A Kingdom FOR A BARREL

CAN AN AREA OF DEEP ECUADORIAN AMAZON INSPIRE THE WORLD TO LOOK PAST NATIONHOOD FOR COLLECTIVE CONSERVATION?

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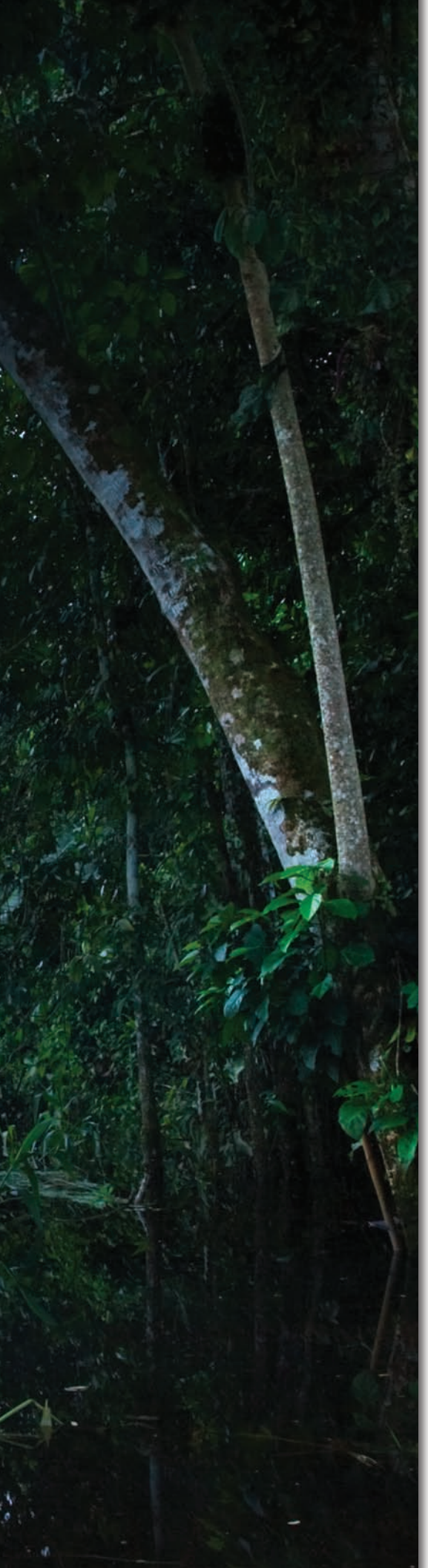

Walking along a jungle path just outside Ecuador's largest national park, Yasuní, the Zabala family was surprised by a group of nude Amazonians that emerged from the forest. The mother screamed as the tribesmen plunged palm-wood lances decorated with macaw feathers into her chest and stomach, killing her. They then speared two of her children, grabbed her infant son and made off into the woods. Days later, the baby was found—alive—in a hole dug beneath a tree root.

One of the most biodiverse places on this planet, the nearly-4,000-square-mile Yasuní National Park is also the verdant home of two small, semi-nomadic tribes that live in isolation: the Taromenane and Tagaeri. The attack on the Zabalas, the latest of several such incidents in the past decade, occurred near heavy machinery opening a road and a generator powering an oil well. Ecuador's environment ministry hypothesized that the Taromenane, drawn by the sound of the roadwork and the generator's "deafening noise," were striking back at an "enveloping society." Indeed, oil activity has pushed steadily east through the northern half of Yasuní's untouched depths for the last several decades. The undeveloped ITT area—named for its potentially lucrative Ishpingo, Tambococha and Tiputini oil fields—overlaps more than 350 square miles of Yasuní's northeast corner, and is all that remains between ongoing projects and the Peruvian border.

But the government's Yasuní-ITT Initiative dictates that oil-dependent Ecuador will leave ITT alone forever if the international community comes up with half the $7.2 billion value of its oil. Money raised would fund conservation, reforestation and renewable energy. An initially enthusiastic reception has been hushed by the government's aggressive sales pitch, which at times has sounded more like a hostage negotiation than an international model for conserving tropical, mega-diverse areas. Ecuador needs $100 million in commitments by year-end to keep the Yasuní-ITT trust fund alive. As of early December, it had about $70 million.

