.

Ecuador wants to diminish its dependency on natural resources, but claims it can only do so by first intensifying extractive activities. This type of reasoning is questionable and has not had favorable results for neither nature nor the indigenous population. Yet, as I argued, this is not just Ecuador's fault. It is also the result of the logic of capitalism and the basic workings of the state. The difficulty of doing things differently is also part of the way in which institutions of power hold on to their privileges. I believe to have shown this by the example of how carbon markets are, by their very design, aimed at increasing competitiveness of companies involved than actually doing something about climate change. Instead of collectively taking responsibility for the problems we face we either point to each other, or avoid it all together by creating markets to do the work for us. This, as it turns out does not have the results one would hope for. Furthermore I argued that the way in which we deal with environmental issues has the characteristics of a tragedy. We see and know that how we handle the earths ecology is wrong and needs to change, but seem to be unable to do so.

The Yasuni-ITT proposal is about the Waorani as well, since it is the place where they live. Yet they have not had anything to say so far about the proposal. This is typical of their history, in which they have always served as building blocks for the ideologies that were imposed on them. I have described the trajectories of modernism and environmentalism and how they influenced, but not erased(!), Waorani way of living, and claimed that they are similar in their dominance.

Because of the poverty I found in the Yasuni-ITT proposal's dependence of foreign finance, I included a part on how the Waorani related with nature and what I believe we can learn from this. I have argued that it is through their continuous direct engagement with the forest that they develop sensitivity towards changes. This is what is missing in the western relationship with the

environment and this is part of what leads to our current predicament.

## Bibliography

- Acosta, A. (2009) *La maldición de la abundancia*. Ediciones Abya Yala: Quito, Ecuador  
Ediciones Abya-Yala
- Acosta, A. and Martínez, E. (2010) *ITT Yasuni entre el petróleo y la vida*. Abya Yala: Quito, Ecuador
- Agyrou, V. (2005) *The logic of environmentalism: Anthropology, Ecology and Postcoloniality*.  
Berghahn books.
- Bauman, Z. (2011) *Collateral Damage: Social Inequalities in a Global Age*. Cambridge: Polity  
press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994) *The location of culture*. Routledge Classics: London, UK.
- Bird-David, N. (1992) *Beyond the hunting and gathering mode of subsistence: Culture sensitive  
observations on the Nayaka and other modern hunter-gatherers*. Man, New Series, Vol. 27,  
19-44.
- Bond, P. (2012) *Inclusive Green Growth Or Extractive Greenwashed Decay?*. Available at: at:  
[http://www.zcommunications.org/inclusive-green-growth-or-extractive-greenwashed-decay-  
by-patrick-bond](http://www.zcommunications.org/inclusive-green-growth-or-extractive-greenwashed-decay-by-patrick-bond)
- Cardoso, F. H. and Faletto E. (1979) *Dependency and Development in Latin America*. Berkeley:  
University of California Press.
- Daly, Herman E. “ *Economics In A Full World*”, Scientific American (September 2005), 293, 100-  
107.
- Echevarria, H. (2010) *Constitucion y derecho penal ambiental: retos juridicos*. In Derechos y  
Ambiente, Vol. 2, 3-8.
- Ellen, R. and Fukui, K. (1996) *Redefining nature: ecology, culture and domestication*. Oxford: Berg
- Finer, M et al. (2009) *Ecuador's Yasuni Biosphere Reserve: a brief modern history and  
conservation challenges*. Environ. Res. Lett. 4. (22pp).
- Fontaine, E. (2006) *Petróleo y Desarrollo sostenible en Ecuador*. Rispergraf: Quito, Ecuador.
- Fuentes, F. (2012) *Ecuador: new left or new colonialism?* Available at:  
<http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/51353>
- Galeano, E. (1971) *Las Venas Abiertas de America Latina*. Siglo XXI editores: Mexico DF, Mexico
- Gerlach, A. (2003) *Indians, Oil and Politics: A Recent History of Ecuador*. Scholarly resources inc.
- Gudynas, E. (2010) *The new extractivism in South America: Ten Urgent Theses about extractivism in  
relation to current South American progressivism*. Available at: [http://www.bicusa.org/en/  
Article.11769.aspx](http://www.bicusa.org/en/Article.11769.aspx)

