



Oil Drilling Threatens the Most Biodiverse Rainforest on Earth Warns the “Scientists Concerned for Yasuní”

The “Scientists Concerned for Yasuní” – a group of more than 100 scientists from Ecuador and around the world (Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, and United States) with experience in Yasuní National Park – submitted a statement to the Ecuadorian Congress detailing the extraordinary biodiversity of the park and strongly warning against allowing new oil drilling in its core.

The Ecuadorian Congress is currently debating President Rafael Correa’s proposal to open up the remote northeast section of Yasuní National Park, areas known as oil blocks 31 and ITT, to a potentially massive new oil drilling operation. Since the area is within a national park, Congress must declare the projects to be in the national interest. President Correa’s new aggressive push for oil drilling comes on the heels of his announcing the failure of a 6-year initiative seeking international financial compensation in exchange for leaving the oil permanently underground.

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

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

“The diversity of Yasuní National Park really is quite stunning when you realize the extreme richness spans across all biological groups,” said Anthony Di Fiore of the University of Texas at Austin, who has worked in the Yasuní region for almost 2 decades. “From monkeys to birds to frogs to woody plants, Yasuní is among the world record holders in almost every category.”

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

“The campaign is much direr this time because the government drilling plans are much more aggressive and extensive than in years past,” said Matt Finer of the Center for International Environmental Law. “They are not nibbling around the edges of the park anymore, but going deep into the core of one of the most important protected areas in the world.”

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

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

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

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

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Some specific examples cited by the Scientists Concerned for Yasuní about the park:

- The 153 documented **amphibian** species represents a world record at the landscape scale ($\leq 10,000$ km²).
- The 274 documented **amphibian and reptile** species represents a world record at the landscape scale.
- The 597 documented **bird** species and the 176 documented **mammal** species represent some of the highest known totals at the landscape scale.
- The ten coexisting **primate** species represents a remarkable diversity at the local scale (≤ 100 km²).
- The over 3,000 documented **vascular plants** is among the richest areas globally at the landscape scale.
- A typical hectare of terra firme forest in Yasuní National Park contains at least 655 **tree** species, more than are native to the continental United States and Canada combined.
- The park is part of an equatorial band of forest (stretching from the Ecuadorian Andes to Manaus in Brazil) that contains the richest 1-hectare **tree** plots in the world.
- Yasuní National Park is home to 28 **Threatened** or **Near Threatened vertebrate species**, such as White-bellied Spider Monkey, Giant Otter, Poepig's Woolly Monkey, Amazonian Manatee, Lowland Tapir, Giant Armadillo, and Harpy Eagle. Nearly half of these 28 species are facing a high to extremely high risk of extinction in the wild.

Further background material:

Global Conservation Significance of Ecuador's Yasuní National Park.

<http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0008767>

The case against Ecuador's claims of 'low-impact drilling' in Yasuní

<http://news.mongabay.com/2013/0916-finer-yasuni-drilling.html>

Photo by Bejat McCracken

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