I wanted to see what about ITT the government thought could inspire people the world over to loosen their purse strings. While waiting for my access permit in the Ecuadorian environment ministry's regional office, I chatted with a pair of bright-eyed employees. In a moment of candor, one said, "I hope the government gets the money. If not, have you seen *Avatar*?" She signaled the Yasuní wall map with her small palms wide open. "This is the Ecuador version."

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I hoped ITT itself, the pristine northeast corner of Yasuní park, might deliver a more coherent pitch for conservation to me and my friend Dan, an emergency medicine doctor whose idea of a vacation is hitchhiking through rural Africa. To our uninitiated ears, though, the jungle's voice would seem subdued, not symphonic. Deciphering it would be best accomplished traveling ITT's trails and paddling down the Yasuní River with interpreters from the Waorani tribe, which, although still remote, has been contacted over the last half-century. With the Waoranis' help, I believed ITT would prove itself a world apart.

And I had good reason to hope: Yasuní occupies just 0.15 percent of the entire Amazon region yet is home to roughly one-third of its amphibian, reptile, bird and mammal species. In a given hectare, there are 100,000 insect species, not to mention more species of trees here than in the U.S. and Canada combined. The number of fish species surpasses that of the Mississippi River basin. Invoking the cliché "teeming with life" would merely scratch the surface. Yasuní is life atop life atop life, all of which—in a cruel twist of fate—resides atop oil. ITT alone holds about 900 million barrels, or 20 percent of Ecuador's total reserves.

This bounty defies comprehension to everyone except people like Quemontare "Pedro" Enomenga. Pedro, 23, is one of the first three Waorani whom Ecuador's environment ministry hired as park guards in 2011, and we were the first people he guided.

Pedro is short with a boyish face, but strapped with muscle from hunting since he was old enough to hoist a spear. He weaved briskly between trees with absolute certainty; to his trained senses, the jungle was alive with meaning. We struggled to keep up, bypassing trees, plants and mushrooms with a pathetic inability to identify any of them. Our taxonomic vision, Pedro informed us, was on par with that of a Waorani toddler. A nettle he pushed into our forearms raised the skin in bumps and left a pleasant numbing sensation like Icy Hot. The stench of a fullback's sweaty shoulder pads signaled that tapirs had passed through. What looked like an unripe starfruit was actually a pod containing pulp-covered seeds that tasted

like watermelon Jolly Ranchers. I perceived everything in terms of my world, but there was no analog when Pedro peeled back a vine to reveal a fluid the Waorani use to paint their faces. He made birdcalls and conversed with doves. His own language, Wao Terero, bears no relation to any other on Earth.

The snaking trail led us waist-deep across a swamp filled with detritus that gave Dan an excuse to clench his machete between his teeth. It was all very Rambo-esque until, while balancing on a log, he slipped into the drink. We came out at the edge of a lake and climbed what looked like a mangrove on steroids. Pedro scurried up the madly interwoven branches shouting back for us to trust their strength, despite their pliability. We did so little by little and reached a 50-foot height, where Pedro cleared a view to watch pink river dolphins surface. I found out later that my photographer, Valentí, who had taken the trail back to camp, was in a tree at the same time. He had clambered up to take refuge from a pack of peccaries.

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Pedro spends his days speaking via radio with his family on the opposite side of the park, where oil development and colonization have already taken place. Joe Kane's book *Savages* is an admirable account of the Waorani's ultimately futile resistance to oil extraction. That tale, from the 1990s, is a prelude to the ITT initiative.

Before oil activity, the Waorani were not one unified people but rather clans of nomadic hunters who believed that a jaguar reared a dead man's heart, which grew into the first Wao. They have since settled and mostly ceased spearing other clans and *cohouri,* or outsiders. One clan retreated deeper into the jungle and, renamed Tagaeri, still roams the park in solitude. The relation between Waorani and Taromenane—which means "the people down the path"—is less clear.

The government delineated the "Intangible Zone" in 2007 across the southern half of Yasuní as a reserve for the Tagaeri and Taromenane. However, the tribes are not aware of its creation, much less its man-made borders. It is said they cook only at dark so the smoke doesn't give away their location, and very few people have ever seen them.

Pedro once spoke with them. In 2008, a radio call informed Pedro's village that a logger had been run through with multiple spears. The army enlisted Pedro's uncle—the village chief—and a handful of his relatives to convey a message: Stop killing, or we're coming in after you. They stripped off everything but their rubber boots and set out tracking the tribe through the jungle. They came upon a longhouse on a hilltop, before which Pedro witnessed nude Taromenane dancing.

