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Resistance and rebuilding in the Amazon

Ashish Kothari | 17th September 2019



Indigenous Sapara people are resisting oil extractivism and building the case for protecting 30 million hectares of the Amazon.

I am in the Amazon with Manari Ushigua, a shaman

and healer, within the Ecuadorian territory of the Sapara indigenous nation, a people who have inhabited the forest for thousands of years, and whose deep immersion within it is legendary.

On our journey, Manari stops and points above his head to a thick vine snaking its way up the trunk of a tree. “This,” he says, “is the source of curare, which was used as an anaesthetic in the old days; we also use it as a poison for hunting.” He had rubbed the bark of another tree a few minutes beforehand. A white paste formed in his hand. As applied it to my head, he said: “This is our botox, use it if you want to appear young!”

Manari is also head of the Sapara Association. He has just displayed a tiny fraction of what they know about the forest and its beings. Their knowledge is so profound that it has been recognized by UNESCO as part of humanity’s ‘intangible heritage’.

Population decline

Unfortunately, this intangible wealth is threatened by the modern world’s quest for financial profit, and the ideology of economic growth that fuels it.

The Sapara are threatened by concessions given by the

Ecuadorian government to oil companies within its territory. If these plans go ahead, it could be the death-knell for a people already beleaguered by severe population decline. The Sapara are down to about 600 from 20,000, decimated by diseases brought in by outsiders who also enslaved them for the rubber trade and other commerce.

Fortunately the population is now stable, but any new factor such as incursions by oil extraction and mining could tip it over towards extinction.

The threat is not only physical – the destruction of the forest and water on which the Sapara depend – though that is real enough. Perhaps much more insidious, and very difficult for the modern world to understand, is the violation of the spirit of the Sapara and all the beings they live with, an attack that could kill them psychologically and emotionally even if they survive physically.

The Sapara have lived as part of nature, as one amongst millions of beings in the Amazon, for as long as they can remember. They believe their past, their ancestors, are what guide their present, and their dreams tell them what to do next.

Resisting and rebuilding

The Sapara ‘read’ their dreams, interpreting them to understand what the spirits are telling them, and what steps they must take today and tomorrow. Daily rituals to stay connected are as important as eating and drinking and making love; we learnt this as every day started with a ‘cleansing’ ceremony, washed with water in which *chiricaspi* leaves were immersed, or painted on our faces with the deep red of *achote* tree fruits, or given *guayusa* tea to drink.

Oil extraction, mining, logging, and any other such extractivist activities would irrevocably undermine this delicate balance between the material and the spiritual, as much as it would destroy the intricate web of life that this rainforest supports.

As devastating is the decline of their language. Manari said: “Only 2-3 people now know it fully, the rest of us have grown up being told Spanish is the proper language to speak. We are trying now to bring it back by teaching it in our school.”

UNESCO’s heritage tag includes the Sapara language, since it

encodes so much of their knowledge. It is a sobering fact that most of the world's endangered languages, and there are thousands, are the ones that indigenous people have spoken, and they are mostly unconnected to the few globally dominant languages.

The Sapara are resisting and rebuilding. They have travelled out of their territory to Quito, and other parts of the world, to tell their story. They have been supported in this by indigenous networks such as the CONFENIAE (Confederation of Indigenous Nations of Ecuadorian Amazon) and COICA (Coordinator of Indigenous Organisations of the Amazon River Basin), and civil society groups like Fundacion Pachamama and the Pachamama Alliance.

These people have told the Ecuadorian Government in clear, unambiguous terms: we don't want oil drilling and mining in our territory ... or for that matter, anywhere in the Amazon.

Palpable unfairness

Resistance is one of two strategies they are using. The second is providing alternatives to the narrative of the Ecuadorian government, that extractive industries are the only way it can generate enough revenues to put into programmes for people's welfare.

The Ecuadorian Government has over the last few years become seriously indebted to the Chinese, having taken enormous amounts of their investments without a thought on how they would repay. Chinese companies, fully backed by their government, have moved into Latin America in a massive way in the last decade or two, funding major infrastructure as a means to reach the continent's rich natural resources.

