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Abstract: This article examines a new set of policies embraced by indigenous leaders in the Upper Napo region of the Ecuadorian Amazon, driven, in part, by a growing appreciation for "wilderness"—large areas where humans exercise a very light touch. In the past few years, leaders have pursued wilderness conservation initiatives while simultaneously promoting petroleum extraction in their own backyards. Both political positions run counter to those pursued in previous decades, when opposition to both oil development and strict forms of conservation within their territory was strong. To address this reversal, I trace some of the development interventions and North-South collaborations that have contributed to the emergence of "nature" as a meaningful imaginary for Amazonian indigenous leaders and for a new generation of young people, drawing connections to William Cronon's critical analysis of how wilderness conservation became a priority in the United States. I conclude that more than two decades of conservationist interventions in the Upper Napo region have led to some largely unintended consequences, as Amazonian leaders increasingly subscribe to Northern environmentalists' romanticization of "the Amazon" as a wild place, one that therefore must be distant from the places where they work and live.

Keywords: indigenous peoples; Amazon; wilderness conservation; Kichwa; Ecuador; NGOs; development; landscape perception

1. Introduction

Two decades ago, environmental historian William Cronon published a derisive critique of First World environmentalists' over-romanticization of, and over-emphasis on, protecting large wilderness areas in areas remote to where one lives and works. He traced changing ideas of the meaning of wilderness throughout American history, claiming that the modern notion of untouched, pristine wilderness, where no people should live or work, is a fully cultural one, largely a product of historical changes such as urbanization. As part of his critique, he highlighted the special place held by the tropical rain forest in contemporary notions of wilderness, "which since the 1970s [had] become the most powerful modern icon of unfallen, sacred land—a veritable Garden of Eden—for many Americans and Europeans" ([1], p. 82).

Given this special importance, it is perhaps not surprising that many First World environmentalists working in the Amazon continue to advocate strongly for the protection of large areas in which humans are hoped to exercise a very light touch, if any at all. However, many scholars, including Cronon, have noted that the North American emphasis on wilderness has left little room for the people who inhabit these spaces to make a living [1–3]. Indian historian Ramachandra Guha, for example, provided a "Third World Critique" of the wilderness concept, arguing that "the implementation of the wilderness agenda is causing serious deprivation in the Third World" ([2], p. 71). Historically,

countless indigenous peoples have been forcefully removed from landscapes in an effort to create a sense of pristine nature and what Roderick Neumann calls the "national park ideal" [3].

However, what do the people who live in the "veritable Garden of Eden" think? After more than two decades of conservation-driven efforts by North American and European environmentalists in the Amazon, are the region's indigenous inhabitants starting to see the rainforest the way these environmentalists do? In other words, is there any evidence that they are adopting the appreciation for remote and wild landscapes that Cronon critiques, or do they insist (as one might expect) that the Amazon rainforest remain a place where not only animals and plants can live, but people can live, work, and aspire to a better future?

Previously, I have argued that First World notions of setting aside lands for the conservation of animals and plants ran counter to the ways that at least one group of indigenous Amazonians, the Upper Napo Kichwa (previously spelled "Quichua"), understood their home and their relationships to other beings that share that home [4]. This argument was based on an examination of decades of organizational archives of the Rukullakta Indigenous Territory, located in Napo Province in the Ecuadorian Amazon, as well as an examination of documents produced by the larger indigenous rights organization to which Rukullakta belongs. It was also based on numerous oral history interviews with older Kichwa residents of Rukullakta, carried out in 2000 and 2001, and twenty months of participant observation, carried out over the course of fifteen years. My findings reinforced analyses by a number of scholars who show the diverse ways in which Napo Kichwa [5,6] and other indigenous Amazonians (e.g., [7]) understand the forest as a place where humans, animals, and plants, as well as various forest spirits, live together and engage in complex relationships.

During research trips in 2013 and 2014, however, I began to hear about new visions of the Amazon. The perspectives I heard were, on the one hand, increasingly open to petroleum development in the immediate region, despite the fact that opposition to such development had been consistently strong for at least a decade. On the other hand, these same leaders simultaneously advocated for the conservation of areas of the Amazon located far to the east (including, in particular, the prevention of petroleum development in that region). In other words, they were advocating for "saving the Amazon" in an area remote to their homes, while supporting activities that had the potential to contaminate the part of the Amazon where they lived. This combination of visions indicate that something akin to the notion of wilderness, as defined and critiqued by William Cronon, could be gaining traction, at least among indigenous political leaders.