"A jaguar will attack a beast that comes into our zone. He comes because he is a fool, and he dies because he is stupid," they sang.

They panicked at the sight of Pedro's family. Most fled, but those who remained brandished spears even after Pedro's family convinced them they intended no harm. Eventually they revealed what had happened: A young hunter was aiming his poison dart blowgun at a macaw when the sound of a nearby chain saw startled the bird into flight. In hot pursuit, the hunter tripped over a log. He conferred with his fellow hunters, and they determined the logger should die.

"We don't want any noise. We want to live happily in the jungle. If you make noise, we can attack. We don't want *cohouri* nor you," they told Pedro's family. Upon hearing the army's message, they responded fearlessly, "We are many."

When parting ways, the Taromenane warned Pedro's family that if they ever visit again they must come without rubber boots—a *cohouri* creation—or be slain on sight.

The sound of chain saws and generators is just the start; explosives used during seismic testing, well drilling, well pumps and a processing plant for ITT's heavy oil will drown out the pristine forest's voice. At the Tiputini Biodiversity Station in Yasuní, there is a constant industrial drone from oil operations 12 kilometers away. It's not hard to imagine bloodshed in ITT, not to mention environmental impacts such as water contamination. Roughly 90 percent of liquids extracted will be water laden with heavy metals that has to be re-injected without, in theory, poisoning groundwater. Worse still is the colonization and subsequent deforestation associated with oil activities.

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It all lends itself to a convincing case for conservation. So why isn't the Yasuní-ITT trust fund, which is administered by the United Nations Development Programme, drawing donations?

First, what the government calls "Plan A"—preserving ITT—has advanced parallel to "Plan B"—producing ITT. President Rafael Correa says ITT will provide one-third of the oil for a new refinery, but the "credible threat" he wishes to create comes across as menacing greenmail: Fork over the cash, or else ITT gets it! The perception of ransom is not dispelled by the expected contributions, listed on the Yasuní-ITT Initiative's website by country and amount. Meanwhile, national oil company Petroamazonas is negotiating with residents for seismic exploration of ITT's Tambococha and Tiputini fields and is developing an adjacent oil block that could have been incorporated into the initiative. Correa often appears indifferent to whether money flows in from oil or conservation.

"INSTEAD OF, 'OH, MY GOD, THANK YOU!,' THE REACTION WE ARE SEEING IS, 'THIS IS EXTORTION.' IT'S NOT!" BAKI SAID. "WE ARE DOING THIS BECAUSE WE CARE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, BUT WE ARE ALSO IN NEED."

The woman directing the initiative and negotiating donations is Ivonne Baki. She welcomed me into her high-rise Quito office and defended Correa's pragmatic position.

"People are saying that we need to move toward sustainable development and be aware that oil is not going last forever, and we are starting to do that. Instead of, 'Oh, my God, thank you!,' the reaction we are seeing is, 'This is extortion.' It's not!" Baki said. "We are doing this because we care for the environment, but we are also in need."

Ecuador is in essence asking the uncomfortable question of whether developed countries will put their eco-money where their eco-mouths are.

"It's our right to take the oil if we want! But we are suggesting a new development (model), a new way of seeing," she said. "We would like very much to move away from oil dependence. But we can't! If we have some help, this could become an example to the world."

But can Correa's government—or a future government—be trusted to use the money as it says? This is a country of tumult and turnover. Correa was preceded by seven presidents in ten years, and the loan default during his term "was one of the most egregious examples of default in the history of international finance," Patrick Esteruelas, vice president of Moody's Sovereign Risk Group, told me. Ecuador is the ratings agency's lowest-ranked country, below even Cuba.

In short, confidence in Ecuador is lacking,

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particularly to carry forward such an unprecedented concept. The novel hitch is that Ecuador hopes to generate carbon credits with a mechanism that does not yet exist: avoided emissions from extracting oil. Germany footed the bill for Ecuador's ITT studies, but rather than donating to the initiative wound up supporting its reforestation program that will provide carbon credits. If a country is going to give anyway, the logic goes, it might as well get something in return.

This raises the question: Why doesn't Ecuador link the initiative to credits from avoided deforestation? The amount of deforestation that would occur is unclear, especially because it is not oil activity, but rather the subsequent wave of settlers, that deforests most. Petroamazonas argues that the presence of a strong institution would stop deforestation that is already taking place.