The Ecuadorian state's inability (or unwillingness) to imagine and move towards an economy not dependent on extractivism (the only recent shift by socialist governments being to move away from private capitalist control to state control), has meant that indigenous peoples and civil society organisations are having to think up radical alternatives.

While the unfairness of this is palpable, nevertheless the Sapara and other indigenous nations are coming up with diverse ideas.

Ecological understanding

Our forest walk with Manari and other Sapara is part of one such attempt. The community has set up a community-led tourism initiative deep inside their territory, called Naku (Sapara for forest), near the village of Llanhamacocha.

It is not a typical tourism venture; rather, it is focused on healing, where visitors can spend a few days immersed in the sights and sounds and smells and spirits of the forest, receive the wisdom of the local people, have their dreams interpreted, and partake in cleansing and medicinal ceremonies including (if they so wish) a session with the legendary plant ayahuasca (*iyouna* in Sapara).

My colleagues and I are being treated to all this for five amazing days in June this year, days with no internet or phone connection, the pace slowed down to that of one of the stunning millipedes one could see in the forest, and no schedule to stick to.

It was so different from my usual routine of doing one thing after the other, of constantly referring to my watch, that it took me the first two days to just make the bodily, emotional and mental shift.

The Naku initiative is now providing resources for the community to invest in some other crucial needs. A school has been started where apart from the regular curriculum set by the state, the community has introduced elements of its own culture, knowledge, and ecological understanding.

The resources are now adequate even for the Sapara to employ a full time project coordinator: Estefania Paez is a young woman from Quito, who has taken to the task with enthusiasm (and was, incidentally, our trip organizer and interpreter).

Ecological limits

The Sapara are also aware that dependence on tourism for generating alternative livelihoods is fragile. They have begun experimenting with products, made from things obtained from the forest using their artistic skills and traditions, that can be sold. They are conferring amongst themselves and with supporters from outside on other possibilities.

The Naku initiative is of course a very partial alternative to the economic approach of the Ecuadorian state. There is no way it can compete with the revenues generated by oil and minerals.

Ecuador will need to look at alternatives like reviving its agriculture through agroecological approaches, community-led tourism, localizing the economy for basic needs, and other such options that are sensitive to the region's biocultural diversity and fragility.

The government also needs to step up its efforts to get global assistance to keep the Amazon intact, emphasising its incredible role in maintaining global hydrological and climate cycles, the incalculable value of its biodiversity and its indigenous cultures and knowledge systems. Not as carbon trading kind of mechanisms, for those only legitimize the capitalist system that is one of the roots of the crises in the first place, but more in the form of reparations from the global north for the enormous damage it has done to both the Amazon and to the world's environment, i.e. repayment for its ecological debt to the peoples and biodiversity of the Amazon.

These are difficult and long-term struggles. For the immediate, the Sapara are expressing to the world that they want to be left in peace, with no incursions by oil and mining companies, and that they have ideas for how they can build a bioeconomy that respects ecological limits as also the wisdom of the peoples that inhabit that Amazon.

Ambitious initiatives

Sapara are participating in an ambitious Amazon Sacred Headwaters Initiative, combining several indigenous networks in Ecuador and Peru, with support from groups like Pachamama Alliance and Amazon Watch, to build the case for protecting 30 million hectares of the Amazon from extractive industries.

With one final ceremony, we bid an optimistic 'hasta pronto' to our Sapara hosts. Our tiny plane rumbles off the dirt runway, and as it circles around Llanhamacocha and begins to head towards the nearby Shell airport, the enormous expanse of the Amazon comes into view.

The river along which we had camped appears like a snake gleaming in the sun. Verdant green all the way to the horizon, broken by winding water snakes, the crowns of skyscraping trees emerging like sentinels ... it's a view unlike anywhere else on earth. Can it survive the onslaught of the greed-driven, power-hungry world of 'development'?

As I write this news of the fires affecting the Amazon (and nearby regions) is waning in global media, making the prospect of survival seem even more bleak. Nevertheless, people are resisting and rebuilding.

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