The politicians' comments to me were made in regards to a specific conservation project, the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, proposed by Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa in 2007 to preserve close to five million hectares of biodiverse habitat in an area over 100 miles to the east of where they lived. The Correa administration offered to stop planned oil extraction in exchange for compensatory contributions to an international trust fund that would offset the government's economic loss [8]. One of the people I spoke with in the Upper Napo region, Archidona Mayor Jaime Shiguango (a Kichwa man), bemoaned that the proposed project had not succeeded in raising sufficient funds to protect Yasuní from oil exploitation. He contributed $100 USD of his own money to the cause, and went on to say that if every Ecuadorian had just paid just $1 USD, when added to that offered by foreign governments, Correa's proposed conservation project would have raised enough money to proceed. I was surprised to hear about Mayor Shiguango's concern for protecting the distant Yasuní, as most of our conversations were about more local issues pertaining to his mayoral duties.

What made his comments even more puzzling, however, was that they were made within minutes of statements expressing support of oil extraction in his own municipality. Other indigenous leaders in the area articulated similar sentiments, representing a dramatic reversal from my previous conversations with them, carried out during multiple visits over the course of fifteen years. In 2013 and 2014, they made statements such as: "If the people desire petroleum development, it is my duty to comply" and "improved technologies make petroleum extraction much less dangerous than it was in the past".

What could explain this dramatic reversal? Perhaps, I thought, frustration over the low amounts of income provided by conservationist projects after two decades of implementation lends currency to a new social imaginary, in which the potential social benefits of oil concessions could outweigh the potential risks. Still, the two positions—supporting oil development in their own region while supporting strict conservation downstream—seemed highly contradictory, and I asked Mayor Shiguango to elaborate. All he said was that Yasuní is different from Napo and described a visit he had made there. His description of his visit and tone of voice indicated that he thought that Yasuní was much more important to protect than the area where he lives.

This response was particularly puzzling coming from Mayor Shiguango. Before being elected, Shiguango had worked for years as an agronomist for the local office of the German bilateral development organization GIZ, (Gesellshaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, or German Agency for International Cooperation; formerly GTZ, Gesellshaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, or German Agency for Technical Cooperation). He was thus very aware of their studies showing the high level of biodiversity and species endemism in Napo. These studies eventually led to the declaration of a United Nations Biosphere Reserve there on 10 November 2000, including all of the Rukullakta Indigenous Territory, where Shiguango grew up and owns land. Indeed, he had spent decades of his life working on projects devoted to finding and promoting forms of agriculture that could improve the income of local farmers while reducing rates of deforestation. What, then, could explain his sudden approval of petroleum development, and what made Yasuní so different from the place where he lives?

There are multiple processes that have contributed to these growing desires to "save the other Amazon." One boils down to simple economics. Oil might bring significant monies to municipal coffers, and it is hard for conservation to compete unless there is a government-sponsored plan to make conservation pay sums similar to those that oil extraction can, as in the ITT-Yasuní Initiative. Another process is the growing importance of party politics in this region, particularly the way in which Ecuador's President Rafael Correa engages with more local politicians and activists. In short, Correa, even more than most politicians, rewards those who support his programs and political party, and severely punishes those who do not [9]. Anthropologist Carmen Martínez-Novo even goes so far as to argue that Correa's regime has constructed indigenous subjects (and other members of Ecuador's dynamic social movements), "not as actors (who may give their support at times but with whom the government must negotiate) but as obedient subjects" and that "ambivalences or outright opposition will not be tolerated" ([10], p. 112). Correa has favored drilling for oil in Napo, while simultaneously proposing and advocating for the Yasuní-ITT Initiative. Those in Napo who have aligned themselves with his party, including Mayor Shiguango, have moved toward his positions on both counts.

While not discounting the importance of the current political and economic situation, this article focuses on a more subtle process through which indigenous people in the Upper Napo are increasingly seeing wild nature as something that should be appreciated and actively conserved, even as they advocate for urbanization of the places they live, including more and better roads, bridges, and recreational facilities. When this process, which has occurred gradually over the course of four decades, is examined alongside the more recent openness to petroleum development, a paradox emerges that goes beyond the issue of money or party politics. Petroleum development has always held the promise of income and jobs, but most indigenous politicians in the Upper Napo have still opposed it until recently. Furthermore, everyone recognizes that the social and environmental impacts of oil extraction will long outlast Correa's presidency. Examining other processes that may be contributing to these paradoxical visions is therefore timely and worthwhile.

