“We are the Lungs of the World”: Popular Environmentalism and the Local Politics of Climate Change in the Ecuadorian Amazon

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by

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Acknowledgments

In 1969, my father spent two years in Peru with the Peace Corps, his first trip to Latin America and the start of a long career of conservation work on the continent. This thesis results from my own first trip to Latin America, taken at almost the exact same age, and inspired by the same concerns for the protection of nature. In my time in Ecuador, I felt like I could see my father’s footsteps all around me, whether bouncing around on a winding Andean road—an experience about which I had heard many a story—or canoeing into Yasuní—a place my father has had a hand in preserving—for the first time. I’m especially lucky that, for the last two weeks of my research, I got to trace some of those steps with my father by my side. Dad, this thesis is dedicated to you.

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Abstract
This ethnographic pilot research addresses new forms of environmental mobilization and ecological consciousness connected to Ecuador’s Yasuní-ITT initiative, an innovative climate change mitigation project. The initiative, which proposes to leave nearly a billion barrels of oil underground in an area of high biodiversity in exchange for international compensation, has, thus far, been analyzed primarily in terms of its relationship to carbon markets and international climate negotiations. Drawing on fieldwork in the Yasuní region, I explore local perceptions of, and engagement in, the initiative. I focus particularly on the area’s mixed-race mestizo colonists, who have often been invisible in discussions of the Amazon’s primarily indigenous environmental movements. I argue that traditional frameworks for understanding popular environmentalism—particularly, Joan Martinez-Alier’s “environmentalism of the poor”, which focuses on how environmentalism emerges from material livelihood interests—do not fully capture how Ecuadorian activists value conservation and petroleum, use environmentalism to construct identities and claim a connection to territory, and understand the relationship between ecological protection and development. I propose the “environmentalism of the people” as a new framework to guide further research into the role of local governments, national politics, and non-indigenous actors in generating popular environmentalism and influencing the success and failure of climate mitigation projects.
Abbreviations

CO₂ – Carbon Dioxide
CONAIE – La Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (“Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador”)
EJ – Environmental Justice
EotP – Environmentalism of the Poor
FICCKAE – Federación Indigena de Comunas y Comunidades Kichwas de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana (“Indigenous Federation of Kichwa Communities of the Ecuadorian Amazon”)
ITT – Ishpingo-Tambochocha-Tiputini
IZ – Intangible Zone
MoE – Ministry of Environment
NAWE – Nacionalidad Waorani del Ecuador (“Huaorani Nation of Ecuador”)
NGO – Non-Governmental Organization
NRF – Nueva Roca Fuerte
OAS – Organization of American States
OPEC – Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
PMC – Plan de Medidas Cautelares (“Plan of Precuationary Measures”)
REDD – Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation
T/T – Tagaeri and Taromenane
WCS – Wildlife Conservation Society

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Introduction

The Big Idea from a Small Country

During the next decade, annual greenhouse gas emissions from developing countries will surpass those of the developed world (Chandler et al. 2002). While often portrayed as passive victims of climatological processes initiated elsewhere\(^1\), developing countries will therefore play a determinative role in the success or failure of global efforts to mitigate climate change (Markandya and Halsnaes 2001; Jotzo 2005; Helm 2009; Cardoso 2009). Engaging developing countries in climate mitigation will require innovative policy mechanisms that transfer significant resources from North to South\(^2\) and use those resources to simultaneously address emissions, local environmental degradation, and human social and economic needs (Halsnæs 1996; Najam, Huq, and Sokona 2003; Halsnæs and Verhagen 2007; Wagner et al. 2009). As the limited impact of international summits like that in Copenhagen (2009) highlight, however, mitigating climate change will require more than just clever policy. It will also require novel forms of politics that allow Southern governments to resist institutional and popular pressures for carbon-intensive and extraction-financed economic growth (Roberts and Parks 2007; Depledge and Yamin 2009; Giddens 2009; Lahsen 2009). This thesis explores one such innovative policy mechanism—Ecuador’s Yasuní-ITT initiative—and the national and local environmental politics that surround it.

The potential impacts of climate change in Ecuador, including losses in agricultural production, stress on urban water systems from melting glaciers, and climatological disasters, are daunting (UNDP 2007; World Bank 2010; Vidal 2010a). Nonetheless, Ecuador seems an unlikely candidate to be an innovator in climate mitigation. Its historical contributions to greenhouse gas emissions are negligible\(^3\), and neighbouring governments have insisted that the primary responsibility for addressing climate change rests with Northern countries (Adger et al. 2001; Johnson 2001; Gudynas 2009). More importantly, Ecuador is Latin America’s fifth-largest oil producer, and petroleum provides over a quarter of government revenue (Sanchez-Paramo 2005).

\(^1\) This distinction between developing countries—with the responsibility and capacity to mitigate climate change—and poor ones—who can only adapt—is abundant in the literature (Gleick 1989; Grist 2008; Collier, Conway, and Venables 2009; Crate and Nuttall 2009) and cemented into policy by the “common but differentiated responsibilities” framework of the Kyoto protocol (Lemos and Agrawal 2006).

\(^2\) The World Bank (2010) estimates that the developing world will bear 75-80% of the costs of climate change, and that $140-175 billion a year will be required to finance climate mitigation in developing countries.

\(^3\) Ecuador’s yearly per capita emissions of CO\(_2\) are 2.3 tons, half the world average and an eighth those of the United States (Campodónico 2010).
Speaking to the UN General Assembly in September 2007, however, Ecuador’s leftist president, Rafael Correa, offered a “pioneer initiative in the history of an oil-producing country” (Correa and Moreno 2007), pledging to leave one billion barrels of oil underground in the Ishpingo-Tambochocha-Tiputini (ITT) bloc of Yasuni National Park. This Amazonian park is one of the most biodiverse in the world and home to the Tagaeri and Taromenane, two indigenous groups that live in voluntary isolation (Bass et al. 2010). In exchange, Ecuador asked for compensation—$3.6 billion, half the oil’s market value—to be deposited into a UNDP trust fund that would finance reforestation, renewable energy, protection of Ecuador’s parks, environmental research, and sustainable development in the Yasuní region. If Ecuador ever exploited the oil, the funds would return to the contributors.

From the moment this Yasuní-ITT initiative was put forward, it received accolades from international media, civil society, and academics. British news outlets like the BBC and Financial Times called the initiative “pioneering”, “unprecedented”, and a “revolutionary plan” that could “serve as a blueprint for saving large tracts of the planet” (Caselli 2010; Blair 2011; McAvoy 2010; Vidal 2010b). For Ecuadorian environmentalists, the proposal offered a “change of paradigm” that “uproots the economic model in its entirety” (Martínez 2009:19). Academics have explored Yasuní-ITT as a means of implementing “ecological economics” (Rival 2010), establishing “eco-socialism” (Le Quang 2010), or creating new North-South coalitions for environmental protection (Martin 2010, 2011).

The aspirations of the ITT proposal’s Ecuadorian authors reached beyond Ecuador. Indeed, they claimed that the initiative’s central mechanism—compensation for leaving fossil fuels underground—is a “post-resource curse” model for biodiverse developing countries worldwide (Larrea 2010b).4 Activists have already seized the example of Yasuní-ITT in their efforts to avert exploitation in Bolivia, Guyana, Guatemala, and Belize (Chávez 2010; LAHT 2010b; Ramos 2011). When the UN urged President Kabila of Congo to refrain from oil exploration in Virunga Park, he responded that, if Congo were to do that, it would expect compensation along the lines of Yasuní-ITT (Manson 2010).

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4 According to the Ecuadorian government, countries that could use the ITT mechanism are Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Indonesia, Madagascar, Malaysia, Papa New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, and Venezuela (Larrea and Warnars 2009).
A Parable of Failed Climate Mitigation?

Undoubtedly, the most significant feature of the Yasuni-ITT initiative is the mechanism for mitigating climate change it proposes.\(^5\) If burned, the oil of Yasuni’s ITT bloc would emit 407 million tons of CO\(_2\), equivalent to the entire yearly emissions of France (Koenig 2007). There is no precedent in existing climate treaties for leaving fossil fuels underground as a tool for reducing emissions (Silvestrum 2009). As one Ecuadorian minister described the initiative, “This is an entirely new model for fighting climate change that we have devised, which is paying for non-emissions. It doesn’t exist in the world. It’s not in Kyoto; it’s not anywhere.”\(^6\) In fact, by using international funds to preserve biodiversity, protect indigenous livelihoods, and finance development, Yasuni-ITT appears to represent just the sort of innovative, multi-dimensional policy scholars have identified as necessary to bring developing countries into the international climate regime.

Yet, for all its promise, the Yasuní-ITT initiative appears unlikely to succeed. Despite initial endorsements from European parliaments, the OAS, OPEC, and a raft of celebrities, funds have not been forthcoming. As of November 2010, the trust fund had received only $100,000 from Chile, a “symbolic” $20,000 from China, $12,000 from private donors, and small pledges from Spain and a regional government in Belgium (Ortiz 2010; El Universo 2010; El Ciudadano 2010; LAHT 2010c). Most significantly, Germany—which had initially promised €50 million a year for thirteen years—withdraw its pledge in September 2010, citing mistrust of Ecuador’s intentions, concerns about the precedent the initiative would set, and a desire to work within carbon markets (Lang 2010).

The apparent failure of Yasuni-ITT could be one more example of the “dysfunctional North-South politics” (Depledge and Yamin 2009:443) that undermine efforts to achieve international action on climate change. Existing work on Yasuni is congruent with this perspective, situating the initiative within literature on international climate negotiations, Ecuadorian political economy, and transnational environmental activism (Boedt and Martinez 2007; Finer et al. 2009; Inesch 2009; Vogel 2009; Warnars 2010; Rosendal et al. 2008; Martin 2010; Larrea and Warnars 2009; Acosta et al. 2009; Martinez 2009; Fontaine 2007a). In focusing primarily on the technical dimensions of Yasuni-ITT as a policy, though, these studies have not fully explored the politics behind Yasuni. This thesis addresses this gap by

\(^5\) See, e.g., Gallagher (2009) [“What ups the ante [with Yasuní-ITT] is climate change”], Finer et al. (2009:63) [“The most innovative component of the Yasuní-ITT initiative is the concept of leaving oil underground…thus helping to combat climate change”] or Acosta et al. (2009:5) [Avoiding CO\(_2\) emissions is “the key global contribution of the initiative”].

\(^6\) All interviews were conducted in Spanish; translations are the author’s.
asking if, why, and how ordinary Ecuadorians living in the Yasuní region understand, interpret, and mobilize around the initiative (although, see Rival 2009, 2010).

Existing theories suggest that poor people are unlikely to become involved in projects to mitigate climate change, because awareness of climate change is limited, its culprits are difficult to pinpoint, and addressing it often appears less pressing than poverty alleviation (Gough and Shackley 2001; Roberts and Parks 2007; Kabubo-Mariara 2009). As Martinez-Alier (2002:11) argues, people in the developing world instead engage with environmental issues that have a direct, immediate, and material impact on their day-to-day livelihoods. In the Amazonian context, this leads to the assumption that only indigenous people—with a long-standing connection to the land as an economic and cultural base—will be involved in environmental movements, while non-indigenous “colonist” migrants support extraction for their own economic benefit. Nonetheless, these theoretical predictions have not been tested with respect to climate mitigation projects.

This thesis shows the widespread support for leaving the ITT oil underground among the largely poor and marginalized non-indigenous population living near Yasuní.\(^7\) In contrast to literature that asserts that the poor support environmentalism only when it can be tied to local, material livelihoods, I found that respondents understood the benefits of conserving Yasuní in terms of the park’s value to the Ecuadorian nation. Examining the origins of this framing of environmental protection—which, following Rival (2010:363), I label the “environmentalism of the people”—I argue that environmentalism in the Yasuní region has emerged as a highly politicized vehicle through which local actors, particularly municipal governments, critique extraction-centered development, assert their place within the Ecuadorian nation, and generate a new mestizo-Amazonian identity among non-indigenous “colonists”. In short, local actors do engage with climate change in significant ways, but for reasons much more complex than an interest in mitigating emissions.

In the next chapter, I review the literature on environmental movements in the developing world. I focus on assumptions that cut across different theories: that Amazonian “colonists” are disinterested in environmental protection, that “environmentalism of the poor” emerges only in response to local threats to economic livelihoods, and that governments in the developing world are always on the side of extraction and degradation. In Chapter II, I describe my methods and theoretical framework, explaining why political ecology—particularly, its post-structuralist-influenced variant, liberation ecology—is an appropriate

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\(^7\) I use “the poor” throughout this thesis to refer to peoples living around Yasuni who, while varying in socioeconomic status, share economic and political marginality relative to other areas of Ecuador.
tool for making sense of the local politics of climate mitigation. I caution that this work is preliminary, and can only provide a framework for more systematic investigation into the forces driving developing-world mobilization around climate change.

In Chapter III, I offer a brief discussion of the political economy of modern Ecuador, highlighting the deep tension between the state’s commitment to a new, environmentally-sustainable economic model and renewed efforts at natural-resource fueled development. Chapter IV examines how these contradictory forces have created a disparity between the symbolic presentation of Yasuní National Park to international actors and the reality on the ground, which in turn creates space for “local” populations to engage with a “global” carbon mitigation project. Chapter V describes why local residents perceived involvement in environmentalism as important, connecting ecological consciousness to experiences of contamination from oil exploitation and marginalization from national development. In Chapter VI, I attempt to explain how this came into being, arguing that environmentalism has become a mechanism for populist political contention between the state, local governments, and indigenous movements.
I. Environmentalism: Shifting Theories, Common Assumptions

Post-Material Environmentalism

“Environmentalism” has been broadly defined as an “explicit, active concern with the relationship between human groups and their respective environments” (Little 1999:254), manifested through individual behaviour, collection mobilization, and policy action. Environmentalism has classically been described as an archetypal post-industrial and post-class “New Social Movement,” focused not on economic distribution or political power but quality of life (Foweraker 1995; Melucci 1996; Lee 2007). These theories of “post-material environmentalism” argue that environmental values circulate primarily within educated, urban middle classes (Dunlap and Catton 1979; Buttel 1987; Cable and Benson 1993; Inglehart 1995; White 1996), who are economically secure and able to engage with abstract issues like biodiversity and climate change. In this formulation, individuals mobilize to protect the environment because they have an aesthetic, spiritual, or scientifically-based concern for nature—not because they view the environment as critical to their day-to-day survival.

Nominally “post-material” environmental groups have emerged dramatically in Latin America during the last three decades. In 1979, there were fifty nationally-based environmental NGOs in the region; by the 1990s, this had increased ten-fold (Price 1994). This proliferation was heavily dependent on Northern support for conservation, suggesting that Latin American environmentalism “has been largely inspired by political, economic, and intellectual influences from the USA and Europe” (Kaimowitz 1996b:436; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Carruthers 2001). Most of these organizations are operated by well-educated upper-class residents of capital cities (Kaimowitz 1996b; Christen et al. 1998; Reboratti 2008), and draw on “new” social movements for human rights or democracy for their membership (Hsiao and Liu 2002; Cova 2005; Hochstetler and Keck 2007).

These formal environmental organizations have focused their attention on policies addressing a narrow range of issues, such as pollution control, park conservation, and environmental education. They are reluctant to engage with politics more broadly, insisting that the environment can be protected through existing institutions (Kaimowitz 1996a). Partly as a consequence of their disengagement from wider issues of social justice, environmental NGOs in Latin America are often perceived as elitist and unsympathetic to the needs of the rest of the populace (Garcia 1992; Berger 1997; Reboratti 2008). It is clear, then, that such “post-materialist” environmentalism “is not widely embraced by Latin
Americans”, which points to the pessimistic conclusion that “For the poor of the developing world, economic opportunity, no matter how short-lived, will always take precedence over environmental protection” (Price 1994:42; Baker 1983; Broad and Cavanagh 1993; Dasgupta 1995). Similarly, in most Latin American cases popular political parties operate under the assumption that there are “many more votes to be gained by parcelling out to the poor what is left of the national patrimony than by preserving it” (Dean 1997:331).

The Environmentalism of the Poor

The theory that the environment is a “post-material” concern—however theoretically coherent—is empirically untenable. Cross-country surveys of environmental attitudes show that residents of poor countries consistently register more concern for the environment than their rich counterparts (Brechin and Kempton 1994; Dunlap and York 2008), and the post-material elite rarely view environmental protection as a priority (Martinez-Alier 1991; Reis 2005). Critically, sociologists have interpreted the interest of poor and marginal populations in the environment as stemming from a different source than “post-material” environmentalism. As Brechin and Kempton (1994) argue, poor people support conservation in order to defend traditional livelihoods, ensure local control of land, and protect their living conditions.

A paradigmatic example of this manifestation of environmentalism comes from African Americans in the United States, who, despite their traditional hostility to bourgeoisie environmentalism, mobilized in the 1980s to confront “environmental racism” (Bullard 1990; Edwards 1995; McGurty 1997; Foster 1998). These “environmental justice” (EJ) movements challenged “locally-unwanted land-uses” (Agyeman and Evans 2004:156), particularly the placement of toxic waste dumps in low-income communities. The organizational and ideological origins of EJ were the civil rights movement and its demands for social justice, rather than “professional” environmental organizations (Kurtz 2003; Carruthers 2008; Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010).

As the EJ literature makes clear, the perception that environmentalism is the sphere of the wealthy—and, concomitantly, that marginalized populations are disinterested in environmental protection—is an artefact of a particular definition of environmentalism. Theories of post-materialist environmentalism equate environmental protection with biodiversity conservation, wilderness preservation, and ecological modernization (Martinez-Alier 2002). A wider definition of environmentalism captures not just professional NGOs but also rubber tappers in the Brazilian Amazon seeking control of their forests, urban slum-
dwellers demanding access to clean water and air, and peasants seeking to revalorize
smallholder agriculture. The last twenty years have witnessed a burgeoning of scholarship on
environmentalism among marginal populations in South Asia (Karan 1994; Akula 1995;
Guha 2000), the Pacific (Lohmann 1995; Porio and Taylor 1995), and Africa (Bisner 1995;
Müller 1997). Martinez-Alier has labeled these movements the “environmentalism of the
poor” (EotP), a marker which—despite these movements’ heterogeneity—reflects a “clearly
articulated environmentalism in the countries of the South” (Martinez-Alier and Guha

Like their counterparts in the EJ movement, participants in EotP are often reluctant to
self-identify as environmentalists and are suspicious of mainstream, professional
organizations (Blanco 1991; Rodrigues 2004). These movements use the vocabulary of
ecology and environmentalism instrumentally, adding an ecological dimension to long-
standing social conflicts in order to gain outside support and sympathy (Lohmann 1995;
Doane 2007). The rubber tappers’ movement of Brazil—which eventually became an icon of
rainforest preservation—was at its inception tied to the trade union movement and concerned
not with Brazilian environmental policy but the state’s model of industrial development
(Keck 1995; Hochstetler and Keck 2007; Acselrad 2008). Like EJ movements, these groups’
goal was not protection of the environment but control of it (Collinson 1996; Newell 2008),
agitating for “community-directed rational exploitation” (Klooster 2003:109) in place of both
wilderness preservation and unbridled degradation.