Several environmentalists disagreed, telling me it has been virtually impossible to prevent people from following the oil roads into the jungle to log, plant crops and hunt, especially after providing manual labor during prospecting and construction.

"We've been extremely poor at predicting how indigenous people respond," the Tiputini Biodiversity Station's director, Dr. Kelly Swing, told me. "You can talk about management plans and exclusionary strategies and so on, but good intentions pave the road to hell."

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Dan and I paddled a small canoe, or *quilla,* down the tranquil Jatuncocha River, steering around fallen trees and picking ice cream bean pods as we passed. We were welcomed to the lake by a rainbow arching across the entire sky. It disappeared only to make way for a stunning sunset.

It was our first outing and we'd had no trouble idling to fish for piranha nor rowing upriver, but the broader Yasuní River was another story. We had intended to paddle to Kawymeno—the only Waorani community within ITT—but recent heavy rains made that prospect if not physically impossible, certainly unfeasible given time constraints. Lowering an outboard motor on the larger canoe was disappointing, but the real concern was whether the Waorani would even let us come ashore. The environment ministry had never made contact with Kawymeno, and the local director was along for the ride to recruit two park guards. I didn't want to consider the possibility that the Waorani might decline our request to guide us down the river to the Intangible Zone's oil wells.

After seven hours motoring up the swelled river, we pulled up to Kawymeno's bank. The Waorani gathered and stared—wondrous, curious and scanning for signs of threats. In my experience, the best ways to bridge a cultural divide are athletics and alcohol, in that order, and we applied that magic formula. The women first trounced our team in afternoon soccer, winning the $10 bet. While soaping up on the riverbank later, Dan and I shut our eyes and opened our ears to the gentle flow of the river, the nocturnal buzz of crickets and frogs, and the tireless chanting of Waorani hunters. We had watched them throw their arms over one another's shoulders, march in an oval and sing as one. Now the otherworldly chant was a distinguishable element of the pristine forest's hum. "Listen to where we are!" I said.

Later, fueled by bowls of *chicha*—manioc that has been chewed up, spat out and left to ferment, and which has the soggy, chunky consistency of vomit—we spent the rest of the night dancing. We gained trust, made friends and managed to hire two Waorani, Aba "Saúl" Omaca and Zancudo Awenca, to guide us downriver.

We paddled our *quilla* the next morning at an unhurried pace, and the spade-shaped oars made a lulling sound. Vegetation soared upward on each side of the river and reached out to one another. Nearly enveloped, I could feel the jungle's pulse. Toucans and green macaws flew above the treetops. Martins swooped across the water. Iridescent blue morpho butterflies floated by. River dolphins and an otter emerged, unperturbed by our tiny craft. As Pedro had taught me, I scanned the cradles of ceiba trees

towering above the canopy for the aerie of a harpy eagle—the strongest raptor in the world. We rowed for hours, and a light rain falling warm upon our skin was a welcome refresher.

We sustained ourselves by swigging a concoction of cane liquor stuffed with coca leaves, which Dan had scored outside the park and was as foreign to me as to the Waorani. When the coca's energizing effect wore off, we found ourselves pleasantly buzzed from the booze. It also got us good and talkative. The intercultural exchange was not always of the highest order—e.g., whether Waorani women give blowjobs (they do) and the dubious merits of anal sex—but it was nonetheless real. At one point, Saúl asked me what traffic jams look like, and I had to explain commuting and consumerism. They in turn taught me birdcalls and described how they hunt with 9-foot spears and blowguns. Soon enough, I saw it firsthand. We pulled through the green partition that separates river from flooded forest, and they kept their giddy glee bottled in their throats as they shot poison darts at a monk saki monkey. Without a motor to intimidate, the monkey studied us with his wide, wise face even after he'd been stuck twice. He removed both darts with his paws, and scampered off through the branches to find a spectacle of greater interest. I was relieved for the monkey, and for my stomach. But when we approached Dan's canoe, he proclaimed, "I've got dinner!" and held up the game a passing Wao had given him. That monkey's tongue hung loosely from its open mouth. Later I gnashed the gamey sinews of its ribs with my molars, then chewed its left ventricle. Only bug repellent spread on my tongue and inside my nostrils could chase its lingering taste and the smell of burned hair.