Cronon argues that wilderness came to be imagined in the North as a place of spiritual redemption, allowing one to live without guilt in an industrialized, polluted landscape and retreat to wilderness to cure oneself of capitalism's ills [1]. Thus, northern notions of wilderness are built on three interrelated visions. First, nature-with-minimal-human-impact must come to be seen as something of great value, in this case cultural and spiritual value. Second, it must come to be seen as in short supply or in the process of disappearing, and therefore necessary to protect. Both processes have been occurring in

the Rukullakta Indigenous Territory. The third component of Cronon's "wilderness ideology"—that people are willing to live with pollution such as petroleum wells and their natural-gas-burning flames within view as long as they believe that wilderness exists elsewhere, is not explicitly discussed among the general population. However, the fact that they have elected indigenous politicians who support petroleum development, infrastructural improvements, and strict conservation of large areas located relatively far from where most people live and work suggests that these ideas may be starting to take hold. Only time will tell.

This article is not intended to imply that there has been an enormous ontological shift in the Upper Napo in which everyone fits the rather rigid mold of the North American environmentalist portrayed by Cronon. The Kichwa continue to hold many ideas that blur the boundaries among humans, animals and forest spirits, for example. Many people have spoken to me about how some human individuals can convert themselves into jaguars or anacondas; about how disease in one's plants and domesticated animals can be caused by the ill will or jealousy of one's neighbor; and about how culturally important trees can come to resent humans for selling their fruit on the market, producing relatively little fruit in subsequent years. Rather, I trace gradual changes and growing agreement that undeveloped "nature" is valuable, connected to Kichwa identity, and in short supply. Additionally, I trace how in very recent years, most efforts to set aside this "nature", have been pursued in places far from where most Upper Napo Kichwa live and work.

Interestingly, Mayor Shiguango not only supports petroleum development in Napo, he also organizes weekly outdoor recreational activities for his municipality's residents (not for tourists), such as climbing the nearby Sumaco Volcano (located in a national park) and mountain biking. The region's residents did not engage much in these types of activities before Shiguango's election as mayor. This is another piece of evidence that exposure to European and North American tourists and conservation-driven project personnel has introduced new ways of thinking about undeveloped "nature" as a desirable place to visit and recreate.

To understand the ways in which Northern environmentalists started to change indigenous leaders' ways of seeing the rainforest in the Upper Napo, it is important first to describe the decades before their arrival. The Upper Napo has a particular history of land settlement that has contributed to recent worries that land is in short supply, particularly forested land. Furthermore, once environmentalists began their conservation-driven activities in Ecuador, they collaborated with many indigenous organizations in the country, and the leaders of these organizations circulate and share ideas. The following sections briefly outline these processes and interactions.

2. A Very Brief History of the Upper Napo

Before the 1960s, the Upper Napo region was not accessible by road. However, this did not mean that it was completely cut off from Quito, Ecuador's Andean capital, or from other parts of the country. Rather, the region's history of engagement with Andean polities and markets originated before the mid-sixteenth century, when the Spanish organized several expeditions in search of gold and cinnamon. Contrary to their expectations of these excursions, the Spanish found no gold and only very dispersed cinnamon trees ([11], p. 67). Subsequently, the colonial administration worked to establish dominance over the various Indian groups living in the region through the system of *encomiendas*, or reward of property to Spaniards through service to the crown. These grants gave beneficiaries access to Indian labor and to tribute that the Indians paid primarily with gold and cotton. The Spanish also worked to convert the indigenous residents to Catholicism, although this was less of a priority than extracting indigenous labor ([12], p. 29, note 14). Indians worked in Spanish fields, constructed houses, worked as domestic servants, panned gold, wove textiles, and carried both cargo and people on frequent trips to and from Quito, crossing frozen Andean passes on foot in trips that lasted eight days or more, often without shoes ([11], pp. 76–81; [13], pp. 22–29). Although population counts from colonial offices must be viewed with some skepticism, Blanca Muratorio estimates that the population in the Upper Napo region decreased by over 90 percent between 1559 and 1608 ([13], p. 41).

Without a viable labor force, many *encomienda* beneficiaries left the region. Through the process of abrupt colonization and subsequent abandonment of this part of the Amazon, the Spanish managed to convert an area that had included quite populated regions and been strongly connected through pre-colonial political, economic, social, and cultural ties to the Andes into a sparsely populated and isolated zone ([14], pp. 23–26; [15]). This historical picture of the Amazon—a place that was heavily populated but that became depopulated because of disease and exploitation—is vastly different than the image of the Amazon as a "veritable Garden of Eden", held to this day by many Westerners.