- Hansen, J (2009) *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Harnecker, M.(2011) *Ecuador: una nueva izquierda en busca de la vida en plenitud*. El viejo topo, Spain.
- Harris et al. (2007) *Ways of knowing: anthropological approaches to crafting experience and knowledge*. Methodology and History in Anthropology Vol. 18, Berghahn Books
- Ingold, T. (2000) *Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. Routledge: London, UK
- (2011) *Being alive: essays on movement, knowledge and description*. Routledge publishers, London
- Larrea, Carlos (2011), “ *Yasuni-ITT: Una Iniciativa Para Cambiar La Historia*”, available at: <http://www.campusvirtual.uasb.edu.ec/uisa/images/yasuni/documentos/2011%20itt%20folleto%20esp.pdf>
- Larrea and Warnars, (2009) *Ecuador's Yasuni-ITT Initiative: Avoiding emissions by keeping petroleum underground*. International Energy Initiative. Published by Elsevier Inc. (5pp)
- Lewis, J. (2008) *Managing abundance, not chasing scarcity: the real challenge for the 21st century*. Radical Anthropology Journal, Vol. 2, 11-19
- Lu, F. L. (2005) *The catch 22 of conservation: indigenous people, biologists and cultural change*. In Human Ecology, Vol. 22(3), 199-215
- Mangan, J. E.(2005) *Trading roles: Gender ethnicity and the urban economy of colonial Potosi*. Duke university press.
- Milton, K. (1993) *Environmentalism: the view from anthropology*. Routledge: London, UK
- Oilwatch (2005) *Assaulting the paradise:petroleum companies in protected areas*. Available at: [http://www.oilwatch.org/doc/libros/Assaulting\\_the\\_paradise.pdf](http://www.oilwatch.org/doc/libros/Assaulting_the_paradise.pdf)
- Narvaez, I. (2009) *Petroleo y poder: el colapso de un lugar singular Yasuni*. FlacsoAndes: Quito, Ecuador.
- Pearson, (2009) *Waorani at the head of the table: towards inclusive conservation in Yasuni*. Environ. Res. Lett. 4. IOP publishing. (3pp)
- Ray, R. and Kozameh S. (2012) *Ecuador's Economy Since 2007*. Centre for Economic Policy Research. Available at:<http://www.cepr.net/index.php/publications/reports/ecuadors-economy-since-2007>
- Rival, L. (2000) *Marginality with a difference: how the Huaorani remain autonomous, preserve their sharing relations and naturalize outside economic powers*. In Hunters and gatherers in

the modern world: conflict, resistance and self-determination, 244-260.

(2002) *Trekking through history. The Huaorani of Amazonian Ecuador*. Columbia University Press: New York, USA.

(2009) *Ecuador's Yasuni-ITT Initiative: The old and new values of petroleum*. Ecological Economics. Published by Elsevier. 358-364.

Saint, S. (2004) *The end of the spear*. Every tribe publisher: New York, USA.

Sawyer, S. (2004) *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism In Ecuador*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Sebastian and Hurtig (2001) *Oil exploitation in the Amazon basin of Ecuador: a public health emergency*. In Pan Am J Public Health, Vol 15, 205-211

Sokal, D. and Bricmont, J. (1998) *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*. Picador: USA, New York

Tsing, A. L. (2005) *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Uquillas, J. E. and Larreamendy, P. (2006), *Applied Anthropology in Ecuador: Development Practice and Discourse*. NAPA Bulletin, Vol. 25:14–34.

Vallejo, M., Larrea, C., Burbano, B., Falconi, F. (2012) La iniciativa Yasuni-ITT desde una perspectiva multicriterial. Abya Yala: Quito, Ecuador

Yashar, D. (2005) *Contesting citizenship in Latin America: The rise of indigenous movements and the postliberal change*. Cambridge University press, New York, United States.

Zibechi, R (2012) *Ecuador: the construction of a new model of domination*. Available at:

<http://upsidedownworld.org/main/ecuador-archives-49/3152-ecuador-the-construction-of-a-new-model-of-domination>