EotP is, at heart, a form of contestation over the distribution of resources that the poor
need for their livelihoods (Lynch 1993; Martinez-Alier 1995; Kaimowitz 1996b; Bryant and
Bailey 1997; Pezzoli 2002; Doane 2007). Developed-world opposition to building dams, for
example, might stem from anxiety over “the loss of the beauties of nature…or pleasures such
as rafting down a river” (Martinez-Alier 2002:129). In the developing world, activists are
more likely concerned that such projects “threaten to dislocate people and to affect their basic
human rights to land, water, and ecological stability of life-support systems” (Karan
1994:32). The importance of survival and livelihood as an impetus for environmental
mobilization helps explain why women play a dominant role in EotP, since women often bear
the burden of provisioning for households and do so using ecological resources (Akula 1995;

EotP engages not just with conflicts over livelihood, but also over scale. While post-
material environmentalism frequently deals with issues like global mass-extinction or climate
change, those addressed by EotP are almost always local and place-based (Cable and Benson
Martínez-Alier and Guha (1997:18) frame struggles to maintain community land management and resource use as “a defense of the locality against the nation”. In their narrative, the state is an agent of environmental degradation and ally of rapacious multi-national corporations, obeying a “common Southern pattern of cooperation between the upper levels of the state and foreign private corporations for the use of natural resources” (Martínez-Alier 2002:195). When Southern states do become involved in the preservation of the environment, they often do so by replacing popular, social-justice-oriented movements with exclusionary, managerial, and scientific ecology (Akula 1995; Bryant and Bailey 1997; Acselrad 2008).

To Martínez-Alier, EotP is also a fight over how nature is to be valued. Developing-world environmentalists resist the privatization and marketization of communally-shared ecological services, arguing that their value for communal and individual reproduction is unquantifiable and incommensurable. Nonetheless, the complex and multifarious means of valuation deployed by movements of EotP rarely attribute any intrinsic value to nature itself. When groups “appeal to indigenous territorial rights and also to the sacredness of Nature”, they do so only “in order to defend and secure their livelihoods” (Martínez-Alier 2002:11). The ecological conflicts described by Martínez-Alier are over distribution among individuals and groups in present society, not between present and future generations or human beings and other species.

Although Martínez-Alier (1995:84) insists that environmentalism, thus defined, is not the “materialist” counterpart to “post-materialist” environmentalism, others have accepted that this livelihood-centered approach suggests that environmentalism in Latin America is “motivated by basic and immediate material interest” (Collinson 1996:2). In this view, the poor are driven to conservation by rational calculations of self-interest within a given incentive structure (Hall 1997; Kaimowitz 2002; Swinton, Escobar, and Reardon 2003). As a consequence, they are easily drawn away from environmentalism if ecological degradation offers greater material benefits than preservation (Stanley 1996).

Cultural Ecologists

These materialist, rational-choice, and deterministic readings of theories of EotP have, unsurprisingly, drawn significant criticism. Arturo Escobar argues that environmental movements in Latin America are simultaneously economic, political, and cultural struggles

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8 As Lorentzen (1995:57) points out, “self-interest” is not necessarily individual, but could refer to actions taken on behalf of family or the community.
(Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar 1998; Escobar 2008). An environmental constructivist, Escobar (1999) views these “cultural ecologist” movements as not only seeking to control the physical products of nature and how those products are valued, but also the ideological and cultural production of nature itself. As a result, for Escobar, environmental conflicts are not just about defending livelihoods, but also the “lifeworlds” and “cosmovisions” that underpin them (see, also, De La Cadena 2010).

The differences between Escobar’s and Martinez-Alier’s conceptualizations of environmentalism should not be overstated. The conflicts described by Escobar all involve local forms of degradation—gold mining, deforestation, and colonization—and, in contrast to the deterritorialized struggles against biodiversity loss and climate change characteristic of post-material environmentalism, are always tied to place (Oslender 2002:88). Moreover, like Martinez-Alier, Escobar (2008) sees the state as either on the side of environmental degradation or irrelevant to the global-local—or “glocal” (Escobar 2006:121)—interactions that are at the heart of environmental conflicts. While international environmental networks are important collaborators in such struggles, Escobar ultimately privileges the local as the source of true environmental protection.

Although Escobar’s ethnographic focus is on Afro-Colombians, this “cultural ecologist” framework is most visible in the literature on indigenous environmentalism. Studies on the transnational indigenous rights movement, which emerged in force in the 1980s from the Arctic to the Amazon, chart how the movement weaved together demands for territorial rights and cultural recognition, as Escobar envisions (Conklin and Graham 1995; Cunha and Almeida 2000; Garí 2001; McSweeney 2006). Frequently, indigenous groups have grounded political claims in environmental terms, asserting that, for them, “the environment is not an issue…it is a way of life” (Robyn 2002:213; Cepek 2008; Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010). The state, on the other hand, is once again framed as an overt enemy of indigenous ecologists, or, at best, an institution committed to a weak version of sustainability that is an “aestheticized, non-politicized discourse closely tied to a broader official discourse of development” (Brosius 1999:286; Rodrigues 2004).

Nowhere has the relationship between indigenous cultures, environmental mobilization, and the conservation of territory been explored with more depth than the

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9 Escobar defines culture as the “collective and incessant process of producing meanings that shape social experience and configures social relations” (Alvarez et al. 1998a:3).

10 Martinez-Alier’s response to this culturalist critique is conflicted. On one hand, he dismisses post-structuralism, writing that “these are structural conflicts…not simply instances of the politics of place and identity” (2002:120). In a recent work, however, Martinez-Alier (2009:62) argues that the poor often side with conservation because of “livelihood needs and their cultural values.”
Amazon. In 1989, representatives from indigenous groups declared, “We use and care for the resources of that [Amazonian] biosphere with respect, because it is our home, and because we know our survival and that of our future generations depends on it” (Redford and Stearman 1993:249). Declarations by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and World Wildlife Fund, as well as the Convention for Biological Diversity of the Rio Summit, assent that indigenous groups are key actors in Amazonian conservation (Chapin 2004). A wide swathe of literature now argues that indigenous “Traditional Ecological Knowledge,” deeply embedded within their cultures, allows these groups to manage their territory sustainably (Garland 1995; Varese 1996; Ellen, Parkes, and Bicker 2000; Etkin 2002; Drew 2005; Valdivia 2005; Stocks, McMahan, and Taber 2007; Brondizio, Ostrom, and Young 2009) and potentially even increase biodiversity (Posey 1985, 2000; Rival 2006). Indigenous conservation stems not just from the dependence of communities on natural resources for their survival, but also on aesthetic, spiritual, and cultural value attributed to nature (Cunha and Almeida 2000; Garí 2001).

The notion that the indigenous peoples of the Amazon are “intrinsically” conservationist, however, faces a growing challenge from ethnographers, biological scientists, and conservation practitioners. Some argue that indigenous people have a long history of unsustainable resource use (Alvard 1993; Coomes 1995; Dean 1997). Others claim that indigenous people have abandoned conservation in favour of integration into the market, invoking environmentalism only to legitimate demands for territory and recognition (Redford and Stearman 1993:254; Bebbington et al. 1993; Sabin 1998; Raymond 2007). A middle-ground position accepts that while there is “nothing intrinsically or automatically sustainable about indigenous practices” (Carruthers 1996:1020), indigenous culture can lead to pro-ecological behaviour under certain conditions (Aagesen 1998; Gray et al. 2008; Pace 2004). This position is consistent with Escobar’s argument, which is that environmentalism among the poor is not inevitable but constructed out of specific and contingent configurations of identity, culture, and place.

Colonists: Environmental Anti-Heroes

The above theoretical frameworks widen our view of participation in environmental movements. As Martinez-Alier (2002:vii) notes, though, it would be “patent nonsense” to argue that poor people are “always and everywhere environmentalists.” All of the bodies of theory discussed above assume some prerequisites for environmentalism, be they a long-standing cultural connection to a given landscape or a strong livelihood interest in
environmental protection. Inevitably, certain groups lack these characteristics, and are thus assumed to be unlikely to mobilize around environmental issues.

Amazonian “colonists” represent one such group. Although the Ecuadorian Amazon is often thought of as a space primarily inhabited by indigenous peoples, non-indigenous mixed-race mestizos now make up 70% of its population (Gray et al. 2008). The discovery of oil in the “Oriente” (“East”) in the 1970s spurred a rapid increase in population that continues to the present (Marquette 1998; Pichón 1997; Bilsborrow, Barbieri, and Pan 2004). This process of “colonization” of the Amazon was promoted by the Ecuadorian state, which saw shifting population into the Amazon as an opportunity to ease pressure for agrarian land reform in the highlands, integrate the region into the national economy, and secure rainforest territory coveted by Ecuador’s neighbours (Vickers 1984; Uquillas 1984; Posey 2000).
Despite the role of the state in encouraging colonization, however, it has done little to support development or environmental awareness amongst colonists once they have settled (Hiraoka and Yamamoto 1980; Macdonald 1981).

This entrance of poor outsiders into the delicate Amazonian ecosystem is typically portrayed as one of inexorable destruction:

Once roads cut through the forest, they open the way for masses of landless migrants who, in an impoverished country such as Ecuador, see unclaimed land in the jungle as their last hope to make a living. Slash and burn practices prevail and soon the forest disappears. Both settlers and oil companies encroach on Amerindian territories, disrupting their inhabitants’ way of life and endangering their physical integrity (Rodrigues 2004:94).

Peasants in the Amazon are frequently described as refugees of _hacienda_ modernization, soil erosion, or natural disasters, and thus as having few skills appropriate for Amazonian agriculture (Ryder and Brown 2000; Fearnside 2001; Bates 2007). Instead, colonists engage in a “search for readily extractible wealth [that] is predictably desperate” (Lane 2003:79), living from environmentally destructive cattle-ranching, deforestation, mining, and employment from oil companies (Uquillas 1984; Lisansky 1990; Durham 1995). The environmental impacts of Amazonian colonization through rural land use are exacerbated by the formation of urban centres, which facilitate extraction and further colonization (Browder and Godfrey 1997; Ryder and Brown 2000; Simmons et al. 2002; Bates 2008). As in other Amazonian countries (Bunker 1985), the Ecuadorian state is thoroughly implicated in the destructive process of colonization: in fact, the state has historically required colonists to deforest half their land to acquire ownership rights (Suárez-Torres, Uggen, and Crawford 1997).

Meta-level surveys of literature on the connection between poverty and environmental degradation show that poor, rural populations are rarely solely or even primarily responsible for ecological destruction (Duraiappah 1998; Painter 1995; Gray and Moseley 2005; Satterthwaite 2003). Ravnborg (2003) argues instead that such narratives are political inventions used to distract attention from the structural factors that force individuals into ecologically harmful behaviour. In the Amazon, these forces are clear: “pervasive poverty, mal-distribution of farmland, lack of inputs for intensive cultivation, lack of non-agrarian livelihood opportunities, and generally inadequate rural development” (Pichón 1997:707). While such structuralist perspectives might morally exculpate colonists for environmental damage, the perception that degradation is “overdetermined” (Schwartz 1995:102) and colonists are “at the mercy of exogenous forces” (Ryder and Brown 2000:530) leave little
room for any discussion of environmental mobilization. Colonists’ lack of a livelihood based on a longstanding connection to the land—a key element in both Escobar and Martinez-Alier’s theories—offers a central explanation for their disinterest in environmental protection. Consequently, some have concluded that the only way to protect the remainder of the Amazon is to make it inaccessible to non-indigenous people (Fearnside 2001; Kaimowitz 2002).

The contrast between colonists and indigenous people is revealing. The indigenous federations of Ecuador have been consistently depicted as guardians of the Amazon, engaging in an integrated defence of territory, environment, and culture against both oil companies and colonization (Gerlach 2003; Whitten, Whitten, and Chango 2003; Sawyer 2004). When non-indigenous groups—such as Brazilian rubber tappers—engage in pro-environmental mobilization, they do so because they have crafted alliances with indigenous groups or adopted indigenous practices, like community resource management (Keck 1995; Cunha and Almeida 2000; Doane 2007). In short, colonists cease to be environmental antiheroes once they are no longer colonists (Caviglia-Harris and Sills 2004; Chapin 2004); indigenous people, on the other hand, lose their status as “ecologically noble savages” once they begin to emulate non-indigenous peoples (Salazar 1981; Macdonald 1981; Gray et al. 2008). According to the literature, to be mestizo in the Amazon is to be a colonist; to be a colonist is to have little interest in the protection of the environment.  

Towards New Environmentalism(s)

Scholarship on environmentalism has taken on a much more ecumenical focus since its early fixation on Western, post-materialist movements. The theoretical frameworks of EJ, EotP, and cultural ecologism call attention to the diverse ways that marginalized populations can become involved in environmental protection. Nonetheless, they provide few tools for understanding environmental mobilization among certain groups, such as Amazonian colonists.

Nearly all of the environmental conflicts described by Escobar and Martinez-Alier are place-based. This flows from both authors’ assumptions that environmental movements are rooted in the defence of territory and livelihood against states and their international

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11 Escobar (2008b:118), for example, explains Afro-Caribbean environmental mobilization by making them out to be proto-indigenous: “The natural environment—the rivers, sea, and forest—has sustained the black groups of the pacific for several centuries; the natural world thus has an intimate presence in the cultural imaginary of these groups.”

12 Throughout this thesis, I use mestizo and colonist to refer to the same non-indigenous Amazonian population. In Chapter VI, however, I problematize the meaning of “colonist.”
corporate allies. Global environmental threats—like climate change—however, are to some extent “de-territorialized,” lacking clearly identifiable culprits and discernable local impacts (Bryant and Bailey 1997). By attempting to address climate change and local conservation and development simultaneously, though, Yasuní-ITT cuts across these spatial scales. Moreover, the initiative has been actively promoted by the Ecuadorian state and, as I show later, non-indigenous actors in the Yasuní region. It offers, therefore, a novel opportunity to explore how grassroots environmentalism engages new issues and incorporates new actors.

The notion that the poor mobilize to defend their livelihoods and that environmentalism must always be coupled with social justice cuts across all the frameworks discussed above. It is nonetheless constraining, because it suggests that those poor people who do not draw a direct benefit from use of the environment will be disinterested in protecting it. Such determinism is almost as myopic as the post-materialist view: rather than saying that the poor “can’t afford to be environmentalist”, some argue that they simply “can’t afford not to”. As a result, environmental movements lose their political distinctiveness and become class mobilizations demanding control of production factors which are, only coincidentally, environmental (Vayda and Walters 1999).

A more dynamic approach is needed to explore how environmentalism can serve as a force for constructing identity, creating connections to place, and generating livelihoods, rather than simply flowing from place, identity, and livelihood in a unidirectional fashion. In the Yasuní region, this necessarily entails paying more attention to colonists, who have heretofore been treated as “contingent, incomplete haphazard meldings of the detritus of aboriginal social formations…defined in terms of what they are not (aboriginal, national) rather than in positive terms” (Nugent 1993:xxi). The next chapter explores how to bring issues such as agency and actors such as the state and colonists back into discussions of environmentalism.
II. Theory and Methodology

The Liberation Ecology of Climate Change

Political ecology—a theoretical perspective that draws on anthropology and geography—emerged in order to explain complex, multi-scalar environmental conflicts through attention to power, politics, and history (Watts and Peet 2004; Robbins 2004; Gray and Moseley 2005). Traditionally, political ecologists focused on economic and political structures, rather than individual actions, as the driving forces behind environmental change (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Stonich 1993; Durham 1995). In this way, political ecology runs parallel to studies of climate politics, which argue that the outcome of mitigation projects is primarily determined by international political structure (Roberts and Parks 2007; Barrett 2009; Giddens 2009).

Despite these apparent congruencies, political ecologists have been reluctant to engage with climate change, preferring instead localized issues like land degradation (Bryant and Bailey 1997; Goldman and Schurman 2000). The study of climate politics, on the other hand, usually begins with the assumption that climate change is an “inescapably” and “unavoidably” global issue (Depledge and Yamin 2009:451; Roberts and Parks 2007:9; Harrison and Sundstrom 2010; Hepburn 2009; Paterson and Grubb 1992; Peffer 1998). Sources of greenhouse gas emissions are spread across the continents, climatological systems are globally linked, and impacts are not easily constrained within national borders. In such a conceptualization, the role of grassroots environmental mobilization is minimal: local actors merely “suffer the consequences of acts that are largely outside their own sphere of influence” (Byg and Salick 2009:165).

While scientifically compelling, this “global” construction of climate change should not be accepted uncritically (Lutes 1998; Adger et al. 2001). In reality, “global” processes like climate change are the aggregate of local decisions, since all greenhouse gases enter the atmosphere from specific sources (Sovacool and Brown 2009; Wagner et al. 2009). It follows, then, that actions taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are never solely global, but stem from multi-scalar policies implemented by states, international institutions, and NGOs (Jagers and Stripple 2003; Lindseth 2004; Lemos and Agrawal 2006; Paterson 2009). Municipal governments in particular play a critical role in regulating transport, heating, and electricity use, and have been at the forefront of local-level experimentation in climate mitigation (Collier and Lofstedt 1997; Betsill and Bulkeley 2006; Lutsey and Sperling 2008; Schreurs 2008). Nevertheless, there is little in the way of a developed analysis of the politics
of why certain local actors—be they municipal governments, ecological movements, or ordinary citizens—adopt climate mitigation policies and others do not.

“Liberation ecology” represents one variant on political ecology suited to addressing these gaps in the climate politics literature. Liberation ecologists call attention to the way that grassroots actors can exercise “incomplete agency” (Foster 1998:811) in the face of external constraints (Watts and Peet 2004). Local actors rarely perceive themselves exclusively as victims, but instead seek out spaces within which their choices have an impact (Biersack 2007; Hvalkof 2007). Liberation ecology’s swing of the pendulum back from structure towards agency coincides with a more concrete shift in explanatory approach.

Political ecologists focus on developing “chains of causation” that start with a local environmental problem and link upward through spatial scales to the problem’s “true” global or national source (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987). This approach, however, makes an a priori assumption that local environmental outcomes are always externally determined (Vayda and Walters 1999). Liberation ecology, on the other hand, focuses on complex webs of causation created by collective action taken at multiple spatial scales (Escobar 2008). Such an open-ended, actor-oriented approach is key to understanding Yasuní, where the constraints of international climate negotiations and government policy are critical starting points, but cannot be separated from how local actors use and manipulate them.

Liberation ecology thus challenges the “fairly standard script” (Robbins 2004:182) frequently deployed to describe environmental conflicts in the developing world. As highlighted in the literature review, studies of the Amazon commonly juxtapose ecologically-noble indigenous people and local resource-users against mestizo colonists and multinational corporations. Usually, the state appears only as a single-minded monolith of environmental destruction. Yet as Keil et al. (1998:13) point out, lost in these discussions is politics itself—the dynamic and non-determinant process by which certain actors adopt and appropriate environmental issues to various ends. Liberation ecology’s non-deterministic approach allows researchers to “bring the state back in” as a potentially pro-environmental actor, noting that the state has a unique capacity to enforce certain forms of environmental protection (Gille 2002; Eckersley 2004). At the same time, it treats the state as only one actor—itslf fragmented and conflicted (Migdal 2001)—among a potentially diverse array of potential institutions that could mobilize for or against environmental protection.

Liberation ecology also pushes researchers to take a more critical approach to the relationship between environmentalism and identity. EotP assumes that environmentalist identity flows from preexisting characteristics. The “anti-essentialist” approach of liberation
ecology, in contrast, sees environmentalist identity as growing from social position, history, and more situational factors. For example, Agrawal (2005) found that categories like gender and wealth were less influential in predicting environmental behaviour than the specific ways certain individuals were (and were not) integrated into local programs for ecological management. The relationship between identity and environmentalism is not unidirectional, then: environmentalism can also be a source of new identities.

Just as actors and identities cannot be taken for granted in environmental conflicts, liberation ecologists note that the environment itself is a contested and politicized social construct. While trees, rocks and animals may be objectively “real,” the analytical category of ”nature” is inevitably understood and deployed in divergent ways by different sets of actors (Luke 1995; Low and Gleeson 1998; Escobar et al. 1999; Hannigan 2006; Alatout 2006). Liberation ecology calls our attention to “what reality [of nature] is being constructed, by whom, for whom, for what political purpose, and to what political effect” (Biersack 2007:14). Yasuní National Park may be a real place, but representations of and narratives about the park—as much as the physical space of the park itself—are objects of contestation.