During the two and a half centuries between 1640 and 1900, the Catholic missionary front grew, spreading out from a few colonial posts, but white and mestizo settlement remained low [14]. The indigenous population was able to recover some of its numbers and reclaim some of its previously controlled territory [11,14]. While the Upper Napo Kichwa continued to face exploitation [11], most were able to spend part of their lives living in and from the forest, far from missionaries and colonial or state representatives, for a number of reasons. First, because of waxing and waning interest in the region and its marketable products, the region's history of engagement with colonial/state agents and markets during this time was not a slow, unidirectional march from isolation toward greater engagement. Rather, the region has oscillated between periods of greater engagement with the outside world and relative isolation. Furthermore, because of difficulties in finding their way through the forest, nonindigenous people were often unable to access the forest products they desired, including *pita* (agave fiber, used for making rope), gold (panned from rivers), and later, rubber. They could only obtain these products by allowing or forcing indigenous people to take extended trips away from mission and government centers to seek these products in the forest [13].

By the beginning of the twentieth century, indigenous engagement with the state and markets intensified, albeit slowly at first [14]. The 1894 Special Law for the Oriente provided for the settlement of "vacant lands" (*terrenos baldíos*) in the Amazon region, but settlers were generally only interested in the lands surrounding towns. As long as the Kichwa population could still find forested areas for hunting and clearing their swidden gardens, there were no serious conflicts over land. The settlers took up cattle ranching or produced cash crops, the most important of which were cotton, coffee, rice, and sugar cane. *Hacienda* (ranch or large farm) owners gained access to Indian labor by encouraging them to purchase items on credit—shotguns, cooking pots, cloth, and axes—at severely inflated prices, then forced them to work to pay off their debt [13]. Still, many indigenous residents would spend periods of time working for whites to obtain the goods they desired, then retreat to their forest homes for several months to engage in hunting, fishing, and horticulture [16]. It is clear that most Kichwa valued this time of relative autonomy and self-sufficiency.

Agrarian reform began after the 1956 publication of the first national agricultural census, which revealed that Ecuador had one of the most imbalanced distributions of land in Latin America [17]. The Ecuadorian government encouraged poor highlanders from the Andes and coastal regions to colonize the less densely populated, Amazonian lowland region. The influx of people seeking land in the Amazon caused some Amazonians, but not all, to start to worry about reduced availability of land ([4], pp. 39–41). The government also promoted cooperative formation among the indigenous population to reduce the costs involved with demarcating and legalizing individual parcels. The state officials hoped that cooperatives would also maximize the reach of both agricultural extension and loan programs ([4], p. 39).

3. The Rukullakta Cooperative

The San Pedro de Rukullakta Agricultural Cooperative was formed during this time by 207 Kichwa households, with early organizational meetings held in 1970 and 1971. As part of the organization's mission, members began cattle ranching with loans from the state development bank, sharing responsibilities for taking care of the cattle by taking turns spending periods of roughly two weeks at the ranch, located some distance from where most people lived. This system of taking turns meant that most of Rukullakta's residents could continue to alternate between periods spent close

to the mission town of Archidona; periods spent taking care of cattle in relatively isolated pastures located in otherwise forested parts of the cooperative's lands; and periods spent hunting, fishing, and gardening near their secondary homes, located in other parts of the forest ([4], pp. 49–59).

In the 1980s, when it became clear that cattle ranching would not produce the hoped-for profits (and sharing the care of cattle brought in-fighting among members), many switched to cash crop production to fund what had become thought of as necessities—school uniforms and supplies; certain Western goods such as machetes and aluminum pots; and food to supplement that which could be grown on the small garden plots afforded them by the cooperative administration. This cash cropping involved a more dramatic change in livelihoods for many, as it required remaining near agricultural fields for more extended periods. Those who engaged in cash cropping no longer divided their lives into more-or-less equal periods spent near the town and periods spent in the forest; rather, they spent much more of their year in a single home, close to areas where they could plant cash crops (the increasing importance placed on sending one's children to school also contributed to this) ([4], pp. 118–25). Many who engaged in cash cropping would still visit more forested, less populated areas to hunt and fish for a few days at a time, but this was now thought of as a recreational and supplemental food-providing activity, rather than forming a key part of their annual cycle of moving between a town-centered life and a forest-centered one. This was therefore a key period in the history of beginning to think of the forest as a place to recreate rather than a place to live, one that predates Northern environmentalists' involvement in the region.

