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Oil and Gas Projects in Western Amazon Threaten Biodiversity and Indigenous Peoples

The western Amazon, home to the most biodiverse and intact rainforest left on Earth, may soon be covered with oil rigs and pipelines.

According to a new study, over 180 oil and gas “blocks” – areas zoned for exploration and development – now cover the megadiverse western Amazon, which includes Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and western Brazil. These oil and gas blocks stretch over 688,000 km² (170 million acres), a vast area nearly the size of Texas.

The study appears in the August 13 edition of the open-access journal PLoS ONE. The paper is available online at <http://dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0002932>.

For over three years, researchers from two U.S. non-profit organizations – Save America's Forests and Land Is Life – and scientists from Duke University tracked hydrocarbon activities across the region and generated a comprehensive map of oil and gas activities across the western Amazon. The result is an alarming assessment of the threats to the biodiversity and indigenous peoples of the region.

“We found that the oil and gas blocks overlap perfectly with the most biodiverse part of the Amazon for birds, mammals, and amphibians,” said study co-author Dr. Clinton Jenkins of Duke University. “The threat to amphibians is of particular concern because they are already the most threatened group of vertebrates worldwide.”

The study also found that the oil and gas blocks are concentrated in the most intact part of the Amazon. Even national parks are not immune; exploration and development blocks cover the renowned Yasuní National Park in Ecuador and Madidi National Park in Bolivia.

“The most dynamic situation is unfolding in the Peruvian Amazon,” warned lead author Dr. Matt Finer of Save America's Forests.

The study reports that 64 oil and gas blocks cover approximately 72% of the vast Peruvian Amazon (~490,000 km² or ~121 million acres), an area much larger than California. All but eight of these blocks have

appeared since 2003, when Peru launched a major effort to boost exploration across the Amazon. National parks are off limits to hydrocarbon activities in Peru, but oil and gas blocks do overlap a variety of other types of protected areas.

Many of the oil and gas blocks in the western Amazon overlap titled lands of indigenous peoples and encroach on the territories of indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation. These isolated peoples have chosen to live in the forests without contact with the outside world. They are extremely susceptible to outside illnesses due to lack of natural resistance.

In the second part of the study, the researchers delve into the most cutting policy issues related to oil and gas activities in the Amazon.

The authors highlighted new access roads as the greatest single threat from hydrocarbon development. Roads trigger deforestation, colonization, overhunting, and illegal logging in previously remote areas.

“The elimination of new oil access roads could significantly reduce the impacts of most projects,” said Finer, echoing one of the studies’ main conclusions.

The analysis points out that the current environmental assessment process is inadequate due to a lack of independence in the review process and a lack of comprehensive analyses of the long-term, cumulative, and synergistic impacts of multiple oil and gas projects across the wider region. The authors stress the need for regional Strategic Environmental Assessments in order to correct this situation.

The study also addresses the complex policy issues related to indigenous peoples.

"The way that oil development is being pursued in the Western Amazon is a gross violation of the rights of the indigenous peoples of the region" said Brian Keane of Land is Life, "International agreements and Inter-American human rights law recognize that indigenous peoples have rights to their lands, and explicitly prohibit the granting of concessions to exploit natural resources in their territories without their free, prior and informed consent."

The authors also detail the growing conflict of hydrocarbon activities slated for the territories of indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation.

Finally, the study highlights the role of the international community. Growing global energy demand is driving the search for more oil and gas in the Amazon and companies from the U.S., Canada, Europe, and China are carrying out most of the development.

“Filling up with a tank of gas could soon have devastating consequences to rainforests, their peoples, and their species” remarked co-author Dr. Stuart Pimm of Duke University.

Ecuador’s innovative Yasuní-ITT Initiative is held up as a potentially precedent-setting example of how the global north and south can collaborate on both protecting the Amazon and combating climate change. The initiative is the Government of Ecuador's limited-time offer to keep its largest untapped oilfields unexploited in exchange for financial compensation from the international community.