Research Methodology

Liberation ecology—with its attention to the complex inter-linkages between power and history, politics and economy, and culture and the environment—lends itself to an ethnographic, case-study approach. This work draws on three months of fieldwork in Ecuador during the summer of 2010, a period during which attention to the fate of Yasuní was at its most intense and local action pronounced. Three different sources provide the bulk of the data for this study, allowing me to “triangulate” my findings (Brady and Collier 2004).

The fulcrum of this research is fifty-five in-depth, semi-structured interviews. I spoke at length with local and national government officials, indigenous community leaders, oil workers, businesspeople, employees of Yasuní Park, tourist guides, and members of local, national, and international civil society. Although informants were selected through “snowball sampling,” I started my sample at multiple points in order to avoid being restricted to individuals within a single network. Interviews were individually tailored but organized around common themes: perceptions of oil exploitation, knowledge of the Yasuní-ITT proposal, and participation in environmentalist activities. My approach was not to get a comprehensive cross-section of popular opinion, but to interview within different sets of actors until new perspectives were no longer forthcoming.
Interviewing primarily explores beliefs and meanings, rather than actions (Arksey and Knight 1999). In the case of Yasuni, where symbols and images of the park frequently stray from reality, this bias is problematic. Ideally, researchers supplement interviews with participant-observation (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995), but because my time in the field was so limited, this ethnographic ideal was unattainable. Instead, I complemented my interviews with “go-alongs”: outcome-oriented and active observation (Kusenbach 2003). I attended meetings of the Yasuni-ITT Proposal Technical Committee and Management Committee of the Yasuni Biosphere Reserve, and travelled extensively in the Yasuni area, visiting communities surrounding the ITT Bloc, Huaorani villages in the interior of the park, and the municipality of Francisco de Orellana (Coca), which serves as the region’s commercial and transport hub. “Go-alongs” allowed me to observe individuals using the park while simultaneously conducting nearly one-hundred informal interviews to understand the meaning behind these actions.
These two sources of ethnographic data were rounded out with analysis of media coverage, a critical source given that “the momentum of an environmental campaign is to a large extent an artefact of the amount of media coverage that it is able to attract” (Brosius 1999a:286). Although the voices of grassroots actors are rarely reflected in media coverage of Yasuni, newspaper and online articles were nevertheless critical in adding context to my study. As Duneier (1999) notes, the micro-level richness and detail offered by ethnography loses its value if it is presented without considering broader, macro-level processes. Because reporting tends to focus on events and outcomes, rather than more static beliefs and institutions (Earl et al. 2004; McAdam et al. 2005), it balances my other sources of data by situating my snapshot of environmentalism in Yasuni within a longer history. Media coverage has also allowed me to continue to track developments in Yasuni after leaving the field.

Evaluation of Research Techniques

The choice of research methodology inevitably entails trade-offs. A key benefit of my qualitative approach was the ability to adapt my research in the face of new circumstances. Changes in the international standing of the ITT proposal—caused by the endorsements of European countries or negotiations with the UN—had an impact on conditions in the Yasuni region during my fieldwork, and required alterations in my research plan. Similarly, upon entering the field I found that “climate change” as a stand-alone theme had little relevance for interviewees. I thus shifted towards investigating more general beliefs about the environment, with which perceptions about climate change were intertwined.

An open-ended ethnographic methodology was not just a practical necessity, but also an essential part of my theoretical approach. The existence of so many frameworks to describe grassroots environmentalism created a strong temptation to try to force the forms of environmental mobilization I observed into the mould of EJ or EoTP. I elected, however, to follow the precepts of “grounded theory” (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and to attempt to create new theoretical concepts closely tailored to empirical data. My interviews, research articles, and field notes were open-coded in nVivo. Data analysis started in the field, and filtered back into my selection of individuals to interview, themes for questioning, and even choice of sites to which I travelled. Because this approach produces concrete and accessible theory (Turner 1981), I was regularly able to test and refine the concepts I was developing with participants themselves.
Nevertheless, this thesis bears out some of the weaknesses of a grounded theory approach. My data do not suggest a coherent theory of environmentalism, nor, if they did, would I have the depth of research necessary to lend such a framework validity. Indeed, while in the field, I often had to reconsider what I meant when I said I was studying “environmentalism.” This evoked a common problem in case study research: what is the case actually being studied (Schrank 2006)? I certainly did not study membership and participation in explicitly environmentalist organizations, which—in Ecuador, as elsewhere—is infinitesimal (Dunlap and York 2008). At the same time, I did not want only to research statements people made about the environment, since a rhetorical commitment to environmental protection is nearly universal and, by extension, often meaningless.

I conceptualize my research as describing what sociologists characterize as social movement “frames.” Frames are the mental tools by which individuals and collectives use ideology to make sense of the world around them, with the intention of guiding meaningful action:

Frames are constructed as movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to effect change (Benford and Snow 2000:615)

Frames are “action-oriented,” insofar as they “inspire and legitimate activities and campaigns” (Benford and Snow 2000:614), but they are not themselves actions. In effect, my decision to study social movement frames in Yasuní directs me to focus on what individuals believe should be done about oil, the environment, and Yasuní Park. I thus treat “environmentalism” as a broad field of normative constructions about how people should relate to nature, rather than a narrow type of action engaged in by explicitly-labelled social movements and NGOs (Brosius 1999a).

As stated in the introduction, this project should be seen as pilot research. My goal is to generate questions, concepts, and themes that can be evaluated through more extensive and in-depth research. I attempt to show possibilities (Graeber 2004): different ways that environmentalism is evolving in the face of new problems, like climate change, and novel policy instruments, such as the Yasuni-ITT proposal. My hope is that they serve to broaden the conceptual horizons of policy makers, activists, and academics.
III. The Political Economy of Non-Extraction

The Signing Ceremony

On August 3rd, 2010, three years of negotiations between Ecuador and the United Nations—and a decade of campaigning by Ecuadorian environmentalists—culminated in the Yasuní-ITT Trust Fund Agreement. Held in the white-pillared cancillería of Ecuador’s foreign ministry in the capital, Quito, the signing ceremony officially set the terms by which international funds could be contributed and would be subsequently managed. National elites and foreign dignitaries arrived in luxury SUVs, ascending to the Salón los Proceses by way of a red-carpeted marble staircase flanked by photographers.

The ceremony began with a multi-lingual rendition of the national anthem, while a video in the background juxtaposed images of Ecuador’s immense biodiversity with its varied indigenous cultures. Ministers from the UN and Ecuadorian government, speaking to a packed audience, lauded the ITT proposal as “the first of its kind” and a “symbol for the rest of the world.” They called attention to a group of Huaorani—an indigenous group from the Yasuní area—who were seated near the front and wore red paint and crowns of feathers. As the event came to a close, a group of schoolchildren sang a paean to “Pachamama,” Kichwa for “Mother Earth.”

August 3rd symbolized a major turn in the self-presentation of the Ecuadorian state, in which the machinery of a government historically dependent on oil exports re-oriented towards promoting a “post-oil” initiative. Over and over, speakers emphasized that credit for the apparent success of the Yasuní initiative, and the greening of the Ecuadorian state it represented, belonged to the President of the Republic, Rafael Correa. Indeed, the embrace of the proposal by Correa’s Alianza Pais party in 2007 was “decisive” (Martínez and Acosta 2010:13) in converting the initiative from the dream of radical environmentalists into serious public policy. To outside observers, Correa has since been leading the international campaign to protect Yasuní, as part of a wider reframing of environmental policy and remaking of the Ecuadorian nation in accordance with “buen vivir,” the indigenous concept of a harmonious “good life.”

For some environmentalists, however, August 3rd offered little cause for optimism. Despite repeatedly declaring that the Yasuní-ITT initiative was his government’s “number-one priority,” the President—in Quito at the time—did not attend the ceremony. In private conversation, civil society leaders who had worked on the proposal for years admitted that the trust fund was little more than an empty bank account. President Correa, they lamented,
had always said that if the $3.6 billion requested was not forthcoming, exploitation would move forward.

This example hints at the deeply contradictory currents that run through modern Ecuador. In this chapter, I explore how the Ecuadorian state is torn between new commitments to environmental protection and a long-running, institutionalized orientation towards resource-led development, seen at the level of the nation, Yasuní Park, and the ITT initiative. This contradiction is crucial for understanding the Yasuní-ITT proposal itself, and provides the national context for the local environmental mobilizations explored in subsequent chapters.

Oil State, Green State, Pink State

Ecuador’s economy has long been underpinned by primary commodity exports: bananas, cacao and, starting in the 1970s, oil (Peláez-Samaniego et al. 2007). The discovery of oil in the Ecuadorian Amazon precipitated industrialization and the construction of infrastructure (Whitten 1981; Valdivia 2008; Rival 2011), but also reinforced a lopsided distribution of wealth and dependence on external markets which subsequent regimes have been unable to reduce (Lane 2003; Gerlach 2003). Presently, 40% of the state’s revenue comes from oil exports (SGI 2010), and for many Ecuadorians, reserves of crude oil “embody the wealth of the nation” (Rival 2010:360). As a consequence, the state has traditionally focused on maximizing oil production (Kilmerling 1991, 1996, 2000; Narváez 2007), showing a consistent “lack of political will, technological capacity, and human resources” (Suárez-Torres et al. 1997:98) to confront its environmental impacts.

A variety of factors have recently combined to impel change in Ecuador’s regulation of the oil industry and, more generally, the entire field of environmental policy. The indigenous movement, which emerged as a political force in the 1990s, has injected a new vision of environmental protection into public discourse (Greene 2006; Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Kuecker 2007; Zamosc 2007; Lucero 2008; Healey 2009). As many interviewees suggested, the realization that Ecuador’s reserves are finite, alongside well-publicized cases of harmful contamination caused by oil spills\(^{13}\), have also created public pressure for stricter controls on the oil industry. Ecuador’s new constitution, passed by referendum in 2008, reflects this environmental concern. The document is organized around

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\(^{13}\) The best known of which is *Aguinda v. ChevronTexaco*, a class action lawsuit filed in 1993 against Texaco (now owned by Chevron) by 30,000 Ecuadorians for health and environmental damaged cause by the companies’ operations northwest of Yasuni.
the principle that a “good life” is achieved not through economic accumulation but through a balanced relationship with nature (Acosta 2009). It prohibits transgenic crops and seeds, proscribes the patenting of indigenous collective knowledge, recognizes water as a human right, and perhaps most dramatically, gives certain rights to nature itself. Although some commentators have reported the President Correa was initially resistant to this codification of indigenous cosmovision (Cadena 2010; Jameson 2011), the government now frequently presents itself as a defender of the “rights of nature” (Saavedra 2010).

Concern for environmental protection has also filtered into national development policy. An official at SENPLADES, the planning ministry, explained that all projects that rely on public investment now must detail their impact on Ecuador’s carbon footprint and conform to Ecuador’s goal of converting its energy matrix to renewable energy. A new court has been set up to adjudicate the rights given to nature by the new constitution; the first case before it is a lawsuit against British Petroleum for the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill (Jarrín 2010). Internationally, President Correa has advocated for an “eco-tax” on each barrel of oil shipped from OPEC countries, which would be used towards developing new modes of economic activity (Acosta et al. 2009). Across the government, ministers insisted that “we are thinking on the level of the entire country about how we can change the base of production in the country” away from oil. This is a significant shift for a nation in which the first barrels of oil extracted were paraded through the streets of Quito like a conquering hero and greeted as a source of national salvation (Kilmerling 1996).

Still, this apparent “greening” of the Ecuadorian state must be considered within its wider context. By the end of the 1990s, many commentators felt that the only alternative to neoliberalism was autonomous, indigenous-led community self-development (Munck 2000; 2003; Whitten 2003). The Correa regime, however, is one among a “pink wave” of left-leaning regimes that swept across Latin America in the last decade, offering a third path: an active role for the state in development, poverty alleviation, and economic management (Blanco 2006; Beasley-Murray, Cameron, and Hershberg 2009; Panizza 2009; Cornia 2010). While Ecuador’s new constitution may give rights to nature, it also creates new social rights which can only be realized with government spending (Plaza 2007; Barrientos, Gideon, and Molyneux 2008). In attempting to fund commitments to redistribution and poverty reduction, leftist governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador have embraced a “neo-developmentalist” (Acosta 2009:111) ideology of national progress fueled by natural resource extraction (Gudynas 2009; Bebbington 2009b; Ruiz-Marrero 2010; Chávez 2010).
Extraction, then, remains at the root of development in Ecuador (Mendoza 2007). The same SENPLADES functionary who described to me the actions Ecuador was taking to implement *buen vivir* eventually admitted:

Ecuador is not ready to give up all the revenues of petroleum. And we are not ready to get all the energy that we need without petroleum. So, we need planning to make these jumps [to a sustainable economy], but at the same time, we are thinking about the necessities of the people.

In practice, the government’s primary commitment has been to new models of extraction, not non-exploitation (Perreault and Valdivia 2010). New petroleum laws passed in 2010 make all foreign oil companies “service providers”: while they receive a fee for their work, windfall profits are reserved for the state (Rival 2011; Swartz and Alvaro 2010). When Correa declared a moratorium on new sites of petroleum extraction in 2007, his intention in doing so was to give the government time to renegotiate contracts with foreign oil companies in order to maximize revenues, not to limit oil exploitation itself (Fontaine 2007a; Martínez and Acosta 2010). Indeed, 65% of the Ecuadorian Amazon has now been zoned into oil blocs (Finer et al. 2008).

**Figure 4.1: Oil Exploitation in the Ecuadorian Amazon**

![Map of Oil Exploitation in the Ecuadorian Amazon](source: Finer et al. (2008))
Like other left-of-center Andean governments, the Ecuadorian state has approached natural resources in a centralized, nationalistic fashion (Bebbington 2009b). Under the new constitution, indigenous groups lost the right—granted in the 1998 constitution, if rarely actualized (Lara 2007)—to prior consent for extraction on their land. As one government official explained:

To be informed, or to consent: there is a difference. And the [indigenous] pueblos wanted consent, of course. In the constitution of Ecuador, the first article speaks of natural resources. And it says that ‘Non-renewable natural resources belong to the national patrimony.’ The state is for all Ecuadorians, and for this reason, there is no prior consent.

As the signing ceremony showed, superficially the Correa regime has been more than willing to appropriate images of a multi-cultural, multi-lingual nation. With its rhetoric of a state that speaks and acts for all Ecuadorians, though, the administration appears to seek to “return in time to the magical country of the ‘70s, a paradise of abundant resources, without indigenous people, environmentalists, or bothersome environmental worries” (Abarca 2010:240). Informants from a variety of NGOs felt that the Ecuadorian state had been strengthening itself at the expense of civil society, particularly by recruiting professionals (including conservationists) from the private sector into the government (Beasley-Murray et al. 2009; Becker 2011). The consequence was a state without any strong counterbalancing force.

Obviously, this commitment to state-led development through natural resource extraction has environmental consequences. Even as the government has talked about leaving oil underground in ITT, Ecuador has accelerated efforts to open up gold and copper mines in the Amazon (Bebbington et al. 2008). Environmental groups like Acción Ecológica reported that the government had become increasingly hostile towards them, a claim consistent with the labeling of such groups by Correa as “extortionists”, “terrorists”, and “romantics” (Bebbington 2009:18). When I asked one employee of the Wildlife Conservation Society, a transnational New York-based NGO that helps manage Yasuní Park, about the importance he felt was being given by this government to issues like conservation, he flatly answered, “They don’t compete with national interest issues like oil and major infrastructure.”

Yasuni National Park(s)

The conflict between these two strands of modern Ecuadorian political economy—renewed extractivism/developmentalism and environmentalism—is reflected, in microcosm, in the area surrounding Yasuni National Park. Whatever the label of “National Park” might
suggest about the 900,000 hectare preserve on the far-eastern border of the country, Yasuní falls under diverse jurisdictions and is designated for contradictory purposes (Narváez and Fontaine 2007). On the one hand, because of its unique spatial positioning during the last glacial epoch (Larrea 2010a:77), Yasuní is now arguably the most bio-diverse place on Earth (Bass et al. 2010). It is also a “lonely park” (Bass et al. 2010:13), insofar as it is one of the only parks in that area of the Amazon with an intact large-vertebrate population and the size to sustain that population over time and in the face of climate change (Checa et al. 2010).

In apparent recognition of these factors, Yasuní was declared a national park in 1979 and a UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve in 1989 (Finer et al. 2009). In the subsequent decade, a third of the park was granted to the Huaorani indigenous people, and in 1999, an area between the park and Huaorani territory was designated an “intangible zone” for the preservation of the uncontacted indigenous people who live there. At least on paper, these designations create layers of protection from extraction for the Yasuní area. Article 407 of the new constitution prohibits extraction in protected areas—absent a petition of the President, approved by the National Assembly, that affirms that such exploitation is a fundamental national interest—and Article 57 guarantees the inviolability of the territory of indigenous groups in voluntary isolation. Ecuador is also a signatory to numerous international conventions that create parallel obligations (Plaza 2007).

On the other hand, these cultural and conservation designations overlap with a geography of extraction and exploitation. The state prospected extensively for oil in Huaorani territory during the 1970s (Rival 2002) and in the 1980s held multiple rounds of bidding for access to oil blocs in the northern portions of Yasuní Park (Finer et al. 2009). At present, the park is carved into six petroleum blocs, with the rest of the biosphere reserve and Huaorani territory criss-crossed by further concessions. Rights to Blocs 14 and 17 are owned by AndesPetroleum, a Chinese consortium, and Bloc 16 is presently operated by REPSOL, a Spanish company (Martínez 2009). Bloc 15, which in 2006 passed from Occidental to PetroEcuador, the Ecuadorian state oil company, accounts for 20% of Ecuador’s oil production (SaveYasuní 2010). Even as the government has promoted the Yasuní-ITT proposal, it also granted licences to PetroBras, the Brazilian national oil company, to drill in Bloc 31, which abuts ITT.14 The park director told me he expected prospecting to begin in late 2010; others have argued that this exploitation is not economically viable unless the infrastructure in Bloc 31 is also used to exploit ITT.

14 In fact, President Correa’s presentation of the ITT initiative to the United Nations happened one day after he gave license to PetroBas to exploit Bloc 31 (Martinez 2009).
The formal environmental protections granted to Yasuní are further undermined by a lack of funds and capacity for implementation. Although this is a problem for national parks across Latin America (Narváez and Fontaine 2007), the situation in Yasuní is particularly dire, as it receives the least funding-per-hectare of any park in Ecuador (Boedt and Martínez 2007). One biologist with more than a decade of experience in Yasuní told me that in 2004 the park was receiving only $1,000 per year from the state, pushing it to the “border of collapse” (Narváez 2007:35). Another scientist told me that when he visited the park in the 1990s, he saw local villagers hunting freely in the park—with park guards often joining them during their shifts. The six guards and two managers employed during that time were almost entirely paid for and trained by the Wildlife Conservation Society.

Universally, informants stated that the situation has since improved. There are now eleven guards, with better vehicles, and a newly-hired park manager with greater technical

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15 The Nature Conservancy, a U.S.-based conservation NGO, determined that Ecuador’s thirty-four parks need $13 million per year, although their present budget is only $3 million. Cepek (2008:218) describes the Ecuadorian Ministry of the Environment as “under-funded, under-staffed, and often ineffective.”
expertise. Nonetheless, the head of the Ministry of the Environment (MoE) in Orellana, one of the provinces where the park is located, opined that “There aren’t sufficient resources to do necessary operations [to protect the park]”, nor to hire the fifty-plus guards that are called for in the park’s management plan. Moreover, MoE employees still cannot freely enter certain areas of the park without permission from the oil companies that hold permits for those areas.