A 1987 earthquake destroyed a road that provided access to oil fields located hundreds of kilometers northeast of Rukullakta. International consultants visited the Upper Napo to evaluate whether it was an appropriate site for building a new road to access those fields. During these visits, the consultants became aware of the biological diversity in the region. The German Reconstruction Bank, impressed by the region's "extraordinary faunal, floral, hydrological, and cultural richness", agreed to construct the road on the condition that its representatives would be able to remain in the region, working for development that would both "conserve and take advantage of" the region's resources "in a sustainable manner" ([18], p. 3).

This began a new chapter in development projects in the region, in which most projects were designed to discourage farmers from practicing cash crop agriculture and cattle ranching. Unlike the national agencies and international donors of the 1970s and early 1980s, which pushed for increased clearing of the forest and its conversion to pasture, these new development organizations tried to convince indigenous people to stop clearing the forest and to engage in completely different economic endeavors such as small-scale fish-farming and ecotourism. International conservationists saw only that farmers growing cash crops were breaking up what the former perceived as pristine forest (even though some of it was in the same locations where cooperative members had practiced cattle ranching in the 1970s). They therefore sought to prevent these farmers from continuing what they saw as "forest destruction" ([4], pp. 127–28).

4. International Conservation Visions and the Ecuadorian Amazon

Efforts by Northern conservationists were not limited to the Upper Napo region during this time. Rather, they funded various initiatives throughout the Ecuadorian Amazon and Andes and worked with indigenous organizations of different sizes. For example, the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), established in 1991 as a collaborative effort of the World Bank and the United Nations, favored Ecuador in its projects. One of GEF's first initiatives (beginning in April 1992) was a US $7.2 million project for biodiversity conservation in Ecuador. Ecuador was also the site of ten single-country GEF biodiversity protection projects, totaling US $39.2 million in grants, and five climate change projects, totaling US $7.64 million in grants, between 1992 and 2002. It also shared five regional grants (either for Amazonian nations or for Latin America) for biodiversity protection during that decade.

Both GEF and various bilateral funding organizations working in Ecuador, such as the US Agency for International Development and the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), positioned

indigenous Amazonians in their publications as stewards of the rainforest, not as threats to nature. The projects they funded were generally directed at conserving both tropical forests and indigenous cultures, although the former was given a higher priority than the latter ([4], p. 153). For example, the executive summary of the World Bank's 1990 discussion paper, *Ecuador's Amazon Region: Development Issues and Options*, began with this question: "Why single out a national region for specific analysis as part of the Bank's country economic studies?" ([19], p. ix). The first answer supplied for this question was: "Ecuador's Amazon Region has several unique features, among which are the extreme fragility of the region's natural resources, its rich biological diversity, its significant native populations, and its large, but diminishing, petroleum reserves" ([19], p. ix). Shortly thereafter is a section that explains why readers should be concerned about the region's inhabitants:

> The region is home to approximately 85 thousand to 100 thousand native peoples that have retained a relatively autonomous life style. Over the past years, some of these indigenous groups have remained isolated; others have retained their cultural identity while incorporating some services (e.g., education, health care) offered by the broader Ecuadorian society. The opportunity for preservation of cultural choice (including sophisticated ecological knowledge and resource management strategies) for the Amazon's native populations is another of the region's unique characteristics ([19], p. ix).

In this section of the World Bank report, indigenous people are described as an integral part of the biologically diverse ecosystem in the Amazon, particularly because of their sophisticated ecological knowledge. Thus, the portrayal of the Amazon they give is not an unpeopled one, but it is one inhabited by indigenous people who live harmoniously with other living beings, apparently cut off from most markets. The report's executive summary does not acknowledge the widespread cattle ranching projects of the 1970s, the nonindigenous residents of the region, or the political activism of indigenous organizations, although they are mentioned briefly later in the report ([4], p. 154).

Since the publishing of the World Bank report and through many interactions with foreigners who support the idea that indigenous people have a special connection to nature (for additional examples, see [20]), some indigenous leaders have come to believe the portrayal, at least to some extent. While there is no doubt that leaders have at times engaged in a certain amount of strategic essentialism, adopting phrases such as "Mother Earth" and "Gaia" in their public discourse to pursue land claims or protection from polluting industries, multiple decades of hearing about the connection between indigenous peoples and nature and, importantly, being rewarded with land and money for doing so, has shaped notions of their own identity beyond any strategic purpose. In Rukullakta, exposure over the years to environmentalist discourse has at least partially convinced many leaders that a connection to, and knowledge of, nature was what made indigenous people different from everyone else. Losing access to nature therefore represented a threat to their indigenous identity and cultural continuity. For example, many leaders describe their ancestors as *sinchi*, or strong, because they could live in the forest without many of the luxuries of the town. In particular, there is a strong sense among most Kichwa that early-morning bathing in cold forest rivers and eating wild meat makes one strong and resilient [5], while eating processed foods and living in town makes one weak.

