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WATER

You Are Here: Home » Ecosystems » Chipping in to save the rainforest

Chipping in to save the rainforest

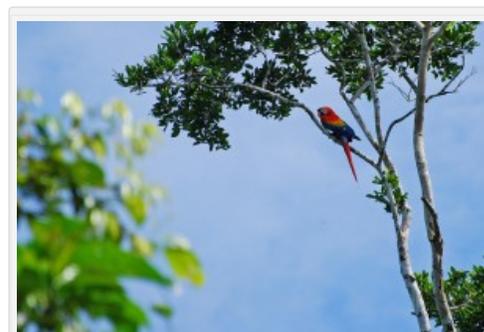
Posted by: Yvonne Bokhour Posted date: October 17, 2012 In: Ecosystems, Impact | comment : 0

On the rim of the Amazon basin, deep in Ecuador, there's a reserve of remarkable beauty—one scientists view as exceptionally biodiverse and visitors experience as magical.

The Yasuni National Park, whose inner reaches are accessible only via canoe, is home to a vast array of species, hundreds of which have yet to be discovered. It contains more tree varieties than all of North America and protects threatened mammals such as the white-bellied spider monkey.

Living alongside the birds and jaguars, flora and fish, are indigenous peoples—clans of the Waorani known as the Tagaeri and Taromenane. They prefer to live in isolation, and consider the Yasuni their refuge.

This wonderland has been threatened, however, by the discovery of oil—lots and lots of oil. More than 800 million barrels, to be exact, valued at over \$7 billion.



Scarlet macaw in Yasuni National Park, Ecuador. Photo credit: ggallice

Such large sums are not inconsequential to the country of Ecuador, whose people struggle daily with poverty. But in a novel proposal known as the [Yasuni ITT Initiative](#), Ecuador has asked the global community to offset its potential profits with donations. It will not drill for oil; it will preserve the Yasuni rainforest—if it can secure contributions totaling \$3.6 billion, about half what the oil is worth at 2007 prices.

The Initiative will not only save the Yasuni preserve, it will also prevent significant CO2 emissions—hundreds of millions of metric tons—that would have spewed into the atmosphere had the oil been extracted and burned.

At a signing ceremony held at United Nations headquarters in September, the government of Italy expressed its support for the Initiative with a contribution of 35 million Euros. Italy joins donors including Spain, Columbia, Chile, Georgia, Turkey, sub-national regions of Belgium and France, and numerous foundations and individuals.

Donations are administered by the UN's Development Programme (UNDP), which is investing contributions in renewable-energy projects for Ecuador. Reforestation is another major goal that will further reduce CO2 emissions. The region's indigenous peoples are also recipients of this aid.

While questions have been raised about whether the Ecuadorian government is actually requesting a "bribe" or "ransom," the UN states that Ecuador "seeks the financial contribution of the international community as a gesture of co-responsibility in the fight for climate change."

In a video interview with UNEARTH News before the ceremony, Dr. Maria Fernanda Espinosa, Ecuador's Coordination Minister of Heritage and also Chair of the Yasuní ITT Steering Committee, explained: "The emissions of a country like Ecuador, a developing country in South America, are extremely marginal. But in spite of that we feel that we are co-responsible. So basically the decision of the Ecuadorian government, backed by the Ecuadorian people, is not to exploit its most important oil reserve...What we are doing instead is calling, inviting the international community to contribute..."

For the complete interview with Espinosa as well as one with Bisrat Aklilu, Executive Coordinator of the UNDP Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, click [here](#).

After the ceremony, Staffan de Mistura, Italy's Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told UNEARTH why Italy felt compelled to donate, even during difficult economic times:

"The answer is that, especially in difficult times, as Italy is going through, you develop a particular sensitivity about what does it mean having a vision. Probably the economy in Italy would have been better off if we would have had the opportunity of looking ahead; now we have to do an emergency."

De Mistura continued, "This makes us all think (and I think the government feels this very strongly) to help those countries who have a vision about the future, because we also intend to help that. And in that sense even with economic, financial difficulties we were fascinated by this opportunity."

Italy believes Ecuador's Initiative will inspire others across the globe and intends to help spread the word. As de Mistura explained, it's "the so-called snowball effect...of showing that one country who could have well pretended and expected to use this amount somewhere else has decided just then to actually give us all an example, and we will propagate that example."



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