The overlapping jurisdictions and functions of the Yasuní area have created a heavily contested space. International and national mobilizations in defence of Yasuní have been active for decades (Christensen 2007; Rival 2011). Some—such as the movement against the construction of the Maxus Highway into Bloc 16 or to prevent the government from altering the limits of the park to facilitate extraction—have failed. Others—like that to force PetroBras to enter Bloc 31 without constructing roads—have succeeded. Through these struggles, Yasuní has become a focal point for environmental activism in Ecuador; however, with 20% of the country’s remaining reserves locked in ITT (Finer et al. 2009), the park remains a coveted frontier for further extraction. Yasuní Park and the surrounding areas, then, are truly “emblem[s] of a development crisis bearing down on the entire western headwaters of the Amazon basin” (Hearn 2010), where commitments to environmental preservation clash with government plans for development and economic growth.

The Two Plans

Despite the Yasuní-ITT proposal’s green façade, these contradictions are visible in the trajectory and contents of the initiative itself. As noted in the introduction, the ITT initiative was conceived within Ecuadorian civil society as a way to give political life to concepts taken from indigenous cosmovisions and ecological economics, such as the notion that ecosystem services are “incommensurable” and thus should not be traded on markets (Martinez-Alier 2009; Rival 2010). This was why, Esperanza Martinez of Acción Ecológica explained, the initiative at its launch was “profoundly critical of the carbon market” and proposed an entirely new mechanism, a trust fund for leaving oil underground. This rhetoric has been adopted by those government employees who are responsible for the initiative, who described their proposal as a forward-thinking alternative to carbon markets and other existing tools for climate mitigation, like the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Treaty.

The history of the project reveals a more complex relationship between the ITT mechanism and carbon markets. When the government was fleshing out the proposal in 2007, they used the cost of one tonne of carbon under the European Emissions Trading Scheme, a carbon market, to calculate the “value” of leaving the oil underground in Yasuní
In 2008, the government put forward the idea of “Yasuni Guarantee Certificates” which would be tied to barrels of oil left underground and, they envisioned, eventually tradable (Finer et al. 2009). Roque Sevilla, who was part of the initiative’s initial negotiating team, offered this explanation:

> What we were trying to do was come close to—fall within—a relation to the carbon market, but without some of its limitations. But when we looked at the rules of this market, we had to readjust, because this did not really fall within the carbon market. The problem has to do with the reduction of emissions versus the avoidance of emissions. But it still provided us with a point of reference. This is the only thing we have, at the global level, to figure out how much to pay now to avoid a ton of carbon emissions.

By these accounts, the Ecuadorian government only returned to the original idea of the proposal—a new model independent of existing climate mitigation mechanisms—when an independent evaluation made it clear that funds from carbon markets would not be forthcoming (Silvestrum 2009).

Leaving oil underground is only one part of the climate impact of the Yasuní proposal. By protecting the Yasuní forest—and using funds from the initiative for reforestation—the project fits within Ecuador’s national strategy to embrace REDD (Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation) (Honty 2010). REDD, though, is completely inconsistent with the principles of ecological economics on which Yasuní is supposedly based, given that it falls within carbon markets and has been denounced by indigenous leaders (Putz and Redford 2009). When I inquired about these seeming incongruities, a government official explained that Ecuadorian policy is to work simultaneously within and outside of carbon markets.

The gravest contradiction in the government’s approach to Yasuní, however, is that the initiative to leave the ITT oil underground is only “Plan A.” Ivonne Baki, the present head of the proposal’s negotiating team, explained:

> When Alberto Acosta [then Minister of Energy and Mines] announced the initiative in 2007, the President said, ‘Dear Alberto, you have to understand that if the money does not come, we are going to exploit. We must have Plan B.’ He said this from the first day that they presented this proposal, so this possibility has always been there.

While even the employees of the now-relabeled Ministry of Non-Renewable Resources with whom I spoke said that they supported the government’s stated priority of leaving the oil underground, at times this “Plan B” for extraction seems more advanced than “Plan A.”

PetroEcuador has been preparing for exploitation in ITT for some time: two exploratory wells

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16 For simplicity, I refer to Yasuni-ITT Plan A as “the Yasuni proposal” or “initiative” throughout. References to Plan B will be explicitly identified as such.
were drilled in Ishpingo in 2002, a final development plan was presented in 2008, and licensing began later that year. On the ground, residents even reported seeing preparations for constructing infrastructure, such as generating stations and access roads.

Exploiting ITT, of course, would be consistent with the government’s developmentalist rhetoric and stated commitment to raising output. Production in Ecuador fell from 536,000 barrels-per-day to 470,000 in 2010 (U.S. EIA 2010)—in part because of the departure of foreign companies but primarily, I was told, because existing oil fields were approaching exhaustion. Exploiting ITT represents the best opportunity for Ecuador to raise production and make profitable use of existing infrastructure, such as a new pipeline inaugurated in 2006 and a $12.5 billion refinery being constructed on the coast.\footnote{A PetroEcuador document quoted in Aguirre (2010:173) states that “It is necessary to incorporate the reserves of ITT, which would permit an increase in present production and contribute to the amount of crude required by the Pacific Refinery.” The new pipeline is currently using only 60,000 bbl/d out of a 250,000 bbl/d capacity (see, also, Villavicencio 2010, and for an alternative perspective, Martínez and Acosta 2010).}

Even while admitting to me that Ecuador could only continue to produce at significant levels for fifteen more years, an engineer in the Ministry of Non-Renewable Resources said that the focus remained on increasing output, not preparing for the post-oil era. A few weeks after missing the ITT signing ceremony, President Correa inaugurated a new oil field in Pañancocha, just north of Yasuni, declaring it a “symbol of the citizen’s revolution” (LAHT 2010a).

Although government officials repeatedly insisted that the government’s position has been the same since 2007—Plan A as a first option, Plan B as a backup—its support for non-extraction has seemed, at times, inconsistent and half-hearted. A website launched in 2007 to support the initiative went down a few months later when the government failed to maintain it (Martínez 2009). In 2008, Correa suggested removing a “T” from the project, protecting only the Ishpingo and Tambococha blocs and exploiting reserves in Tiputini (Martínez and Acosta 2010). The trust fund agreement was ready to be signed in December 2009 at the Copenhagen Climate Conference, but in his weekly radio address, the President called the terms that had been negotiated an affront to Ecuadorian sovereignty. In response, all but one member of the team previously in charge of the initiative resigned. Under pressure, the President appointed a new commission led by Ivonne Baki, a former presidential candidate without strong environmentalist credentials (Sevilla 2010).

Since then, the Yasuní-ITT agreement has undergone significant revision. Most importantly, the Ecuadorian government now holds a majority of the seats on the committee
that directs use of the ITT funds. This reconstituted commission for the ITT proposal includes a “political committee” to ensure support for the initiative across various ministries in the Ecuadorian government. Initially, one member refuted my assumption that the very existence of a “political committee” implied dissension within the government:

There aren’t conflicts because the priority of the government is to leave the petroleum underground. So the Minister of Non-Renewable Resources, in an interview, said ‘Yes, this is the priority, to leave the petroleum underground.’ However, she later admitted:

The government, in general, is not homogeneous, on various issues, including on this. There are distinct interests inside the government. They are evident in some issues, not just this. But in this, yes, there is an estrangement of some people from the ITT initiative.

Over time, responsibility for the initiative has moved from the foreign ministry to the office of the Vice President; past heads of PetroEcuador have declared themselves opposed, while others have announced support. In short, the Yasuní-ITT initiative—supposedly the crowning achievement of the Correa government—has “at times seemed like a hot potato that no one wants to receive” (Martínez 2009:36).

Amazonian Schizophrenia

The uneasy coexistence of “Plan A” and “Plan B” for Yasuní—and the conflict between environmentalism and developmentalism it represents—could be interpreted as purely a matter of crass political calculation. Some Ecuadorians—as well as the US ambassador, in a cable revealed by Wikileaks (Hodges 2009)—have concluded that the initiative is just a “distraction and a trick” (Villavicencio 2010:100). Sevilla (2010:65), who renounced his position on the ITT commission in January 2010, now claims that the President is playing a “double game,” attempting to “green-mail” developed countries into giving money and planning to blame those same countries in the event of exploitation.

To claim that all of the Ecuadorian state’s purported interest in environmental protection is a sham, though, seems an exaggeration. One Ecuadorian environmental activist summarized:

It [environmental regulation] has changed, it has changed a little. I think to say that nothing has changed would be an error. I have twelve years in this fight, and I will be continuing for maybe fifteen more. And when I analyze what has happened, it’s clear

18 Another change is that funds will no longer be directed towards the conservation of lands in the hands of indigenous communities. According to Sevilla, this occurred “because of the interest of the government in exploiting, in these areas, minerals and petroleum.”
that we have advanced a lot. We still lack a lot, and we want a much more profound change than Correa wants.

Park guards, international conservation professionals, and local environmentalists all used the same phrase when describing environmental advances under the Correa government: “it’s relative.” Ecuador’s efforts to protect the environment are halting, but still significant. After all, that non-extraction is being discussed at all is noteworthy, given that in Peru oil exploitation has advanced with little debate (Vega 2010) and the Brazilian government has even resisted the scientific consensus that the Amazon is a carbon sink (Lahsen 2009).

Though it would have to be confirmed by more thorough and focused ethnographic inquiry inside the Ecuadorian government, I view these contradictions as an example of what Apffel-Marglin (2005) labels natural-resource “schizophrenia.” In this view, the interest of many individuals, collectivities and governments in preserving the environment is real, but traditional patterns of viewing nature as something to be dominated, controlled and exploited are not easy to break. Analyses carried out by the technical committee of the ITT project show that once the cost of infrastructure and the time period of extraction are taken into consideration, leaving the oil underground for compensation is actually more profitable than taking it out (Larrea 2010a). That so many are resistant to leaving oil in the ground anyway suggests that this support for extraction stems not just from shrewd economic calculation but also from deeply ingrained models of resource management (Rival 2009). As one supporter of the initiative from within the government put it:

If you are a fisherman, what is your job? To fish. If you’re the Minister of Non-Renewable Resources, what is your job? Exploit. Minister of the Environment? Protect the environment. This is the same in all governments, England, France, Ecuador, Bolivia—any government. Obviously, the interests are simply opposed.

Correa once described himself as facing “a dilemma of conscience” (Campodónico 2010:169) with respect to exploitation in ITT—a statement to could reflect political posturing, or, perhaps, a genuine case of environmental “schizophrenia.”

Regardless, this description of the tug-of-war between resource-fueled development and conservation in Ecuador serves two purposes for the present analysis. First, it helps explain why the initiative may be failing. As many interviewees noted, the initiative has lost international credibility due to the government’s inconsistent support and its willingness to exploit oil reserves in other parts of Yasuní Park. From this perspective, the problems of the Yasuní-ITT initiative do not rest in the intricacies of policy design, as some seem to suggest (Finer et al. 2009; Rosendal et al. 2008; Vogel 2009), but, more fundamentally, in domestic politics.
Second, these contradictions create space for local environmental mobilization. Christensen (2007:53) claims that, historically, the Ecuadorian state has suffered “compromised sovereignty” and been unable to take meaningful decisions with respect to regulating the environment. For better or for worse, the Ecuadorian state has now assumed a more active role in guiding Amazonian development. Local social movements not only have a tangible actor to mobilize against, then, but—through the new constitution—norms to deploy against that actor. The new institutional, ideological and legal resources the state has created for environmentalism—and the barriers it has erected to public participation—represent the dynamic “political opportunity structure” of mobilization in the Yasuni region (McAdam 1982).
IV. Myths and Realities of Yasuní

**The Meat Market**

On Saturday mornings, some of the biodiversity of Yasuní is on display in Pompeya, a small colonist town on the Napo River, five kilometers outside of the Park. Starting at dawn, indigenous Huaorani and Kichwa arrive via canoe, carrying corpses of picari, guanta,19 and spider monkeys, as well as a handful of live tortoises and armadillo. Their kills are purchased by a mestizo businessman, who will drive the bush-meat back to Tena, 150 kilometers away. He pays the hunters $2/kilo; a fortune to them, but a fraction of what the meat will fetch in urban restaurants. By Ecuadorian law, these transactions are illegal, but the middleman conducts his business openly and seems unfazed by the presence of an unfamiliar outsider asking questions. He guesses that 70% of the money he pays to the hunters is immediately spent on Pilsener, a popular local beer; a mound of empty bottles, already present at 10 a.m., seems to confirm his estimate.

In 2005, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) began monitoring the Pompeya market. The market has grown steadily over time, now trading in thirty-one different species and moving 12,000 kilograms of meat a year (Suárez et al. 2009). While that quantity might seem small relative to a 900,000 hectare park, studies suggest that tracts of Yasuní are now “empty forests” devoid of large mammals (Franzen 2006). Huaorani hunters with whom I spoke admitted that game was much less abundant than in the past, and that they were eating new species of animals to compensate. Wildlife populations have been so depleted—and human populations so expanded—that, according to my WCS contacts, there is now “no conceivable scenario” under which continued hunting in Yasuní would be sustainable.

Assigning culpability for this apparent ecological catastrophe is complex. A local anthropologist explained that the market is driven by demand in cities like Coca and Tena, where tourists come hoping to try exotic meat and mestizo colonists view eating bush-meat as symbolic of Amazonian life. Oil is also a central part of the story. In 1993, after years of resistance, the Huaorani community relented and allowed Maxus Petroleum to construct a road stretching through Bloc 16 into their territory (Sawyer 2004). Semi-nomadic Huaorani family groups began settling near the road, availing themselves of subsidized transport provided by the company (Suárez et al. 2009). That road leads directly into Pompeya.

Despite the complex forces that enabled the Pompeya Market, most individuals with whom I spoke blamed its existence on the Huaorani. The Huaorani, I was told, had been

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19 Large rodents and wild pigs endemic to Yasuní.
“fooled” or “corrupted” by gifts of cell phones and pick-up trucks from the oil companies, and had given up their traditional way of life in favor of materialism, alcoholism, drug addiction, and laziness. Anthropologists argue that the engagement of Huaorani in the bush-meat trade reflects their rapid integration into the market subsequent to their first peaceful contact with the Western world fifty years ago (Sierra, Rodriguez, and Losos 1999; Holt 2005; Lu 2007). The Huaorani are keenly aware that they are perceived as savages (Yost 1981), suggesting that participation in the meat market may be an attempt to fuse traditional practices with a desire to engage with the outside world as “modern citizens” (Rival 2002:175).

Joe Vogel (2010), an international advocate for the Yasuní-ITT proposal, describes Yasuní as “both a place and a metaphor.” His assertion is that a concrete policy to protect a specific place—Yasuní National Park—has become an international symbol for innovative strategies to combat climate change, protect biodiversity, and preserve indigenous cultures. Within this international metaphor, the Huaorani invariably play the role of “ecologically noble savages” (Redford and Stearman 1993:254) who carefully guard their ancestral ecosystem. Local environmentalism, on the other hand, has little part to play in the success of Yasuní-ITT.

The example of the Huaorani involvement in the meat market demonstrates that this international portrait of Yasuní diverges from reality. As I argue in this chapter, the tension between the Yasuní of place and metaphor is, in part, responsible for the unraveling of the initiative. At the same time, it is through confronting these threats to Yasuní that a wide range of local actors have become involved in defending the park. Understanding Yasuní the place, then, is critical for understanding the new forms of environmentalism coming out of it.

The State’s Initiative

When asked to identify a weakness of the Yasuní-ITT proposal, nearly every informant—whether in national or local government, civil society or the general population—cited a lack of public participation (see, also, Acosta et al. 2009; Martínez 2009; Aguirre 2010). The near universal perception was that, despite its origins in civil society, the proposal was now managed by the government without the input of local actors. While “participation” could mean many things—ranging from government-sponsored events explaining the proposal to active engagement of civil society in the appropriation of funds—it was clear that none of these mechanisms had been implemented. Although I encountered among the local population a certain baseline awareness of the broad outlines of the
proposal—that it involved foreign money for leaving oil underground—this understanding was coupled with a great deal of confusion. Residents of Yasuní expressed frustration at the steady stream of foreigners coming to the area who seemed to have better information about what was happening than they did.

Members of the ITT-proposal’s directory were aware of this lack of participation, but admitted it was a result of strategic choices. The project plan states that the first task is to achieve international support, and the second is to ensure the backing of Ecuadorian society (Larrea 2010b). Observers near Yasuní were possibly correct, then, when they stated that “This whole campaign is towards foreigners, and has not come here.” The international orientation of the proposal was clear at the signing ceremony itself. At one point, the organizers screened a short film that highlighted, they said, the broad support that existed for leaving oil underground. The film flipped between European human rights activists, American environmentalists, and leaders of other Latin American governments. Not a single featured speaker was Ecuadorian.

During a meeting of the Technical Committee for the Yasuní-ITT initiative which I attended, government officials discussed how, with the signing of the trust fund, the initiative was passing into a more “participatory” phase. The crux of this new participatory push was a series of forums on the initiative with the Huaorani, carried out by Fundación Pachamama, a civil society organization which was acting as a “pro-bono” assistant to the government. Already, though, it was clear that this would be a challenging process. Carlos Larrea, an economics professor and head of the technical committee, argued that the government had no official policy towards the Huaorani, and that the Huaorani themselves had no vision for their own future, no clear representatives, and were internally divided. The initiative, he added, is a complicated one, and certain key concepts have no equivalent in the Huaorani language.\footnote{A situation only compounded by the fact that, by most accounts, no one in the Ecuadorian government speaks Huaorani.}

The restricted scope of public participation in crafting and advancing the Yasuní-ITT initiative, though, seems to be more than just a reflection of practical barriers. A narrow focus on achieving Huaorani support for the initiative is consistent with the government’s presentation of Yasuní as a space inhabited only by a handful of indigenous people. Many outsiders felt that the Huaorani attracted the most attention from the government not because they were going to be the most affected, but because—as itinerant hunter-gatherers with, traditionally, a close connection to the environment—they were most representative of the image and symbol of Yasuní that the government sought to project. The Huaoranis, as one
put it, “are not so much actors [in the proposal]… more like subjects. They are like one more element to preserve.” Yet only a single Huaorani settlement of around 70 individuals is within the bloc itself. In fact, while the park itself has only 2,000 primarily indigenous residents, the surrounding area has 45,000, most of whom are mestizo (Suárez et al. 2009). The largest communities near the ITT bloc are actually agriculturalist-pastoralist Kichwa, who are regarded as more “Westernized” and assimilated than the Huaorani. Nonetheless, government officials struggled to envision why the participation of these other groups living near the park might be particularly important:

The colonists are largely outside the park. As a result, their right to know is the same as people in Esmeraldas [a city on the coast] or people in a barrio in Quito. All Ecuadorians have a right to be informed. The communities have already played their role with respect to the initiative, because they essentially created it.

The support of civil society, government officials told me, was “fundamental” to the success of the proposal, but few could offer any specific explanation of why.

Ultimately, the overwhelming image conveyed in my discussions about participation was that, to most Ecuadorians, the proposal was “in the hands of the state.” This sentiment was reflected in an editorial playing with the slogan of Acción Ecológica, “Yasuní depende de ti” (“Yasuni depends on you”), which opined “Yasuní depends on you… but more on the state” (Mena 2010:201). Within the government, some were blunt in telling me that efforts to achieve popular participation were a waste of time: “When you say participation, if you ask my opinion, it is not so important that the people participate as that the money comes.” In a sense, they recreated a binary I noted in my discussion of EotP: local people can become involved in defending their livelihoods from immanent destruction, but complex programs for mitigating carbon are the purview of more sophisticated actors.