However, ideas that celebrate certain aspects of indigenous difference co-exist with a long history of exposure to foreign missionaries and non-indigenous Ecuadorians and the preferences both have had for visible signs of progress. As I have argued at length elsewhere [4], being a good Kichwa leader means bringing projects such as new schools, new bridges, and new roads. So how can a leader show that he is both strong and capable of living away from the luxuries of the town, while simultaneously showing that he is capable of improving the town through visible signs of progress? One solution, repeatedly modeled by many foreign conservationists who spend time in the area, is to work in the town and recreate in the wilderness, a wilderness that seems increasingly distant with the growing number of roads and buildings.

While far from the same process that Cronon describes for the United States, there is some discernable overlap; he argues that fears of losing the American frontier and its deep connection to

American identity propelled the growing appreciation of wilderness. Wild land was deeply connected to American ruggedness and strength and to its sense of difference from Europe:

> if wild land had been so crucial in the making of the nation, then surely one must save its last remnants as monuments to the American past—and as an insurance policy to protect its future. It is no accident that the movement to set aside national parks and wilderness areas began to gain real momentum at precisely the time that laments about the passing frontier reached their peak. To protect wilderness was in a very real sense to protect the nation's most sacred myth of origin ([1], pp. 76–77).

In the Upper Napo, the perception that such spaces needed to be available for future generations of indigenous children—at least to visit if not to subsist from—grew. However, this has been a slow process that has occurred over decades, as demonstrated in the following sections.

5. Early Evidence that Indigenous Activists Began to Prioritize Conservation

In the 1970s, indigenous activists in the Ecuadorian Amazon recognized that colonization by non-indigenous farmers was threatening their access to land. Their response, as described above, was to prioritize land titling, and one of the ways to secure land was to clear forest and grow pasture. Gaining secure land title was also the main priority in many other parts of Latin America at this time ([21], p. 21) and continues to be so in areas where tenure is still insecure. In the 1980s, however, the influence of international environmentalists slowly started shaping indigenous activists' agendas, expanding beyond the focus on territorial demarcation and legalization to thinking more about what was occurring on those lands. This can be seen through an analysis of the issues the delegates discussed during the biannual conferences of CONFENIAE (*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana*, or Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon).

At the first CONFENIAE congress in 1980, the overwhelming emphasis was on gaining more lands for indigenous peoples and pursuing both agricultural intensification and cattle ranching projects to improve their income ([22], p. 100). However, in the next three conferences (held in 1982, 1984, and 1986), there was a gradual increase in the number of issues discussed that pertained to the environment. In the 1982 congress, delegates continued to talk about gaining additional lands for indigenous people, but there were also resolutions urging the reduction of negative impacts associated with petroleum extraction, mining, and African palm plantations on indigenous lands. This indicates a growing awareness of the environmental degradation each of these caused—particularly the damage and contamination caused by petroleum extraction in the northeastern Ecuadorian Amazon ([4], p. 142).

By the fourth congress, in December 1986, delegates were discussing several new issues concerning the environment. For the first time at a CONFENIAE, they addressed the perceived need to be more proactive in conserving forests and their flora and fauna. Specifically, the 1986 resolutions included a call to reforest indigenous lands and the suggestion that communities control hunting and gathering of animal and plant species, especially if conducted by people not belonging to the community ([22], p. 106). Thus, while land scarcity was an ongoing concern that began with the immediate impacts of colonization following the 1964 Agrarian Reform, the damages caused by some of the influx of outsiders into the region did not become salient until the 1980s. Indigenous activists began to place more emphasis on the qualities of the territory—whether it was forested or not; how many fish and animals lived there; and the importance of clean water and fertile soils. Interactions with Northern environmentalists undoubtedly helped these issues to become more salient to congress participants and shaped how they proposed to move forward in their activism.

6. The 1990s: Conservation in the Upper Napo

As part of the development agreement signed between the German and Ecuadorian governments described above, Germany's bilateral development organization GTZ began the Proyecto Gran Sumaco (Great Sumaco Project) in 1995. Through this project, GTZ became the largest financial

player influencing the direction of development in the Upper Napo region. The concept guiding the project was to seek "a harmonious relation between human beings and nature through maintaining the integrity of the natural areas and their genetic materials, and the improvement of the quality of life of its population" ([23], p. 3).