The next morning, we traipsed south toward the oil wells in the Intangible Zone. En route we stumbled upon a venomous snake as thick as my wrist, and an eagle sat perched above him. In positioning ourselves to get a better view, we accidentally flushed the snake's prey—a rodent hiding inside a log. The snake slid beneath the leaves, and the eagle flew off. Our meddling had broken this silent chain.

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There is still reason to hope the Yasuní-ITT initiative might prevail. Baki's team is applying new tactics, among them seeking donations from not just countries but also companies and individuals. Coca-Cola has agreed to donate a portion of Ecuadorian sales, and the government has hosted races, concerts and dinners to pass the plate. It's enlisted a Manhattan PR firm and is rolling out Facebook and Twitter campaigns.

In April, Baki met with the UN's secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon, who is adopting the cause. The same month, the UN began evaluating Ecuador's proposal of "net avoided emissions" as a carbon credit mechanism. The global mindset is doubtless evolving toward conservation of environmental heritage, and Baki has seen the greatest outpouring of support from youth.

"It could be that we did something *avant-garde*, and it was not the right moment. We thought it was, because everybody was talking about it. Maybe this new generation is going to move it forward, but not yet. They are not yet united to create something like that," she said.

Ecuador's 2008 constitution requires congressional approval and a popular referendum for oil extraction within protected areas, so if the Yasuní-ITT Initiative failed, there would be no sharp chop of the guillotine. Rather, there would be a slow sawing. President Correa would decry the lack of willingness to support his cause, declare that Ecuador will virtuously conserve most of ITT anyway and give the go-ahead for Petroamazonas to drill wells just outside Yasuní's border. But as time passes, little by little, drilling would creep into ITT by hook or crook.

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Esperanza Martinez, coordinator of the NGO Oilwatch in South America, told me that even if the initiative fails, there has been "profound success" in developing consciousness about biodiversity, not extracting oil because of climate change, and respecting indigenous rights.

"There has been an impressive leap. Having such a large critical mass in favor of Yasuní is something that has never happened. It is important. And that critical mass is no longer just in Ecuador," she said.

ITT may well become a martyr, as aspects of the initiative are applied to similar efforts elsewhere. For now, though, the idea is incubating and has yet to hatch.

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The Intangible Zone's name alone—which could serve as the basis for a Steven Seagal flick—filled us with a sense of adventure only heightened when our Waorani guides broke off from the path to hunt a Salvin's curassow. We passed jaguar tracks pressed into a massive anthill, then crossed a swamp and emerged into a clearing where, in the absence of a canopy, tall grass had sprouted. A tree of sorts—with its jutting nuts, bolts and hard angles—was a stunted and alien growth. The Ishpingo-1 "Christmas tree," as the T-shaped valve assembly is called, occupied a square pool of murky water, and Zancudo leaned his blowgun against it. When the oil company felled the trees to drill the well, he and others from Kawymeno were recruited to provide "supervision," a euphemism for guarding against indigenous attackers. They stood idly by as water contamination killed the fish and the clamor scared off all wildlife. Still, some Waorani in Kawymeno support oil activity because it creates jobs that provide cash for *cohouri* goods.

Plants climbed the nearby Ishpingo-3 tree, and a rusty sign displayed the date the well was completed: May 7, 2002. These two wells, the only ones inside the Intangible Zone, will likely stay shut even if the Yasuní-ITT Initiative fails. Elsewhere in ITT, Petroamazonas could drill more than 150 wells.

Back at the Yasuní River, we fired up the outboard. Zancudo stayed in the *quilla* with a wide, toothless grin plastered on his face as we towed him in our wake. Saúl meanwhile asked if I would swap my tent for his spear, blowgun, poison darts and bamboo quiver. He and I both got the better end of that trade.

We stopped when we reached a river bend that seemed the same as any other.

"Don't row," Saúl instructed Dan and me as he softly paddled us into the forest. "You have to listen."

The sound of distant croaking grew louder, and we glided into an open area where the tree branches were filled with colorful Agami herons. They stretched their burgundy necks and shook their flowing crowns of baby blue, letting us eavesdrop in on their nattering. Until last year, these birds converged near Kawymeno, but three straight seasons of Waorani raiding their nests forced relocation. The cost of gasoline prevents the Waorani from coming here with an outboard motor.

We pulled our *quilla* up to a nest and peered inside the crisscrossed tangle of twigs. Spared by distance and the scarcity of fossil fuels, the unhatched eggs were a chance for life, just like the incubating idea spawned by ITT. They were as bright and blue as the boundless sky.