Yasuni is not Yasunizado

A central part of the “symbolism” of the Yasuni-ITT initiative is that it represents a binary decision point about the future of Yasuni: either the oil is left underground, and the park is saved, or it is extracted, and the park destroyed. Larrea presented the initiative in terms of an ultimatum: “We do this, or the park will collapse. The park is going to disappear, and the Huaoranis also.” Upon signing the trust fund, the government appeared to have opted to save Yasuni. A few days later, I encountered a memo hanging on the wall of the MoE office in Coca where the park’s management was based. Sent by a linguist at a national university, it announced that since the word “Yasuni” meant “a sacred place,” “Yasunizar”—a verb form in Spanish—would signify “to protect a sacred place.” The past participle,
“Yasunizado,” could be applied to “a sacred place that has been protected.” With the signing of the trust fund, then, Yasuní had been officially Yasunizado.

The impact of the Yasuní-ITT initiative, if successful, would be more than symbolic. Park officials were clear that “it is not possible to effectively manage the park without confronting the petroleum industry” operating within it, adding that “the biggest threat to the park is petroleum activity.” By opening up roads inside the park, oil companies facilitate logging, commercial hunting, and colonization. Restricting oil exploration, therefore, would have major indirect effects in addition to directly avoiding deforestation, road-building, and contamination.

Still, those individuals closest to the day-to-day management and protection of the park did not see the ITT initiative as “saving” the park, nor exploitation as signaling its end:

To be honest, when you consider that there are 150 petroleum wells inside the national park, what’s two more in Tiputini and Tambochocha? I don’t think this is going to make an enormous different on issues of conservation or non-conservation of the park.

While in Quito, the initiative was invariably represented as protecting “the park” writ large, the ITT bloc is only around 20% of its total area. During a meeting of the Biosphere Reserve’s Management Committee, a UN employee based in Quito stated that, with the signing of the ITT agreement, “We are living in a new reality.” Few of the people around the table seemed to concur: a representative from local civil society turned to me and snapped, “What does this have to do with managing the park?” In the end, even though the initiative promised to confront a major threat to Yasuní and to direct funds for the park’s management, most park functionaries seemed to agree with the head of the park, for whom ITT was “not an initiative to benefit the park...[but] an initiative to benefit the Ecuadorian state.”

That the ITT proposal will not directly address all of the conservation and development challenges of Yasuní National Park and the surrounding areas is evident from considering the situation of Yasuní’s nominally uncontacted indigenous groups, the Tagaeri and Taromenane (T/T). These two groups are a potent symbol for the initiative, providing a cultural analogue to the park’s biological diversity and highlighting that Yasuní is unlike almost any other place in the world. In campaign literature, protection of the T/T is inevitably cited as one of the top three benefits of the initiative, alongside the preservation of biodiversity and non-emission of 407 million tonnes of CO₂.

The way the case of the “uncontacted” groups has been represented by proponents of the ITT proposal, however, differs from that reported to me by those in the Yasuní area. At
speeches and events, the government often presents ITT—along with the Intangible Zone (IZ)—as the “home” of the T/T. The bloc is inundated for most of the year, though, so the T/T use it only occasionally for hunting and rarely for residence. The IZ, which the government declared in 1999, was only officially delineated in 2007; one individual involved in the process admitted that it “does not actually represent their [uncontacted groups’] territories” but instead was put in the only place where there were no immediate plans for oil exploration. The T/T do not respect the limits of territories designated for their use, which helps explain why colonists and loggers are encountering them with increasing frequency (Narváez 2007; Aguirre 2010). A map of recent evidence of the groups’ presence which I viewed indicated only one sighting of the groups within the ITT bloc. Instead, the most recent interactions—including the killing of a logger, a colonist woman and two children—have taken place in Armadillo, which is to the west of both the park and the IZ. Here, despite the protestations of the government’s Plan de Medidas Cautelares (PMC) for the protection of the T/T, licensing is moving forward to exploit the bloc’s small petroleum reserves.

Oil, according to Paola Carrera, head of the PMC, is a grave threat to the T/T, but a manageable and predictable one. More difficult to control is the impact of Huaorani

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21 A division of the Ministries of Environment and Justice, formed by executive decree in 2006 after the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights directed the Ecuadorian government to take measures to protect the isolated groups.
activities. In my interviews, Huaorani leaders consistently expressed their deep concern for the T/T, whom they perceive as close relatives. But hunting and logging in Huaorani territory, facilitated by the Huaorani themselves, place enormous stress on the animal populations used by the T/T, which, Carrera speculated, is one reason why contact with the T/T is becoming more frequent: “They’re hungry.” A NGO employee involved in the biosphere management committee explained the challenges incumbent on anyone attempting to address these threats:

This is a delicate issue. It is very difficult to have any sort of restriction on a way of life that has an ancestral origin, although, in reality, neither selling animals nor logging is an ancestral way of life for the Huaorani. At the same time, though, they have an authority for managing their territory that we cannot just negate.

Consequently, the participation of the Huaorani is, according to Carrera, essential for the long-term protection of the T/T. To this effect, the PMC has given numerous Huaorani communities radios and paid some community members to report sightings of the T/T in remote and inaccessible areas.

Local, mestizo-led governments also play a significant role. Informants noted a pernicious cycle by which colonists would push the agricultural frontier further into traditional T/T territory, then demand services on the basis of social rights guaranteed by the new constitution. In the past, local governments, looking for votes, would oblige by constructing roads and other infrastructure, which only facilitated further colonization (Rudel 2009:141). Colonists, I was told, perceived the T/T as “like ghosts in the forest…until they are seen, they are believable as aliens” and blamed violence on angry Huaorani, not uncontacted indigenous people.

The case of the Tagaeri and Taromenane demonstrates the dynamic topography of threats to Yasuní National Park and its immediate environs. Logging, colonization, hunting, and petroleum exploitation are mutually reinforcing yet constantly shifting. Actors like the PMC have “very little space to get away from what is happening on the ground day-by-day” and are reliant on the cooperation of a range of local constituencies. Carrera described the complexities of her work:

These are issues that are interdependent, that cannot be separated. If the park is doing well, and the Huaorani are doing well, then the isolated pueblos will do well. If there are problems with one of them, then that is bad for everyone. There is interdependence in this territory that does not allow us to think in another manner. The Yasuní-ITT proposal will have some impact on these challenges, but it will not make them go away. In contrast to the international myth that the ITT initiative is the defining
moment for the park, managers viewed it as one among many efforts underway to address a wide range of problems.

*Managing Man and Biosphere*

Like many other parks in Latin America (Zebich-Knos 2008), Yasuni was designated in a top-down process that involved no meaningful popular input. Similar to the ITT-initiative itself, the park has consistently suffered from “insufficient engagement of local actors” (Fontaine 2007b:75), in addition to a lack of financial, technical, and human resources. When asked about participation in park management, respondents stated flatly that the park was controlled by the MoE, and no one else had authority over the area. In the words of one biologist, local populations had “no role in things of the park, except to damage it.”

Management of the biosphere reserve, of which the park is the nucleus, has historically been even weaker. The 1989 designation of a biosphere reserve “binds neither the Ecuadorian government nor the international community” and fails to define “rights, responsibilities, or obligations” (Rival 2009:11). The reserve has no protective laws, formally designated guardians, or institutionalized management structure. When I asked one employee of the Ministry of Cultural Patrimony, which directs the ITT initiative, about the biosphere reserve, he cut me off and stated “Look, the reserve doesn’t really exist. There is no management.”

This dismissal is at odds with processes taking place in the biosphere reserve during the last decade. The head of the Wildlife Conservation Society in Ecuador recounted that in 2001 there was a grand assembly in Coca of over 250 representatives of local NGOs, research stations, indigenous federations, municipal governments, and the MoE. Attendees decided to form a temporary management committee for the reserve which would develop statutes and bylaws for a formal management process. This “temporary” committee has functioned for ten years, she explained, as:

…a space in which almost all the actors that are considered key and are taking critical decisions with respect to the Biosphere Reserve interact. […] It doesn’t have specific powers, but it has the will of the organizations to develop and agree on actions. It doesn’t have a legal framework, but that isn’t important. It is a space in which organizations with a legal framework can come together and reach agreements that are very important.

Interest in the committee has ebbed and flowed, but during the last few years local actors have re-engaged and created a management plan for the reserve. Through the committee,
different entities have pooled and channeled resources, coordinated campaigns, and integrated efforts to promote sustainable development.

In contrast to narratives that placed the future of the park “in the hands of the government,” participants in the committee described the reserve as a “space of convergence” for a variety of non-state actors with the potential to have a significant impact. In the absence of formal legal powers, none of the decisions of the management committee can be imposed. The committee must negotiate across cultural diversity—the reserve has populations of Huaorani, Shuar, Kichwa, Afro-Ecuadorians, and mestizos—and the dual purposes of the biosphere reserve—environmental protection and sustainable development. Work on the committee necessarily entails engagement with loggers—both legal and illegal—and petroleum companies, who have primary control over large parts of the reserve. With respect to the biosphere reserve, the head of the park admitted, “local decisions are determinative… the Ministry of the Environment is not.”

At one of the management committee’s meetings, I witnessed the complex negotiations entailed in responding to the threat of the commercial meat trade to the park. After WCS biologists presented a report on the steadily increasing traffic through Pompeya, the MoE reported that it was ready to crack down on the market. Its representative added that civil society support would be essential, because some of the trade was not actually illegal, and the parts that were could easily move elsewhere in the event of a police intervention. A local academic working with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization stated that her organization was actively collaborating with indigenous communities to develop economic alternatives—such as handcrafts production and ecotourism—but that it would take some time before these would be viable replacements for the income from hunting. The biologists, however, insisted that action should be taken immediately: the market was a “luxury” for the hunters and had nothing to do with subsistence.

This statement provoked a strident reaction by representatives of the Huaorani federation, NAWE. This discussion of Huaorani culpability for the meat market, they argued, was representative of the entire way Huaorani had been portrayed in their “short and exploitative” contact with the Western world: “You speak of the Kichwa and Shuar as communities, but only talk about the problems of the Huaorani. We are never spoken about as a nation.” In their view, the Huaorani have been protecting the park without compensation for decades, and were now developing their own sustainable economy—producing artisanal goods for tourists—in spite of a lack of external support. The Huaorani presentation prompted a conciliatory response. The head of Yasuni Park said that any action in Pompeya
would take place with the cooperation of the “organizations of our Huaorani brothers”, but he added that, locally, the Ministry did not have the resources to offer the Huaorani compensation for the lost income from hunting.

The conversation then made a major shift from addressing the production of bush-meat to its consumption. The mestizo head of the Municipality of Coca’s Environmental Department pointed out:

Many of you say we have to arrest these people [the hunters], but we can’t just say, ‘No.’ We have to start by creating awareness. I don’t want the sanctions on bringing the meat out; they should be on selling meals made with the meat. […] Why are we attacking the big guys and not the small ones?

He then announced that Coca could pass a resolution prohibiting restaurants in the city from serving bush-meat. The group then discussed the political repercussions of such a move, since the city’s economy depends on providing services, especially food, for tourists and petroleum workers. Ultimately, the group decided that restrictions on consumption and sale of meat should be coupled with a public awareness campaign addressed to mestizo colonists, admonishing them “If you aren’t from the forest, don’t eat from the forest.”

It is too early to know if this multi-pronged campaign against the meat trade has been successful. Certainly, it will be a long and halting process: as one Ecuadorian biologist put it, “All things with the park are like a roller coaster—up and down, up and down. You can never say that all is well, because it’s never all well. But things are better now.” Some achievements of the management committee are already visible. Although data from 2008 indicate that Ecuador has the highest deforestation rate in Latin America (Mosandl et al. 2008), individuals involved with the committee reported that logging in the reserve had decreased significantly—one estimated 70%—following a coordinated effort of control and monitoring that has taken place over the last two years. The achievement highlights the important role of on-the-ground environmental mobilization for protecting Yasuní.

Friction

The above section should not be read as an uncritical celebration of the power of local actors to achieve conservation. Indeed, whether greater popular participation, decentralization, and democracy lead to better outcomes for the environment is a hotly debated question (Wilshusen et al. 2002; Larson 2003; Liverman and Vilas 2006; Larson and Soto 2008; Brondizio et al. 2009) which this thesis does not attempt to answer. After all, participants in the biosphere management committee—including park officials—saw themselves as completely impotent in the face of the greatest threat to the park: oil. Despite
their positive role on the management committee, municipal governments are deeply implicated in the process of colonization, which presents another critical challenge to the integrity of the park. Participation in the committee is clearly imperfect: committee members admitted that most members of Yasuní-area communities were unaware of the committee’s work or even the existence of the reserve itself. These examples do, however, highlight an alternative reality of Yasuní, one that diverges significantly from government rhetoric of an untouched paradise that can be protected only from the top-down.

Travel and by extension, communication (since many communities do not have access to radio, television, or print media) in the Yasuní region are difficult. It thus seems reasonable to assume that only established local organizations with long-standing connections and reach into communities can mediate popular participation in an initiative that is technical and abstract. Given these challenges, it is surprising that the state has not involved the management committee in disseminating the ITT proposal. Even the park office admitted it had “no direct connection” with the initiative: park employees helped coordinate visits by potential donors, but had not been consulted in the initiative’s development or diffusion.

Carrera, from the PMC, insisted that those working in the Yasuní area wanted to help:

There are a ton of instances in which these actors could have contributed enormously to the functioning of the initiative through their local work. They could have diminished the local conflicts and misconceptions. All of us that work for the state in the Amazon would gladly have helped them to socialize this issue and to look for and achieve local support. This is simply a strategic failure of the state, that it has not used its own entities.

While this expression of limitless goodwill may be an exaggeration, it is clear that if the state wanted to increase awareness of and participation in the Yasuní-ITT initiative, there are mechanisms to do so.

As I argued earlier, the realities of Yasuní the place have, in the minds of many of the initiative’s national and international proponents, almost nothing to do with a proposal that seeks to attract international funds to mitigate carbon emissions. When asked if local communities would play a part in the success or failure of the initiative, one former employee of the Yasuní-ITT negotiating team replied:

They are not going to have an important role. […] The issue is this: if you want something not to work, you form a committee. You invite Acción Ecológica, the whole government, all the ministries, all the parts of civil society, all the universities, all the indígenas. Invite everyone! And it’s not going to function, ever.

22 In the survey on perceptions of the ITT initiative discussed in the following chapter, only 28% of respondents were aware that they lived in a Biosphere Reserve.
In part, this commission member may be correct. The future of the park will be in large part determined by the Ecuadorian state, which alone has the power to limit petroleum activities and halt associated processes of colonization. The ITT proposal itself is heavily dependent on decisions taken even further afield. Norway—which had been identified as a potentially key contributor—decided not to support the initiative, because financing a project to leave oil underground seemed hypocritical to Norwegian lawmakers (since much of their government budget comes from oil extraction). Undoubtedly, international climate politics and the state of the world economy are major factors in Yasuní-ITT, as with other developing-world climate initiatives (Barrett 2009).

Symbol and reality, material and myth, and global and local can never be kept perfectly separate, however. Tsing (2005) describes how global processes touch down onto local realities in a process of “friction,” much like a spinning wheel gripping onto the road. These connections are neither straightforward nor predictable, taking place in “grounded sites of local-global articulation and interaction” (Biersack 2007:16) that are neither fully “local” nor “global.” I witnessed just such a moment of friction during my trip to the Pompeya meat market. Late in the morning, a white SUV pulled up, carrying two UN officials from Africa and Asia who were in town for the ITT Trust Fund signing ceremony. They left after only a few minutes, but not before expressing their surprise and disappointment that something like this could happen just outside of a “protected” area.

Could moments of friction like this help explain why the Yasuní-ITT initiative has failed to attract international funding? Some preliminary evidence suggests that Germany withdrew its support for the ITT initiative because of domestic political changes which have made it more enthusiastic for carbon markets and less so for other forms of foreign aid. Other signs hint that problems in Yasuní the place may have tarnished Yasuní the symbol as it has been presented to international donors. As Tsing (2005:227) argues, environmental activists tend to deploy “charismatic packages” that bind together different images and symbols to make a cause compelling. The “charismatic package” of Yasuní is not just the initiative’s promise to avert carbon emission, but also to preserve “traditional” indigenous people and protect “untouched” biological diversity. Purportedly, the German ambassador told one member of the ITT negotiating committee that the Ecuadorian government had done such a poor job managing Yasuní it would be better off in the hands of oil companies (Sevilla 2010). Others suggest that Germany withdrew its support because of Ecuador’s contradictory

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support for oil exploration in other parts of the park (Saavedra 2010). More research is required to know if in allowing the park—the ITT initiative’s “natural capital”—to be damaged, Ecuador has, as one informant put it, “killed the goose that lays the golden egg.”

These examples buttress literature claiming that the success and failure of climate mitigation projects depend more on domestic politics and conditions on the ground than previously realized (Jacques 2006; Schreurs 2008; Harrison and Sundstrom 2010). This analysis also shows a wide variety of avenues through which grassroots environmental actors can be—and already are—involved the protection of Yasuní. It blurs the division between local, livelihood struggles—emphasized by Martinez-Alier and Escobar—and the more explicitly global, technical, and abstract issues confronted, classically, by “post-material” environmentalists. In the next chapter, I turn more explicitly to the forms of environmental consciousness on which local environmental action in the region is rooted.
V. The Environmentalism of the People

_Nueva Roca Fuerte_

The ITT Bloc is one of Yasuní Park’s most remote regions. A visitor from Quito has to ride ten hours by bus from the Andes to Coca, followed by another twelve hours—and nearly three-hundred kilometers—by motorized canoe. At the end of the journey rests Nueva Roca Fuerte (NRF), a town with a population of 600 hugging the banks of the Rio Napo. Located just over the border from Peru, the town had strategic significance when Ecuador and its neighbour were at war. Although the town still hosts a small military garrison, it is hard not to agree with those residents who describe it as “abandoned.” The river is gnawing at its foundations, having reclaimed NRF’s original main street. The electricity turns off at 10 p.m.; the town’s water piping system is decaying; cell-phone service is non-existent; its airstrip has fallen into disuse. For most residents, the river remains their only conduit to the outside world, but few can afford to travel frequently. Indeed, because of its remoteness, nearly everything in NRF costs two or three times what it does upriver in Coca.

Economic options for NRF are limited. The town is too distant to bring agricultural products to market, and new controls on access to the park restrict hunting and fishing. Some of NRF’s inhabitants are attempting to develop small tourism businesses, but the town’s remoteness is a barrier. In recent years, one of the only sources of employment has been occasional work for oil companies doing exploratory work in the ITT bloc. Given these stark economic realities, many informants outside NRF assumed that the population there supported exploitation. Even strong advocates of the proposal, who initially claimed that “everyone” near Yasuní wanted to leave the oil underground, would often admit that they meant “everyone except the people of NRF.” In fact, during the last several years the mayor of NRF had been promoting exploitation to the Ecuadorian state and negotiated with PetroEcuador to maximize the local benefits of exploitation.

When I visited NRF I encountered a more nuanced situation. The pro-drilling mayor had clashed with members of the community, and as a consequence had moved the regional government upriver to Tiputini, where he continued to advocate for exploitation. While some residents said that they wanted the jobs from drilling, others insisted that they preferred NRF to be free from the contamination they thought oil would bring. Ecuador’s Vice President, Lenin Moreno, was born in NRF, and one shop owner claimed this meant that the proposal to leave oil underground belonged to the town.