Soon after beginning its work, the project staff sought to attract greater international attention to the region by applying for its designation as a "United Nations Biosphere Reserve." They began the lengthy process of compiling the necessary information and developing cross-organizational collaboration (with state agencies and local organizations, including indigenous ones) to be able to submit an application to the United Nations. GTZ worked to win broad local approval of the biosphere reserve through several mechanisms, including the sponsoring of periodic meetings with local leaders from the area; financially supporting some of the NGO activities that were seen as promoting environmental sustainability; and conducting pilot projects of what were seen as environmentally and economically sustainable market pursuits, such as cultivating oyster mushrooms and silkworms, as well as various wild fruits.

The application was accepted by UNESCO, and the region was officially declared a biosphere reserve on 10 November 2000. The reserve covers 931,215 hectares, with a core area of 205,249 hectares and a buffer zone of 178,629 hectares (the rest is part of the reserve but does not have the same limitations on activities as the core and buffer zones). The entire Rukullakta Cooperative fell within the reserve, and about two-thirds of the cooperative was in the buffer zone—which implied that agriculture would be severely restricted there. According to the project's application for biosphere reserve status, the buffer zone "presents a minimum of human intervention, containing characteristic ecosystems, in which moderate use is permitted, for scientific ends, tourism, forest management, and wildlife" ([18], p. 18). So even though early project documents emphasized a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, these later documents give the impression that people were not actually intended to live in two-thirds of Rukullakta's territory.

This external zoning did not stop Rukullakta's members from growing cash crops in the buffer zone, and elected leaders did not attempt to forcibly remove farmers from the areas they had already cultivated, although they continued to discourage new land claims. The leaders also engaged actively with GTZ's staff, taking advantage of the funding they provided for small, alternative development projects. Specifically, they collaborated in various projects aimed at providing alternatives to *naranjilla* (a fruit in the tomato family and the most important cash crop in the region) and to the cutting down of rainforest that often preceded its cultivation. Through their various interactions with GTZ staff, they learned about new methods of territorial mapping through the use of satellite images, scientific data on soil suitability, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technologies, and were thereby once again reminded of the limits of their territorial holdings.

The influence of these various collaborations can be seen in a growing number of calls during the early 2000s to use these tools to create a land use plan for the central leadership to employ in its policymaking decisions. Leaders began to seek assistance from topographers and others who would assist them to more accurately map land claims and land use in their territory. In 2007, they obtained funding from the EcoFund Foundation Ecuador and successfully made a connection to Rodrigo Sierra of the Center for Environmental Studies in Latin America at the University of Texas at Austin, convincing him to provide GIS expertise and guidance for drafting a new management plan. Sierra trained some of Rukullakta's members in using GIS, paid for low-flying planes to photograph the large territory and thereby gain a better understanding of the extent of tree cover in various zones, and funded consultants who assisted the leaders during the eight-month process of creating the plan.

The management plan they produced shows language and concerns learned from twenty years of interactions with foreign forestry and conservation experts. For example, the introduction to the management plan begins with a succinct statement of the leaders' vision for the future: "The communities that make up the Kichwa People of Rukullakta [Territory] recognize the importance of natural resources which are found in their territory as the base of their economic and social

development, and furthermore constitute their natural capital which generates goods, direct and indirect user services. For this reason, they are conscious that these need to be managed sustainably to guarantee the economic and social development of future generations, and that they are a critical element in the participation in new markets of goods and ecological services, taking advantage of green markets and fair trade" ([24], p. 15).

Several of the statements in the document are quite startling and demonstrate growing fears over land availability, such as the following: "If the average family size [in Rukullakta] is eight members per family and this continues in the next two decades, the population could easily pass ten thousand people by the year 2028. This means that an equitable distribution of the territory in the year 2028 would give each [person] approximately 4 hectares" ([24], p. 49). For most of Rukullakta's history, the assumption has been that a reasonable land allocation for each family was at least 25 hectares, so four hectares must have seemed paltry in comparison. From this it is clear that while the collective title may have seemed large in the mid-1970s, thirty years later, fears had grown considerably over whether the territory would be able to support the growing population. Already in 2000, some leaders mentioned to me that they thought they would need to limit land allocations one child per family so as to significantly slow the number of people who would expect to receive land for farming in the future. Politically, however, this would be extremely difficult, and no one has made a serious attempt to implement it.