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24 I spent four days in NRF. During that time, only four other tourists passed through: a Chinese woman and three French backpackers who claimed indigency and wanted free food and lodging.
Consistent with my findings on participation in the ITT initiative, many expressed their frustration that information about the proposal for the area in which they lived had not reached them and skepticism that resources from the initiative would ever come. During my discussions in the town, I repeatedly heard that NRF desperately needed “development.” Only some, however, were willing to support oil exploitation in the hopes of getting it. While concerns about the immediate needs of the community predominated in these conversations, several mentioned the biodiversity and natural beauty of the park as a reason for leaving the oil underground.

The example of NRF highlights the central problematic addressed by this chapter: how to make sense of a form of local environmentalism that defies the assumption that poor and marginalized people support only forms of conservation which advance their socioeconomic standing. As Martinez-Alier (2002:165) himself claims, “an environmental improvement, if gained at the cost of a worsening economic distribution, will be opposed by poor people” (see, also, Evans 2002:223). Yet while NRF residents stand to gain economically from drilling, are colonists rather than indigenous, and are not middle-class, educated “post-materialists”, many expressed support for non-exploitation anyway.

In this chapter, I sketch the outlines of “the environmentalism of the people.” I argue that this environmentalism is defined by a partial willingness to separate livelihoods and environmental protection, a perception of linkage between local, national, and global contamination by oil, and a valuation of Yasuní Park based on its role in an alternative developmental course for Ecuador. This portrayal is not necessarily consistent or complete, which reflects the preliminary nature of this investigation. It is also, however, a manifestation of my conclusion that “the environmentalism of the people” is not a coherent ethical and political approach to the environment, but a situational response to the experiences of the Amazon population with oil exploitation and political exclusion.

**Leave It Underground!**

The starting point for this examination of the “environmentalism of the people” is the widespread support among Ecuador’s population for leaving the oil underground in Yasuní. A 2008 survey found that 58% of respondents supported “Plan A” for ITT. A more recent poll found 77% of the population in favor of the initiative. While on the international scene the proposal appears to have lost credibility, these statistics suggest that the central idea of the

initiative—leaving the oil in ITT underground—has gained legitimacy among the Ecuadorian population.

These two polls were conducted in Ecuador’s main cities, Quito and Guayaquil, and tell us nothing about support among the population living around Yasuni. Another poll conducted by Grupo Faro, an Ecuadorian think-tank, surveyed 600 residents of Orellana, the province inside of which much of Yasuni is located. Although the sample is not random—and therefore, no test statistics were conducted—the poll does represent a cross-section of rural and urban, mestizo and indigenous, and long-term residents and recent arrivals. Once again, support for the initiative was extremely high: 94% of respondents believed that the oil in the ITT bloc should be left underground. Opposition to drilling in the park was strong irrespective of gender, ethnic identity, period of residence, and education.

We should be skeptical of any finding that shows nearly universal support for environmental protection (Dunlap and York 2008). Because concern for the environment tends to be “a mile wide and an inch deep”\(^2\), questions eliciting a general interest in the environment are much less revealing than those which examine the willingness of respondents to make concrete trade-offs for conservation (Brechin and Kempton 1994). This is precisely what the survey on Yasuni asks, of course: whether respondents are willing to forego the presumed benefits of oil exploitation for the protection of the park. Still, the results of this survey should be scrutinized carefully.

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\(^{2}\) I am indebted to Geoff Barnard (personal communication, August 2010) for this description of environmental attitudes in Latin America.
Ethnographic examination offers a less clear-cut portrait of popular perceptions of the ITT initiative. A great deal of misinformation, distrust, and confusion with respect to the initiative circulates in the areas around the park. Many doubted that the national government was actually interested in leaving the oil underground. Of those that did trust their own government’s intentions, some cast aspersions on those of the international donors:

I think that they are tricking us. For the best intentions that this government has, I don’t think other countries will say, ‘Take this [money].’ Instead, they are going to ask ‘What are you going to give me in exchange?’ And this country has one of the greatest reserves of freshwater in the world.

Another common rumor was that Peru was preparing “directional wells” which could remove the petroleum in ITT from the other side of the border. More generally, many were frustrated that Ecuador seemed to be shouldering the burden of conservation alone: “other countries have petroleum, why aren’t they leaving it in the ground?”

When considered independently of the ITT initiative’s problematic political context, non-extraction still commanded the support of much of the local population. Excluding those individuals I interviewed specifically because of their previous advocacy on behalf of the proposal, I asked fifty-two individuals their opinion on leaving the oil in ITT underground. Forty-four (nearly 85%) expressed their approval, some quite vehemently (“I’d rather the government grow drugs for its revenue than drill for oil”). The reasons given by those who did not support the initiative varied. One woman told me that, since Ecuador would get more money from drilling, that was preferable. At other times, individuals seemed to oppose “Plan A” only because they were resigned to its failure, as the following two quotes demonstrate:

The exploitation of Yasuní is going to happen because it is going to happen. And as citizens, our hope is that we can make it so that it does not damage the ecosystem, as has happened in past epochs.

I think that, rather than invest so much stupid energy in the ITT initiative, we should invest our energy in making sure the new contracts with the companies are truly just, and we should demand the best, cleanest technology, and look for minimum standards of quality in petroleum extraction.

Indeed, one of my most disillusioned interviewees said his problem with the ITT initiative was that it would only protect 20% of the park.

As previously noted, there are good reasons to look at these professions of environmental sanctity critically. While it often seemed, as one Coca resident put it, that “Everyone here wants the oil to be left underground”, some of those same supporters were actively involved in damaging the park. A group of oil company employees told me that they

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28 Although Peru and Colombia have recently increased their exploratory activities along the Ecuadorian border (Finer et al. 2008), officials confirmed that extraction of ITT by Peru is technically and politically impossible.
supported “Plan A”—although they would be ready to carry out “Plan B” if needed. Still, these cases suggest—in contrast to previous findings (Rival 2009; Abad 2010)—that leaving the oil underground is considered a credible alternative to extraction among much of the population. Indeed, a finding that answers in support of leaving oil underground are the product of social expectations—rather than real convictions—itself would reveal a generalized hostility towards extraction among the population.

*Post-Materialism of the Poor?*

The Ecuadorian state has consistently stated that if revenues from foreign donors are not forthcoming, it will exploit ITT. This assertion that the poor—whether poor people or a poor country—must be compensated for environmental protection seems fully consistent with Martinez-Alier’s notion of social-justice oriented environmentalism. Interestingly, though, in the Grupo Faro poll 88% of respondents were unaware of the government’s plan to receive international funds as compensation for not drilling—but most expressed their support anyway. In Quito, individuals frequently said that they supported non-extraction so long as the government received something in exchange. Near Yasuní, in contrast, I often heard that the oil should be left underground irrespective of external support. As representatives from civil society reminded me, the original idea that emerged from the Amazon and inspired the ITT proposal was for an unconditional moratorium on further expansion of the petroleum frontier. Unlikely though it may seem, I encountered substantial backing for this “Plan C” (Martínez and Acosta 2010): non-exploitation even without international money.

Regardless of whether they wanted “Plan A”—non-drilling with compensation—or “Plan C”—non-drilling with or without compensation—nearly everyone agreed that creating alternative forms of economic generation was critical for sustaining support for conservation. Government officials involved in the management of the Yasuní proposal worried that “if there is no exploitation, the communities are going to want to know what kind of alternatives of development there are.” When I asked them what “alternatives” were viable, the immediate answer was almost always “ecotourism.”

The barriers to sustainable and economically successful ecotourism in the Yasuní area, however, are substantial. Despite its “eco” label, ecotourism often effects significant environmental harm without bringing substantial economic benefits to participating

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29 This survey was conducted in September 2009. During my fieldwork nine months later, I found a much higher level of awareness of the proposal, suggesting that some diffusion had taken place in spite of the government’s anemic efforts to secure popular participation.
communities (Pattullo 1996; Chernela 2005; Zebich-Knos 2008). Presently, tourism garners only $5 million a year for the Yasuní region (Gallagher 2009). Those in the industry complained that they were already underemployed, even without anyone else attempting to make a living from the business. While I found that many indigenous individuals were extremely enthusiastic about ecotourism—“less oil, more tourists” was a frequent refrain—colonist’s hopes for an economic future rooted in ecotourism were more muted. Even while stating that funds from the ITT initiative should be used to promote tourism, no one with whom I spoke thought the initiative would create enough growth that they could enter the industry themselves.

Beyond ecotourism, no single idea for an economic alternative predominated. Kichwa and Shuar indigenous leaders told me that they hoped to attract pharmaceutical researchers interested in rainforest plants. A few members of local civil society said that they hoped someday factories would be built in the Oriente. Agriculture was mentioned frequently, but because of the Amazon’s poor soil and distance from major markets, its prospects are limited. One local admitted, “Agriculture in the Amazon is agriculture for survival. It is not agriculture for commercialization.”

In short, there is no obvious short-term alternative to petroleum exploitation for the economy of the Yasuní region. Yet this lack of an immanently viable substitute may not be as catastrophic, with respect to popular support for the initiative, as many seemed to think. While both Escobar and Martinez-Alier argue that, for the poor, environmental protection, social development, and livelihood preservation are inseparable, some in the Yasuní region viewed them in isolation from one another. Esperanza Martinez of Acción Ecológica summarized:

In the surveys that we have carried out, the population speaks about non-exploitation. The majority says ‘no exploitation’. The problem with the local population is that they have many needs. They want no exploitation, but they also want someone to respond to the needs of the area.

The discourse among colonists, as one described it, is “conserve, but not conserve everything.” While I was waiting in the MoE office in Coca, a campesino (mestizo farmer) came in seeking title to his farmland. He insisted that what the government really needed to do was to put in a road all the way to NRF, so that farmers could more easily sell their produce. He paused for a few seconds, and added, “But the road would have to go around the

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30 The division between colonists and indigenous with respect to the perceived benefits of ecotourism is unsurprising. Indigenous communities are almost certainly more likely to attract tourists than colonist ones, and indigenous guides are advertised by many tourism companies.
park [Yasuní].” Undoubtedly, the colonist population of the Yasuní region takes advantage of land, timber, and other natural resources; they also seemed willing to support leaving certain places and resources unexploited. In contrast to existing studies of socio-environmentalism, informants appeared to back this conservation even though they doubted they would derive any material benefit from it.

The counterpoint to EotP, post-materialism, posits that interest in ecological protection stems from aesthetic appreciation of nature and scientifically sophisticated knowledge of environmental risks. While some of my conversations in the Yasuní region were with educated, middle-class individuals, though, I also found support among people with lower socioeconomic status. Nonetheless, Yasuní has attracted an enormous amount of attention from developed-world environmental groups (Martin 2010, 2011)—like The Nature Conservancy, World Wildlife Fund, and Wildlife Conservation Society—and it seems plausible that global post-materialist discourses about Yasuní Park have been adopted by the region’s population.

As I have already noted, international interest in Yasuní has been chiefly motivated by concern for climate change. On the ground, residents reported a wide range of climatic shifts: rivers were lower, rainfall more irregular and the seasons unpredictable. Few, however, used the specific phrases “climate change” and “global warming” or could articulate any sense of the origins of these phenomena. One leader of a campesino federation affirmed that environmental messages about the welfare of the planet had little meaning for her:

We don’t feel the human impact of every bad thing in the environment. We don’t feel it, for example, when people in Austria or Argentina die from the cold, when people die from the heat in Africa.

If local people seemed disconnected from the international symbol of Yasuní Park, they seemed no closer to the physical place. Colonists did not “use” the park for their livelihoods nor did they see the park as a space for their aesthetic enjoyment. Although Coca is near the park, one city employee explained that visiting the park is simply not a priority for most residents:

Coca is a commercial city. Here, the people love to work. They don’t like to walk around the forest. […] If you say to a man who sells cocos here, ‘Let’s go to Yasuní’, he is going to say, ‘I have to work.’ One day they don’t sell is a lost day to them. Our idea of a vacation is to go to the coast.

Park officials worried that colonists saw the park as “something that belongs to outsiders”, assuming that no one would want to protect a place that existed only for foreign tourists.
Locals in Coca did indeed perceive the park as a space of prohibition, but it wasn’t clear that they resented this protection. When one woman vented, “Tourists keep coming wanting to know about Yasuní-ITT, but we Ecuadorians can’t even afford to go,” I asked her if Ecuadorians should have a subsidy to help them visit the park. She replied, “No, we can damage the park as much as anyone else.” As examples like this suggest, the origins of environmentalism in Yasuní must rest outside of “local” livelihoods or “global” values.

**Crude and Contamination**

During an interview, one journalist based in Coca described petroleum as an instrument that could be used towards any manner of positive or negative ends:

> I am not pro-petroleum or anti-petroleum. Petroleum is a resource. And we have to determine when to take out this resource, and how to do it, and what’s going to happen to Amazonia. [...] I believe that the entire environmentalist and academic world are wasting their time [talking about non-exploitation]. We need to see immediate solutions to the immediate problems of the people.

I highlight this quote not because it is representative of how petroleum was perceived by many residents of the Amazon, but instead to show its idiosyncracy. A representative of *Fundación Pachamama*, an environmental group that works with indigenous communities, offered an alternative perspective:

> The most important part of the ITT initiative is that people see that the problem is petroleum. We speak of ‘climate change, climate change’, but in the end this is intangible. The important thing here is to stop talking about CO$_2$ and more about consumption of fossil fuels. It is not reducing CO$_2$ but reducing petroleum.

This statement was, initially, somewhat confusing. A wide array of literature has shown the negative human and environmental consequences of petroleum exploitation in the Ecuadorian Amazon (Kilmerling 1991; CESR 1994; San Sebastián and Córdoba 1999; Hvalkof 2000; San Sebastián and Hurtig 2004; Finer et al. 2008). Yet why is petroleum itself, rather than its effects (such as CO$_2$ emissions, spills and contamination, or the corrupting impact of oil revenue), perceived as problematic?

Many of the harmful impacts of oil exploitation identified by local community members mirror those reported in the above studies. Kichwa and Shuar leaders described life prior to petroleum as “free and healthy” and the arrival of companies in the 1970s as degrading traditional practices, livelihood, and health. Colonists living in rural areas around Coca claimed that petroleum had contaminated their water supply, causing abnormally high levels of gastro-intestinal diseases and cancer. One colonist described the abundant game and
fish he encountered when he first moved to the Oriente, which had now disappeared because, he claimed, oil had poisoned them.

The debate within local communities about the impacts of oil exploitation, however, went far beyond anything documented in the literature. Several Huaorani told me that the noise generated by oil wells had ruined their hunting areas and diminished their quality of life. The leader of the Kichwa community federation traced problems of prostitution, alcoholism, and drug use to petroleum companies. Representatives of colonist communities leveled their own set of grievances at the oil industry: the companies had given settlers gifts in exchange for permission to exploit, making them lazy and corrupt. Even urban residents—somewhat removed from the sites of extraction—had their own complaints. Prices for goods and services in Coca are twice as high as in other cities of the Oriente, I was informed, because petroleros have so much money to dispense.

These multifarious complaints about petroleum exploitation were often organized around the concept of “contamination”, as a quote from a municipal employee in Coca shows:

What petroleum has brought is destruction, death, diseases of animals, people, children, and of nature, which, at this moment in the Amazon, is sick. Here, the water is contaminated, the air is contaminated, the soil is contaminated.

In Sacha, a town a few dozen kilometers to the north, another government functionary invoked “contamination”, stating that “The contamination does not have frontiers, it does not have limits, it does not need a visa, it does not need anything.” Among Western environmentalists, the notion of “waste” has become a metaphor for a wide range of social ills that extend far beyond the inefficient use of resources (Scanlon 2005; Barnard 2011). While this point needs to be explored more fully, these data imply that “contamination” has similarly fungible significance. To many of my informants, it was not just the land, air, and water around sites of petroleum extraction that had become contaminated, but their entire ecological and social milieu.

The perceived harms of contamination were not framed solely in terms of local effects. In contrast to the locally-oriented focus of EotP, respondents freely associated local, regional, national, and global scales of environmental problems. One taxi driver in Coca, for example, described changes in the patterns of rainfall he had observed and stronger sunlight, which he said were causing skin cancer and lowering the productivity of coffee farms. Petroleum contamination, he explained, accounted for all of this. Spanish does not have a clear division between “weather” and “climate”, and in my discussions of these issues,
respondents easily shifted between short-term and long-term perceptions of environmental change, deploying a mish-mash of folk and scientific knowledge to interpret it. While professional environmentalists found this frustrating, my own impression was that this sense of inter-linkage between social and environmental problems at multiple scales—bound together by omnipresent petroleum contamination—helps explain why so many individuals supported leaving oil underground, even though few had any direct connection to Yasuní.

In fact, many colonists explicitly attributed their experience with the oil industry as the source of their environmental concern. Colonists readily admitted that they came to the Oriente with little ecological consciousness and looked to petroleum extraction as a source of employment. Both the literature (Valdivia 2008) and my informants stated that, historically, colonists deliberately settled close to sites of oil exploitation in the hopes that they could gain benefits and compensation from the companies. At the same time, many claimed that precisely because of this they had suffered from petroleum contamination more than their indigenous counterparts. Consequently, some external environmentalists with experience in the region told me that they thought that colonists were more resistant to the expansion of the petroleum frontier than indigenous people. While I cannot validate that claim, colonists did seem better informed about the impact of oil exploitation than any other environmental issue.

The harmful environmental and social costs of oil exploitation, of course, must be balanced against its perceived economic benefits. My informants, however, were often reluctant to admit that oil had brought anything to the region at all. In their eyes, revenue from oil flowed to Quito and Guayaquil or Western countries; “barely 1% stays here.” Inhabitants of the Oriente contrasted the “wealth” that had been extracted with their own lack of basic services. Residents of Coca complained that the city had only been linked to a paved road in 2008: “Imagine this city, with all the money from petroleum, and up to two years ago, we lacked a highway!” While outsiders and even some members of the municipal government claimed that “everyone has petroleum money here,” most of the people of Coca with whom I spoke did not agree. Petroleum jobs inevitably went to highly educated outsiders who flew in from Quito during the week and then disappeared.31 This “floating population”, respondents insisted, contributed little to the local economy. Even the vegetables that oil workers ate during the week, they informed me, were brought in from elsewhere, because the workers know that they have “contaminated” the local food supply.

31 Ryder and Brown (2000) show the diminishing contribution of the petroleum industry to employment in cities of the Ecuadorian Amazon.
In the rare events that locals did gain employment in the petroleum industry, the jobs were short-term, low-skill, and poorly paid.

*The Lungs of the World*

The amount requested by the Ecuadorian government as compensation for leaving the ITT-bloc oil underground—$3.6 billion—was initially calculated based on the likely revenues from exploitation, using the market price of a barrel of oil, which in 2009 was $61.21 (Warnars 2010). As the previous section demonstrates, though, locals living around Yasuní had a different sense of the value of oil. The “worth” of a barrel of oil to someone living near Yasuní might be calculated from the benefits it brings to his or her community (almost nothing) minus its environmental and social costs (which are high). Consequently, national discourse about the “sacrifices” involved in leaving petroleum underground did not resonate at the local level:

They said before that constructing a pipeline for heavy crude is a question of life or death, because the campesinos are poor, they are dying of hunger, they don’t have health [care], they don’t have education. Seven years ago, they constructed the pipeline, and now they are saying, ‘We have to exploit Yasuní, it’s life or death, because the people are poor.’ We ask ourselves: are these the same poor people as seven years ago, or are they other poor people now? It’s always ‘Life or death’, but at the end, it’s death.

As Rival (2010) argues, a key outcome of the ITT initiative, if successful, would be to show that petroleum can be worth more under the ground than above it. These data demonstrate that at the local level, though, a revaluation of petroleum has already taken place. This was not based on the sacredness or inviolability of nature. People were happy to accept benefits from petroleum when they came, and, when pressed, would admit that extraction could have a value greater than zero. They saw the worth of petroleum as extremely low, though, which drastically altered their sense of the need for international compensation.