Rather than attempting to implement family-level restrictions, leaders instead pursued a very different response to the perception of a disappearing frontier—they began to advocate setting aside some lands for conservation. Through a process of thirty-five separate workshops held with groups of Rukullakta's residents to discuss the issue of conserving land, they managed to guide the membership to a consensus that there should be a sizable reserve protected from agriculture within the territory. This is particularly notable, since there are many protected areas in the region surrounding Rukullakta, including the Sumaco National Park and the Antisana Ecological Reserve. The desire to have a reserve under indigenous control was thus seen as substantively different and important. Shamans (known locally as *yachaj*, or "one who knows") present at the workshops also expressed their opinion that access to forests was important for continuing their work, according to various people I interviewed.

Based on this consensus, Rukullakta's leaders worked with the researchers from the University of Texas to delimit an 11,000-hectare conservation zone in the southeastern portion of Rukullakta, an area that was still largely forested. The reserve occupies about a quarter of the entire territory, an enormous percentage given the fears over population growth described in the same management plan. By setting aside the land, leaders knew they were reducing land availability even further, but they still believed that it was worthwhile.

Leaders' reports of the conversations they held with territorial residents during the planning process indicate that there has been a noticeable shift how they imagine the remaining forested lands within their territory. Setting aside land within Rukullakta's borders was not unprecedented—there were two previous efforts. One was in 1994, when a group of residents spent two years petitioning the cooperative administration to set aside one thousand hectares as a potential site for ecotourism. In 1999, a different community within Rukullakta, located in a more densely populated area, set aside seventy-five hectares of its community lands for "wildlife reproduction" ([4], pp. 151–52). Both initiatives were justified in very pragmatic and economic terms. Both were also in areas adjacent to where people were actively farming. In the 2008 case, on the other hand, the land under consideration was much larger and quite far from where most people lived and farmed.

Also, some of the reasons for setting it aside were different. Some of the motivations could still be labeled as pragmatic or economic, since Rukullakta's leaders did submit the reserve to a national program that pays landowners an annual rent to set aside lands for twenty years (called *Socio Bosque*, or Partner Forest). However, spiritual and cultural reasons were, for the first time, added to the list of motivations. Shamans needed intact forest to be able to connect with forest spirits, far from the urban noises that could drive them away. Others wanted future generations to be able to be able to visit an

undeveloped forest and to be able to hunt and fish as their grandparents had done. Both reasons speak to a growing appreciation for large areas of forest unbroken by agriculture, a growing sense that such areas were in short supply (even though there are several protected areas nearby), and a commitment to setting off a large area of land that people would visit rather than occupy or cultivate.

7. Conclusions

The leaders and citizens of Rukullakta have gradually moved toward conserving areas of their own territory. While efforts in the 1990s were aimed primarily at creating spaces for ecotourism and were located in areas close to agricultural fields, the most recent move to set aside 11,000 hectares is distinct. That expanse of forest is far more than any eco-tour would utilize and it is located in an area relatively distant from the most occupied areas of Rukullakta. It therefore seems to be guided by something akin to a growing appreciation for wilderness, although there are differences. In Rukullakta, the reserve was and is imagined as a large area in which forest would remain intact, unbroken by roads or settlements, a place where shamans could connect to forest spirits. Somewhat ironically, because of its distance from population centers and roads, many have never visited it nor have concrete plans to do so, although knowing that the area is there may provide a certain level of comfort.

Contributing monies to protect the even more distant Yasuní region, even though most have no interest in visiting it, does not seem like such a large leap given the gradual move toward setting aside remote lands for conservation. While most of Rukullakta's residents have not contributed funds to the ITT-Yasuní Initiative, the fact that some prominent leaders have done so indicates that "saving the other Amazon" has some local resonance.

None of this, however, addresses the issue of why some of the same leaders are weakening in their opposition to petroleum development. Once again, Cronon's critique provides a potential explanation. Part of his argument against wilderness is that by preserving wilderness, "we give ourselves permission to evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead" ([1], p. 81). Could it be that as Upper Napo residents increasingly contribute to the conservation of parts of their lands (and contribute monetarily to conservation of the Yasuní area far to the east), allowing petroleum development in one's backyard seems less distasteful? Certainly, most infrastructural projects (new roads, buildings, and bridges, for example) have broad support among most Kichwa living in the area. "Development" is generally considered a good thing, not something to prevent.

It is too early to argue that the process Cronon describes has occurred in the Upper Napo. At this point, it might just be President Correa's politics or municipal dreams of economic windfalls that are contributing to changing attitudes toward oil. However, it is certainly possible that the Northern environmentalists who focus their energies on saving the Amazonian wilderness rather than their own backyards have provided a model in their preference for saving remote landscapes.

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