Counterpoised against the value of the hydrocarbons underneath Yasuní is the social, environmental, and cultural value of the park itself. As argued earlier, few colonists perceived the biological resources of the park as critical for their own livelihoods. Nonetheless, it was clear that most people had a sense that “the riches of the park are not its petroleum.” Particularly, in describing the value of the park, non-indigenous residents emphasized that it was “the lung of the world”:

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32 For example, many people opposed to exploitation said that, if Peru were going to drill ITT anyway, Ecuador might as well do it first.
The world needs to understand this: the Amazon is the only lung that still exists. If we don’t maintain the last lung, the climate change will be significant [in ways that] we’ve never seen. […] Petroleum is the blood in the veins of the earth. If we keep sucking the blood; it will end up dry.

While statements like these seem to reflect a post-materialist concern for the whole of humanity, further investigation of the idea of “the lungs of the world” revealed otherwise. Respondents invariably underlined that “we”, as “Ecuadorians” or “Amazonians”, were producing oxygen for “them”, the rest of the world. Far from seeing the park and the environmental services it provides as a patrimony of all humanity beyond monetary valuation, many felt that they deserved compensation for this (cf. Auyero 2004). Other countries destroyed their forests in the course of development, and now they were reliant on Ecuador, so “someone needs to pay. […] We are not selling the park, but we need a policy of compensation.” Part of the national dialogue about international compensation, clearly, had filtered down to the local level; what had not was that compensation be predicated on the market value of oil.

“The nation” is often invisible in studies of environmentalism that oscillate between the local and the global (Brosius 1999a). Consistent with recent scholarship on the importance of national environmental movements (Tsing 2005; Hochstetler and Keck 2007), I found that the colonists interpreted the value of Yasuní with reference to the Ecuadorian nation, rather than to their own community (as Martinez-Alier might assume) or to the world at large (as a post-materialist). This became evident when I gathered local perceptions of the massive body of scientific work produced on Yasuní’s biodiversity. Yasuní is one of the most studied places in the Amazon (Pitman et al. 2011), yet in Quito I was cautioned that “scientific knowledge of why Yasuní is important has not permeated the population.” Locals, however, readily cited a study which found that one hectare of Yasuní Park contained more species of vascular plants than the United States and Canada combined (Bass et al. 2010). When translated into colloquial interchange, though, the study took on new dimensions: I was informed that Yasuní had more species of everything than the United States, or that there were more individual insects in Yasuní than in all of North America. The one constant was that tiny Ecuador had more of something than the United States.

Oil is traditionally closely intertwined with Ecuadorian national identity. Perrault and Valdivia (2010:697) link “alternative imaginaries of ‘proper’ hydrocarbon production (i.e. extraction, distribution of rents) with struggles over the meaning of development, citizenship, and the nation.” Debates over oil in Ecuador are “never only (or even primarily) about resources” (2010:692), but instead engage deeper questions about the reproduction of the
state and nation. Traditionally, these popular movements have demanded nationalization of natural resources in order to maximize the benefits of extraction for Ecuadorians (Valdivia 2008), predicated on the notion that, in spite of its past flaws, “just maybe” (Bebbington et al. 2008:887) oil production could become equitable and sustainable.

For many Amazonians, however, there is no “just maybe”: oil is beyond redemption. I conducted my fieldwork during summer 2010, as an exploded British Petroleum well spewed crude into the Gulf of Mexico. If the United States, with all of its wealth and technology, could not stop this spill, interviewees mused, how could Ecuador ever expect to avoid such catastrophes? Many of the people of Yasuní were aware that the crude of ITT was of high density and low quality (Rival 2009), making extraction even more environmentally problematic. Even those that believed that the environmental impact of oil could be allayed through technology felt that the broader social effects of contamination could not be reduced. In so doing, they were rejecting a forty-year conflation of the Ecuadorian nation with oil.

Acción Ecológica conducted a survey in which they asked what made people proud to be Ecuadorian: number one was the national football team; the second was nature. For many in the population, leaving oil underground in Yasuní represented not so much a radical change to their own livelihoods as a responsible step towards acknowledging what was—and was not—a sensible developmental path for Ecuador. “We are not Venezuela”, I was told over and over again, a statement which reflected knowledge that Ecuador’s petroleum reserves were much smaller and thus could not underpin national development to the same extent. Knowing that petroleum was finite and fleeting, respondents thus looked to other countries—often Costa Rica—for alternatives. Precisely because non-exploitation seemed like such a reasonable approach, given the failure of petroleum to provide benefits for the nation, some people were confused as to why Ecuador seemed to be begging for compensation internationally. Petroleum was “not a synonym of wealth, but a synonym of poverty”, so giving it up was not an obvious loss. Within the “environmentalism of the people”, then, environmental preservation represented one long-term strategy for developing a different national economy based on sustainable resource use, biodiversity, and tourism.

Empirical analysis shows that oil companies have committed substantially more resources towards, and been far more successful in, reducing environmental than social impacts (Moser 2001).
VI. The Local Politics of Climate Change

Green Governance in Orellana

In summer 2010, CocaTV, the local television station in Orellana province, was playing an advertisement about Yasuní. The commercial began with images of environmental devastation taken from “ChevronToxico”, a campaign involved in a long-running class action lawsuit against Chevron-Texaco in the province to the north, Sucumbios. The screen then switched to stock footage of rainforest wildlife, while a narrator—speaking in Huaorani, with Spanish subtitles—spoke of “the most diverse place on the planet.” At the end, words flashed in the shape of a slowly beating heart: “No to a slow death. No to exploitation in ITT.” The final frame showed a picture of the provincial prefect, and stated that the provincial government paid for the advertisement.

Yasuní is not just visible on the televisions of Coca, a town of around 25,000 fifty kilometers upriver from the park. Storefronts are adorned with posters advertising Yasuní Park, and the first thing that greets arrivals in the Coca airport is a display on Yasuní’s fauna. During my time in the town, every festival and public event included a mention of Yasuní and the need to leave the oil underground. Yet the television advertisement made no reference to the national government’s proposal, and a local reporter told me that news of the ITT trust fund signing was barely reported in the province. In fact, many residents who considered themselves well-informed confidently told me that the two proposals for Yasuní were not “Plan A” and “Plan B”, but the national government’s plan to exploit Yasuní and the municipality’s proposal to protect it.

This perception is not entirely incorrect. The mayor of Coca, Anita Rivas, created a campaign called Yasuní Oro Verde (“Yasuní Green Gold”) which she has promoted around the world. Although she claimed in our interview to have conducted this campaign to support the central government’s “Plan A”, residents of Coca perceived it differently:

Here in Orellana, we have heard about lots of proposals. One of these that the municipality is carrying out is called Yasuní Oro Verde. The municipal government is, in one manner or another, supporting the [national] government without supporting them. […] In this initiative, the national government is trying to acquire funds so that they don’t exploit Yasuní. But here, lots of people still believe that the government wants to exploit Yasuní. Why do they have this idea? Because this is the idea that the prefect is leaving in the communities.

Yasuní Oro Verde was only one prong of the local government’s environmental efforts. The director of the municipal environmental office stated that his staff was working to make residents aware of their rights with respect to oil exploitation, monitor drilling, and mitigate existing contamination. Other programs funded by the city sought to educate the population
about solid waste, improve water quality, and assist the management committee of the biosphere reserve.

This active engagement with environmental issues is not easy to explain. Theoretically, the incentives for local governments to become involved in climate mitigation are extremely low (Qi et al. 2008). Coca’s position on the preservation of Yasuní is not shared by neighboring governments in Pastaza province where, I was told, elected leaders were not even aware that their districts were within the biosphere reserve. This interest in leaving the oil underground also does not reflect an unequivocal moral commitment to conservation. Mayor Rivas admitted that her primary concern was providing public works for a population that was growing 7% per year, which inevitably meant building infrastructure that facilitated colonization and the deforestation it brought with it. One member of the national MoE reported to me that when he confronted her about an unauthorized highway, she responded “I don’t need environmental permission, because my pueblo needs this road.” Moreover, survey data on Coca depicts an archetypal colonist community—two-thirds urban, 79% non-indigenous, and 67% born outside the province—which does not fit the profile of the social base of environmental movements described by EotP, cultural ecologism, or post-materialism.

Given this, the answer I received when I asked people in Coca why their local government was so involved in Yasuní was surprising: “The environment is a positive aspect for our government…this can win them votes.” Mayor Rivas seemed to agree, reporting that “In our campaigns in the pueblos, Yasuní is our central theme.” This chapter explores how the popular values of “the environmentalism of the people” are reflected in the politicization of the Yasuní-ITT proposal and, in turn, explores how local politics promote that environmentalism. These examples suggest that, in part, environmentalism around Yasuní emerges not from livelihood interests or preexisting identities, but from the construction of political legitimacy and power.

I situate local government action on behalf of the environment within Ecuador’s long history of populist mobilization (Quintero-López 1997; Sosa-Buchholz 1999; Torre 1997, 2000). As Jansen (2011:19) argues, populism is at heart a valorization of “ordinary” people against an “elite” other. Precisely who is “tarred with the elite brush” varies by context. In this case, I argue that environmentalism has been appropriated in local political discourse as a vehicle to celebrate “ordinary” mestizo colonists. The politicization of Yasuní, in turn, is used to challenge both national elites, who are perceived as instigators of oil exploitation and the Amazon’s political exclusion, and the resurgent indigenous movement.
Local Politics, National Development

Nationalists have long insisted that “Ecuador has been, is, and will be an Amazonian country” (Whitten 1981:5). This phrase is belied, however, by Ecuador’s history of profound regional division (Crain 1990; Pineo 1996; Weismantel 2003; Torre and Striffler 2008), within which the true heart of the Ecuadorian nation is presumed to rest in its highland capital, Quito (Stutzman 1981; Rahier 1998). Indeed, by some accounts, the Amazon is a liminal “Fourth World”, marginalized not just with respect to the world economy but also via-a-vis the rest of Ecuador (Kilmerling 2000). Although the state has long sought to integrate the Amazon into national development (Hiraoka and Yamamoto 1980; Uquillas 1984; Muratorio 2008), the reality for many Amazonian residents has been a government visible only through the armed forces and, later, the national petroleum company (Ruiz 1993). In the past, municipal authorities have attempted to fill this void by provisioning social services (Keese and Argudo 2006). Many residents of Coca still felt that this historical inattention from the national government meant that only provincial and municipal governments could attend to and represent their needs.

Amazonian municipal governments are dominated by Pachakutik, Ecuador’s indigenous party. Although authors have described Pachakutik as “transformative” and outside traditional politics (Petras and Veltmeyer 2001; Becker 2008; Cadena 2010; Van Cott 2010), in Orellana Pachakutik is primarily controlled by mestizos and involved in conventional struggles for patronage and resources (Beck and Mijeski 2001). President Correa was elected with Pachakutik’s support in 2007, and municipal leaders told me that they had hoped that the new regime would end the region’s traditional marginality. In spite of this early optimism, relations quickly soured. At the heart of local-national conflict was resources; local governments in the Amazon do not have autonomous sources of revenue and are dependent on grants from the national government.

In late 2007, Prefect Lori of Orellana began organizing strikes and protests against the national government. Although accounts of what happened next are inconsistent (see, also, Becker 2011), it is clear that a series of major protests over oil spills, governmental neglect, and the failure of petroleum companies to carry out promised road-building took place in Dayuma, a region to the south-west of Yasuni. The military and police attempted to quell the strike, killing a protester and arresting twenty-five. A week later, the prefect was arrested.

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34 The statement reflects the loss of 75% of Ecuador’s Amazonian territory in wars with its neighbors, including one with Peru in the 1940s.
35 This marginality is reflected in the Ecuadorian Amazon’s poverty rate: 79.2%, compared to 54.5% nationally (Narváez 2007).
and, purportedly, tortured. Shortly after her release, however, the prefect won reelection. According to a reporter in Coca, since then local authorities in Orellana “have broken all relations and become 100% enemies of the government. Any action the government tries to carry out, she [Lori] is against it, even if it is something positive.”

Three years later, no rapprochement between local and national governments had taken place. Coca’s Mayor Rivas told me that “They [the national government] enter like a thief in the darkness, and once they are in the house they point the gun at you and you can’t do anything.” The head of Coca’s Environment Department was no more charitable:

The problem is also that the government thinks it can do whatever it wants from Quito and many times doesn’t take our reality into account. […] It’s because they don’t care about the population here in Orellana. What does it matter, our votes against the million or two million votes in the big cities?

In the neighboring municipality of Sacha, the mayor deployed less invective, but still expressed his frustration that the national government “lacked the maturity” to “work in its own area of competence” and leave municipal institutions responsible for local affairs.

This depiction of the state as “cowboys that come in order to invade land and invade rights”—as one respondent characterized it—was shared by both elected officials and the general population. Local governments, on the other hand, were immensely popular. The mayor of Coca had a 75% approval rating in the opinion poll conducted by Grupo Faro, and informants in Coca repeatedly told me that they trusted their municipal government, more than other institutions, to promote their interests. This broad support gave Mayor Rivas, in her own words, a “moral authority” to do what she saw as needed by her pueblo. While these conflicts between Amazon and Highlands are nothing new, the fact that this “moral authority” is being used in defense of the environment is and bears further analysis.

_In the last chapter, I showed that the population of the Yasuní region overwhelmingly perceives the Amazon’s forty-year history of oil extraction as having brought environmental and social contamination with little economic benefit. One key achievement claimed by the Correa administration, however, is a better-regulated oil industry that more equitably distributes revenues. Under Correa, the state has committed to sharing a greater proportion of oil revenues with the Amazon, which has been designated a “special” region alongside the Galapagos Islands. With respect to the environment, officials insisted that ecological_
catastrophes were “something in the past” and that oil companies were now given “very little margin.”

In communities near where the petroleum was actually being extracted, though, most reported that the petroleum policy of the Correa regime had been no more positive for the Amazon region than other developments under the new government. Stated the head of Coca’s Human Rights Department:

The petroleum situation has not changed for anything. The way that they take out petroleum is the exact same. When there are spills, the practices are the same: cover it [the petroleum], hide it, and threaten and persecute the people who try to defend themselves. […] From the outside, it seems like it has changed because now you don’t see many uprisings or strikes, like there were until 2007. But this is not because there aren’t problems. Simply, it’s because the people are afraid, because they are terrorized.

Others were more nuanced, but still insisted that the new regime had not meaningfully improved extraction. For example, while the national government had vaunted a reduction in the number of spills as a sign that new regulations were working, officials in Coca claimed that spills still happened on a monthly basis without proper remediation or compensation.37

In Quito, it was evident that many Ecuadorians looked favorably upon the increasing role of PetroEcuador in extraction, a finding consistent with the “petro-nationalism” described by Valvidia (2008). The view of nationalization from the Amazon was less sanguine. State oil companies across Latin America have older infrastructure, less human capacity, and more dated technology than their private counterparts (Moser 2001; Liverman and Vilas 2006; Peláez-Samaniegoa et al. 2007). Locals perceived PetroEcuador as, comparatively, careless and incompetent. The public-versus-private debate in the Amazon is about more than just environmental impact. For all their complaints about the social impacts of oil exploitation, residents and community leaders understood that, in exchange for their acquiescence to drilling, private companies might build sports fields, roads, or schools.

Through nationalization, the state was reasserting its prerogative for social provisioning, and therefore forbidding private companies from providing these things. Colonists insisted that the state still had not picked up the slack, though: “Now, we have a disgraceful situation in which one isn’t giving it [health and education] and the other is prohibited from giving it.”

For actors around Yasuní, the government’s ITT proposal—despite rhetoric about a radical paradigm shift in development—would do little to alter this overall exploitative

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37 Indeed, during my interview with the head of Coca’s Environmental Department, he received a phone call reporting a new spill that had happened that day.
topography. In my conversations with municipal officials, it was often unclear whether they were discussing “Plan A” or “Plan B”: in general terms, they described an oil-related proposal which had little popular participation and would bring the state significant revenue that it would not redistribute. Even when municipal officials were clearly speaking of “Plan A”, they downplayed its significance. While the state insisted that the ITT proposal would be a model that could be replicated across Ecuador, those around Yasuni understood it as a one-off, idiosyncratic proposal. In the district of Sacha, reported the town’s mayor, there are nearly 300 operational wells. Given this, it is easy to understand why a proposal for not building seven platforms in the ITT bloc—250 kilometers away—led residents to muse, “What’s one more well, one less well?”

In criticizing the national ITT initiative, officials referred back to the original proposal that emerged from the Amazon, which had called for a broader moratorium:

They changed our idea! We said no more exploitation inside the park. This would imply that REPSOL should revise their concession, that ANDES-PETRO should revise their concession, and decide if we’re exploiting crude in the park or not. Now this proposal has become something that comes from the central authority, and almost… it speaks of Yasuni, but it is more like an emblem of Yasuni. […] It is not ‘No more exploitation in the park.’ It’s a proposal that tries to gather some resources to not exploit one well in a park.

Numerous respondents criticized the government’s apparent environmental schizophrenia: the new Constitution already forbade further exploitation in national parks, so all they were asking was that the national government comply with its own norms. That the state had appropriated the Yasuni proposal—while altering its original meaning—was described as one
more example of how the Amazon was excluded from national politics, despite producing much of Ecuador’s wealth.

The municipal government of Coca—like many of the town’s citizens—viewed limiting petroleum exploitation as the only reasonable path for developing the region, given the past damages caused by exploitation and the reality that Ecuador’s reserves are finite. Regional governments in Orellana are not ecologically saintly: all my data indicate that, posturing aside, these entities were disposed to build roads, populate the region, and attain what benefits from oil exploitation they could. Instead, their concern, as one administrator explained, was that the municipality needed:

…to create an economy based on our region. […] Nobody [in the national government] is looking with a perspective of twenty to thirty years out, as to what will happen when the petroleum is gone. […] If we don’t do this, we’re going to be a ghost town. The only thing we have left to protect is Yasuní; that’s what we have, our rainforest.

They thus promoted what they viewed as a pragmatic, common-sense sense alternative to exploitation. Given the high level of consciousness within the colonist population about the harmful effects of oil and contamination, a strong anti-petroleum, anti-national-elite discourse was evidently something that local politicians perceived as politically advantageous.

The Return of the Indígena

Any account of the political milieu swirling around Yasuní-ITT must take into account the unprecedented role assumed by indigenous people in Ecuador’s national politics during the last decade. Starting in the 1990s, Ecuador’s indigenous movement—led by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE)—instigated a series of dramatic uprisings that won significant territorial concessions, earned constitutional recognition of multiculturalism, and even unseated a President (Jackson and Warren 2005; Lucero 2008; Jameson 2011). Although the locus of indigenous mobilization was Quito, the movement originated in and has been most successful in the Amazon (Salazar 1981; Sawyer 2004). There, the political reassertion of indigenous people has been coupled with a demographic rise that, in part, reflects an attempt to repopulate lost territory (McSweeney and Arps 2005; Hvalkof 2007).

In Ecuador, as elsewhere in Latin America, indigenous demands for territorial autonomy are buttressed by assertions that Indians are “natural environmentalists with a close, spiritual, non-capitalist relationship to land” (Hooker 2005:304; Cepek 2008; Martí i
Community leaders representing the Shuar, Huaorani, and Kichwa federations in Orellana all told me that, as the park’s historical denizens, they were appropriate stewards for Yasuni. They rejected the notion that, due to population growth or market integration, they were no longer managing the park sustainably: “We conserve because the forest is what feeds us. We only take what we need.” It was revealing to note how they appropriated some of the universalistic language and symbolism surrounding the park, but reframed it in terms of indigenous territoriality and history. One Huaorani man, for example, said that Yasuní was the “last lung of the Huaorani.” For him, Yasuní was not just a territory that produced material resources, like game, but also critical for the reproduction of Huaorani culture and society.

The central role of indigenous federations—particularly the Huaorani—in resisting the expansion of oil exploration into Yasuní is well-documented (Ziegler-Otero 2004; Finer et al. 2008; Rival 2011). Past experience with government-led extraction appeared to have left the indigenous people of Yasuní even more distrustful than local mestizo governments of

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38 Because this research focused on mestizo and colonist environmentalism, I only conducted seven interviews with indigenous actors. These conclusions should be evaluated with this limitation in mind.
the central state\textsuperscript{39}, which filtered into perceptions of the Yasuni-ITT initiative. Although I am confident that all the indigenous leaders with whom I spoke were aware of the government’s “Plan A”, they often made no mention of it, and instead told me that the central government’s only plan was to exploit ITT.\textsuperscript{40} Still, all expressed a strong commitment to ensuring that the oil in ITT was left underground: one Huaorani community leader even said his group would respond to drilling with spear attacks.

In reality, the relationship between indigenous communities and petroleum exploitation is not always one of straightforward opposition. In Quito, members of the ITT technical committee said that the Huaorani leadership had made it clear that their support for the ITT initiative was contingent on guarantees that resources would flow to Huaorani communities and that they would have a role in the trust fund’s management. Other informants told me that the Kichwa communities located around the ITT bloc—like the \textit{mestizos} in NRF—wanted exploitation (a claim I can neither confirm nor deny). A reporter described how, in March 2010, the government held an assembly in Coca in support of Yasuni; in the front row were painted Huaorani, there to show their backing for non-exploitation. In the back—away from the cameras—was a group of Kichwa from downriver, holding a banner that said “We want development.”

My point here is not to suggest that indigenous people are “more” pro-petroleum than colonists, only to highlight their unique positioning with respect to exploitation. Thanks to grassroots mobilization, national recognition, and international attention, indigenous people have achieved some success in striking a “middle ground” with petroleum companies that allows extraction in exchange for social development (Sabin 1998; Rodrigues 2004; Haley 2004). Indigenous people have gained these benefits by virtue of being indigenous, which gives them “the right as a culturally different collective individual to negotiate with oil companies (something that \textit{mestizos}, for instance, are not able to do)” (Valdivia 2005:295).

Consider, for example, this statement by a representative of the Shuar Federation:

\textit{We have seen this penetration since the time of the conquistadors, but it continues with petroleum. […] As a nationality, we have existed from the creation of the world, and we have not come from anywhere else. We are owners, and defenders, and guardians of the environment.}

\textsuperscript{39}Unsurprising, given that oil exploitation has eradicated two indigenous groups, the Tetetes and Sasahuaris, whose names now adorn two petroleum blocs (Martínez and Acosta 2010).

\textsuperscript{40}For example, FICCKAE, the Kichwa federation, has been involved in several assemblies to promote the ITT initiative, and yet when I spoke with its leader, she made no mention of the initiative and spoke only of Kichwa resistance to further exploitation.
In truth, the Shuar are recent arrivals in Yasuní, having migrated from the south around the same time as many colonists. Nonetheless, the discursive construction of indigenous people—who “should” live in the rainforest, unlike colonists who “should not” (Brosius 1999b:282)—buttresses environmental claims by certain groups while discounting those of others. Groups like the Shuar can make claims that link environment, identity, history, and territory in a way that colonists cannot. As I argue in the next section, mestizo colonists in the Yasuní region have responded by developing their own framework to claim, just like indigenous people, rights to territory and power based on environmental stewardship.

Mestizo Environmentalism

During the uprisings of the 1990s, “Nothing only for the Indians” (Whitten 2003:8) was a rallying cry used to insist that indigenous mobilizations were undertaken on behalf of all Ecuadorians. Data show mestizo collaboration in indigenous mobilizations and that, for a time, CONAIE was one of the most trusted political movements in Ecuador (Radcliffe 1999; Gerlach 2003; Sawyer 2004). This appeared to be a startling reversal for a country where indigenous people have been historically viewed as “dirty, lazy, irrational, and backward” (Colloredo-Mansfeld 1998:186) and thought to be destined to disappear in mestizaje, the gradual whitening and unification of the nation (Wade 1997; Rahier 1998; Applebaum, Macpherson, and Rosemblatt 2003). In general, however, comments about how mestizos interpreted the rise of indigenous people have only been attached as addenda to works whose primary focus is indigenous movements themselves (see, e.g., Warren 1998; Hale 2002; Perreault 2003; Taylor, Moran-Taylor, and Ruiz 2006).

My own tentative finding is that many non-indigenous Ecuadorians still do not fully accept that indigenous people have a veritable place in national politics. Mestizo informants claimed that leaders of indigenous federations had been corrupted by money from oil companies and foreign NGOs. Indigenous constituencies were uneducated and malleable, I was told, and could be convinced to go to any protest as long as the federation paid their bus ticket. One government official fumed that “the indigenous people…speak of us mestizos as their younger bothers. They are the wise older brothers, they say.” When I asked one mestizo if indigenous people were generally from the political right or left, she responded that they were neither—indigenous people were only interested in benefiting other indigenous people. In short, two decades after the dramatic emergence of the indigenous movement in national politics, many mestizos still perceive that claims for “differentiated citizenship”—at
the heart of demands for a plurinational Ecuador—are sectional and exclusionary challenges to national unity and individual equality (Stutzman 1981; Yashar 1999; Stavenhagen 2002).

Lucero (2008:94) points out that the struggles of indigenous organizations are “not only over material resources, but also over the symbolic resources of authenticity and legitimacy.” My observation that indigenous people are still considered outside the populist masses of “ordinary” people—because they are viewed as bearers of “special” rights who lead lives apart from the nation—has been made before (Torre 2000). What seemed more novel was the way that mestizo actors attacked the heart of indigenous peoples’ symbolic power: the notion that they are natural conservationists (Conklin and Graham 1995; Pace 2004; Nugent 2007).

In many cases, mestizos claimed that, in reality, colonists caused less damage to the environment than indigenous people. As one park employee asserted:

Based on my experience, the colonists are those who impact less. You know that the colonists deforest, but deforest in order to plant. He cuts the trees but he will leave [tree] cover. He’ll change the crops, but the cover is still there. In the case of the Kichwa communities, they only gather, they want to live by hunting, but they don’t plant much. So they exhaust what there is in the forest. The colonist does not dedicate himself to hunting, and depends on what he plants. If I had to say who is doing more damage, it’s the [indigenous] communities, whether they are Huaorani or Kichwa. As they finish off the fauna, they leave empty forests; forests that have the vegetative forest cover but don’t have life.

It is probably impossible to determine whether an “empty” or a “cleared” forest represents more environmental destruction; the rhetorical machinations required to make this assertion, are nonetheless telling. Many mestizos—in civil society, municipal government, and the general population—declared that because indigenous people derived benefits from oil companies and no longer lived “traditionally”, they could not be trusted with conservation. The mayor of Sacha explained:

Indigenous communities have been great predators on the environment. They have sold the very best parts of their territory for little money. They throw dynamite and chemicals into the river to catch a few fish. Their form of living is sedentary and lazy. They like when people give them things; when the companies come, they ask for ponchos, boats, machetes, things to use for hunting. They have always preferred laziness, not their own initiative.

He concluded, “They need other people to teach them about nature.”

As I argue earlier, mestizos are not able to burnish their environmental credentials through claims to past stewardship or a cultural connection to the land. Mestizos challenged the notion that these factors are what matters, arguing that the indigenous cosmovision—which views nature as being regenerated through human use—is not a legitimate basis for
environmental protection. Instead, they claimed that, in certain places like Yasuní, the use of the environment and its preservation are incompatible. In so doing, these actors moved beyond a locality and livelihood-centered approach to environmentalism, claiming a moral basis for conservation that, in their view, benefited not just the community but Ecuador and the world as a whole.

These observations are not meant to reflect any judgment about the actual environmental impacts of different groups. That said, they do show the politicization of Yasuní-ITT which I have been describing. While colonists claimed they were becoming less dependent on petroleum and searching for an alternative economic future, they saw indigenous people as becoming steadily more reliant on oil-company largesse. As municipal leaders told me, “indigenous people don’t vote.” This statement is at odds with the Ecuador’s legal requirement for voting (Beck and Mijeski 2001), but reflects an understanding that local governments’ electoral base was mestizo colonists, many of whom were skeptical of indigenous politics. Contestation over the mantle of “environmentalist” appeared to be one way these struggles for control and political power manifested themselves.

The Last Paradise?

In essence, I argue that—thanks in part to national changes, like the new constitution, and local ones, such as a shift in thinking about the oil industry—environmentalism in Ecuador has become a form of political currency. It is perhaps for this reason that, while everyone claimed that they, themselves, did not support exploiting ITT, they often said that others did: accusations of ecological misdeeds have become one way of de-legitimizing competing groups’ claims for resources, land, and power. More broadly, through the language of ecological preservation, mestizo-colonist political actors inject themselves into a terrain traditionally dominated by indigenous groups and the state, and, in the long term, insist on their own belonging and distinctive identity.

In the Chapter I, I chronicled how Amazonian colonists have been characterized as leading a precarious existence marked by “insecurity, desperation, and suffering” (Lisansky 1990:80). Colonists, a wide range of sources informed me, “do not feel like they belong to this area... they still feel like people just passing through.” They are a “classic marginal population” which have “very bad conditions of life.” Colonists themselves did their own part to circulate this narrative of exclusion and deprivation. Even one resolutely middle-class professional who had migrated to Coca during the last year told me, “Here in Orellana, we lack practically everything. We lack good centers of education, centers of health.”
And yet, when I asked him if he planned on staying in the Oriente after his contract as a college administrator ended, he responded, “I hope so. That is my dream.” Like other migrants, he offered a double narrative about his life in the Amazon: colonists would insist on their abandonment and exclusion, and then state that they nonetheless found the Amazon to be a place filled with hope and opportunity. Longer-term residents of Coca perceived the city as advancing by leaps and bounds: water, electricity, and road access were all improving. People in the cities thought that employment opportunities were superior to those in the highlands; farmers, for all their concerns about the quality of the soil, knew that remaining in the Oriente was their best hope for gaining land title. In contrast to expectations, many young, middle-class, educated informants with whom I talked said that they wanted to remain in the Amazon in the future.

Typically, migrants paint a romanticized picture of the landscape and lifestyle of the places from which they emigrated (Lynch 1993; Alkon and Traugot 2008). In Quito, many environmentalists assumed that colonists in the Amazon felt the same, and used this to explain why, with respect to the environment, colonists would always be ecologically apathetic. Many of the colonists with whom I spoke, contrary to expectations, idealized the environment of the Amazon relative to their previous homelands. Farmers rejected the notion that they were environmental refugees who came because they were fleeing drought or poverty: “All the people here have come on their own initiative, to have their land, so they can make a living.” Consistent with literature on “repeasantization” (Cohn et al. 2006; Moyo and Yeros 2005; van der Ploeg 2008), which finds that in now-overwhelmingly urbanized Latin America some people are revalorizing rural life, informants insisted that Amazonian life was “cleaner”, “healthier”, and “more tranquil”. Although Coca’s tourism campaign—“Yasuni: The Last Paradise”—was obviously directed at outsiders, its message appeared to reflect a general narrative that living in the Amazon was, at least in some senses, a privilege.

87% of those surveyed in Coca identified themselves as “citizens” of the province of Orellana, including a majority of those born elsewhere. Although I have thus far used “colonist” and “mestizo” interchangeably to describe the Amazon’s non-indigenous population, some rejected the colonist label, pointing out that it made no sense to call a new generation of people born in the Amazon “colonists.” As self-styled long-term residents of the Amazon, they saw no reason why indigenous people should have a privileged claim to it. Those responsible for environmental degradation were, many insisted, a “floating population” that flew in from Quito, with the blessing of the national government, to work in extractive industries. Ultimately, they claimed that, to truly be “of the Oriente”, one needed to oppose
petroleum—and therefore, support the preservation of ITT. To quote Mayor Rivas: “It has been like a template or letterhead for us that we are petroleros. But we are not really petroleros because there aren’t opportunities for the local people in the industry.” If the Oriente symbolized an opportunity for a healthier and more successful life, oil was a symbol of everything that the Oriente was not.

These conclusions need further research for confirmation. Yet they undoubtedly suggest the need for some theoretical revision. First, we need to reconsider the “sense of gloom and pessimism [that] pervades recent studies of the Oriente”, based in the sense that “development is up against overwhelming obstacles” and the area’s residents are “at the mercy of exogenous forces” (Ryder and Brown 2000:527,530). Not everyone perceived life in the Amazon as marked by desperation, and partly as a consequence, not all mestizos appeared to support, as the literature assumes, the frantic short-term exploitation of resources.

Secondly, we should reconsider the relationship that has been theorized between territory, identity, and ecologism. Martinez-Alier argues that environmentalism is born out of pre-existing livelihoods, culture, and connections to land. I would tend to agree with Agrawal (2005), who argues that actors do not always enter into resource-related conflicts with their identities and outlooks fully formed (see, also, Robbins 2004; Little 1999). For many mestizos, a connection to territory did not lead to environmentalism; instead, environmentalism was a medium through which they asserted a connection to territory. This should not be overstated: it would be presumptious to allege that environmentalism was the centerpiece of Amazonian identity. Instead, support for certain forms of conservation was intertwined with pride at being Ecuadorian, a desire for the Oriente to be fully incorporated into national development, and an insistence that indigenous actors should not have sole control over the Amazon.

One day during my time in Coca, I stepped into a local tourism office and asked the attendant if she could tell me anything about Yasuni-ITT. After she handed me a simple government flier, I explained that I was a researcher and had been hoping for more in-depth information. She started describing the proposal—mentioning how it would avert carbon emissions and protect uncontacted groups—but then stopped abruptly. She had recently learned that the proposal would only protect a corner of the park, and now, she said, she “just didn’t believe in it anymore.” What she did believe in, though, was Ecuador’s new constitution. She pulled a highlighted and dog-eared pocket-copy out of her purse and read out Article 250, which states:
The territory of the Amazon provinces is part of an ecosystem that is necessary for the environmental equilibrium of the planet. This territory constitutes a special territorial district which will have an integrated planning that includes social, economic, environmental, and cultural aspects, with a territorial arrangement that guarantees conservation, protection of ecosystems, and the principle of *buen vivir*.

The woman was a recent migrant and had never visited Yasuni. Her simultaneous invocations of the importance of the Amazon to the region, nation, and world, and her connection to it, fit at best uneasily into existing theorizations of popular environmentalism.
Conclusion

Given the preliminary nature of my research, this thesis cannot offer a comprehensive theory of the “environmentalism of the people,” which would require systematic attention not just to discursive framings of environmental issues but also to individual production and consumption decisions, voting behaviour, and social movement mobilization. Furthermore, this thesis does not provide a full accounting of the impending failure of the Yasuní-ITT initiative, which would necessitate more investigation within the Ecuadorian government and among potential international contributors. The purpose of this conclusion is, however, to tease out some key trends in the data which could guide research to address these questions fully and, more broadly, the urgent challenge of developing successful projects for climate mitigation.

In Chapter VI, I pointed out that popular environmentalism in Yasuní appears to be rooted in the politicization of oil production, ethnic and regional identity, and the ITT initiative. In Quito, members of national civil society lamented this politicization, reflecting a general belief among many environmentalists that conservation should be a point of societal consensus that transcends political division (Berger 1997). Yet it seems unlikely that certain groups—such as Amazonian colonists—will ever come to environmentalism organically, given that they have no tradition of sustainable resource use and have little likelihood of benefiting from ecotourism or conservation-and-development programs. Clearly, other mechanisms are necessary to generate interest and support for environmental protection among groups other than “natural conservationists” like indigenous people.

The local politics of Yasuní-ITT point to one such avenue. Local mestizo environmentalism appears to have emerged from a deliberately political mobilization of values, identity, and the desire for power and recognition. The result, admittedly, is a mode of environmentalism that seems far less romantic than that portrayed in existing work on the “environmentalism of the poor.” Mestizo environmentalism around Yasuní was both exclusionary—in its attitude towards indigenous people—and highly inconsistent—as evidenced by local government’s simultaneous desire to leave the oil of Yasuní underground and build roads right up to the boundaries of the park. Moreover, the scope of the “environmentalism of the people” appears to be situational and contingent, rather than universal and unequivocal, as evidenced in Chapter V.

These factors do not necessarily, however, preclude the “environmentalism of the people” from having a positive impact on specific environmental challenges. As Martinez-
Alier (2002:255) asks, “Why cannot local rural poor people have contradictory values simultaneously in favor of more money and more wilderness, as exhibited by many members of the governing bodies of IUCN [International Union for the Conservation of Nature] or WWF [World Wildlife Fund]?” Populations like that around Yasuní can be hypocritical and unreliable advocates for environmental preservation—like anyone else—and nonetheless play a crucial role in pressuring political leaders to support conservation in certain contexts. Indeed, this more detached environmentalism may be precisely what is necessary to engage large numbers of people—not just the subaltern, rural poor, but a broad swathe of developing-world actors—in confronting urgent ecological problems like climate change, while acknowledging that most are also concerned with a wide range of other issues.

These comments return us to the overarching issue that has framed this thesis, which is the role of inhabitants of the developing world in mitigating climate change. In Chapter IV, I argued that local action is critical to ensuring the success of Yasuní-ITT as an integrated attempt to protect biodiversity, mitigate carbon emissions, and preserve indigenous cultures. As the literature makes clear, however, decentralization and democratization do not automatically lead to positive outcomes for the environment. If anything, the differential responses to Yasuní-ITT by varying local actors—ranging between complete ignorance, support of exploitation, and international advocacy on behalf of non-extraction—highlight a limited, but potentially still significant, role for leadership and agency in climate outcomes that might otherwise be assumed to be externally determined (Collier and Lofstedt 1997; Rodrigues 2004; Qi et al. 2008). As I suggest, the roots of this engagement are more morally complex than those focused only on economic livelihoods might assume: effective and durable environmental movements of the poor may be rooted in “mixed motives” rather than purely economic ones (Proctor 1996; Dosh 2009).

Ultimately, effective mitigation of climate change will require a significant shift in developmental paradigms, which acknowledges limits to growth, accepts alternative measures of well-being, and attaches new value to the environment (Clark and York 2005). Through the widest lens available, the Yasuní-ITT proposal offers one lesson in how these paradigms do—and do not—shift. International and national advocates for the ITT proposal have largely assumed that, with the right policy design, political support will follow suit. As I highlighted in my discussion of the tension between myths and realities of Yasuní, however, the symbolic policy of Yasuní-ITT has run up against deeply engrained realities of Ecuadorian (and international) political economy. Viewed from this perspective, Yasuní-ITT represents a case of putting the proverbial cart before the horse, an instance where leaders
promoted an innovative mechanism for addressing climate change before fully understanding how that mechanism would be interpreted and appropriated.

This thesis endeavours to move us beyond Yasuní the symbol, however, and return to Yasuní the place. There, it is clear that we still “do not have a developed analysis of the political innovations that have to be made if our aspirations to limit global warming are to become real” (Giddens 2009:4). Nonetheless, on the ground, amidst the messy local realities of global conservation, fragments of a new politics of climate mitigation have emerged. While the Yasuní-ITT policy might fail, the awareness and engagement with environmental issues that have grown around it offer a lesson that should not be ignored. As Yasuní shows, climate mitigation may not be about climate change at all, but about complex desires for recognition, visibility, and political power, factors which must be accounted for in theories both of environmentalism generally and climate politics specifically.


Narváez, Iván, and Guillaume Fontaine, eds. 2007. Yasuní en el Siglo XXI. Quito, Ecuador: FLACSO.


