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Real-life Na'vi are fighting for survival. It's not in 3-D, and it doesn't make headlines, but the stakes couldn't be higher.

Text and photographs by Nicholas Gill

When the rain stopped the sun was already gone.

Our *peke-peke,* a motorized canoe, got a late start for the Cacataibo village of Sinchi Roca in Peru's Central Amazon. The sky changed from bright blue to a dark mist where nothing could be seen. It smelled sweet, though. You could dissect the scent like a wine. There were hints of chocolate, banana, and passion fruit. The air was fresh. The rain was warm.

The Amazon Basin covers 1.7 billion acres, and accounts for 20 percent of Earth's fresh water and more than 30 percent of its species. Its existence keeps the entire planet an estimated 1.5 to 4 degrees cooler. It is home to pink dolphins, transparent frogs, lizards that walk on water, and a monkey that weighs less than three-quarters of a pound.

As I traveled last year across the world's largest rain forest, James Cameron's film *Avatar,* about a group of indigenous blue Na'vi who live in harmony with their rain-forest environment on the planet Pandora, had coincidentally become the highest grossing film of all time. It tells the story of an Earth-based corporation with an army of private mercenaries that extracts a rare mineral called *unobtainium* from Pandora, and considers the Na'vi less than human. When the Na'vi begin to stand in the way of the extraction of the mineral, their homeland is destroyed and their entire race is nearly wiped out. Any fool can see the parallels. It's just a standard green subtext hidden by dazzling special effects.

As BP continues its cleanup of the Deepwater Horizon well in the Gulf of Mexico, the Amazonian oil business continues to thrive, and it is leaving a destructive swath on both the environment and the people who inhabit it. Say what you want about BP, but at the very least it is paying to have a sizable portion of the spill cleaned up, and immediately sprang to fix the leak. In the Amazon, rarely does someone pay to clean up spills that infect entire river systems. Indigenous groups are now fighting for their right to be consulted about drilling on their land. Most of the people of the rain forest are impoverished to the point that they'll take any job they can get, though many have discovered that accepting the oil companies onto their pristine land is not worth the risk. They have little say in the matter, however.

Angela Tapia Arce of the Instituto del Bien Común, a Lima-based nonprofit that gives legal counsel to indigenous groups in Peru, traveled with me to Sinchi Roca to collect new eyewitness accounts of Camanos, the isolated Cacataibo that are one of 14 tribes living in voluntary seclusion in Peru. The Cacataibo and IBC are pushing for the creation of two reserves to protect the forest and isolated Cacataibo. They are collecting as many witness testimonies as possible as evidence for the Peruvian government, which has claimed not to have yet seen convincing proof that the tribes exist.

The Cacataibo were first exposed to the outside world in the 1930s, when the highway from Lima to Pucallpa split their land in half. About half chose to be left in isolation and retreated deeper into the forest. The Camanos maintain no contact with the outside world, even with the other Cacataibo. They are highly

vulnerable to common diseases like diarrhea and flu, which can be deadly, so contact with them is harshly restricted under numerous international treaties.

In the morning there were two new testimonies about the tribe. Sixteen-year-old Milton Garcia Bolivar explained how he was gathering wood near a stream called Río Tarahuaca in July of 2009, when he began to hear bird whistles. Seconds later he was pushed from behind and fell. He turned and saw a tall, muscular man with long hair and a deerskin that covered his waist. The man picked him up as he screamed. He was carried about 800 yards until he heard the calls of his family. He was then dropped and the man ran off with another figure into the forest.

Twenty-two-year-old Jhon Bolivar Perez was tracking a monkey in 2006, also near Río Tarahuaca, when he stumbled upon a Camano who was tracking the same monkey with an overweight, large-breasted woman. He watched as the man missed the target with an arrow and then turned toward him, at which point he fled.

According to the IBC, hundreds of sightings—including videotapes of oil workers that the IBC put on YouTube—have occurred in a vast region straddling the border of Cerro Azul Meámbar National Park. The problem is that the land is rich in natural resources. Lumber, most of it cut illegally, is floated downstream and sold to buyers who sell it to export companies for shipment around the world. Several multinational companies, including the Spanish company CEPSA and Canadian Petrolifera, are actively exploring the region for oil, too.

The last evening in Sinchi Roca, Tapia Arce noticed a piece of paper nailed to the post of a communal hut. "Has CEPSA been here?" she asked.

They had. A few weeks prior, a group of men in suits had passed out hats and T-shirts and promised jobs, though they never said how much they would pay or how many people they might need, according to the villagers. One of the traits of the oil companies is to consult directly with the villages, not with the larger organizations that have experience in technical issues and can speak for the Cacataibo (who live outside the villages) and the isolated tribes. CEPSA left a small pamphlet detailing the possible side effects of oil exploration—such as temporary loss of trees and the potential death of some fish—though it was in Spanish, and the majority of people here only speak Cacataibo, and even fewer can read. Tapia Arce read what was on the paper and the villagers were surprised no one from CEPSA had mentioned this to them. CEPSA had given them a map of where the seismic lines would pass on their territory. One of them would pass near Río Tarahuaca.

"What happens if they say they don't want CEPSA on their land?" I asked. "They'll come anyway," Tapia Arce said. "These people really don't have a choice. This *was* their consultation." They just didn't know it yet.

"What the companies did was a biological war," says a local teacher with a rash that covers his body. "They didn't need guns."

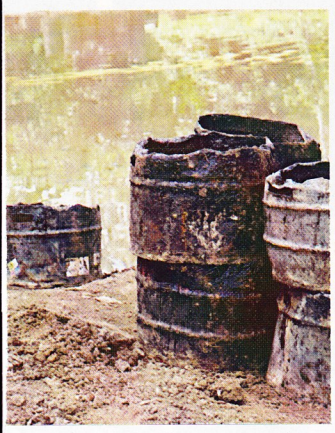
A lawsuit claims that 17 million gallons of crude oil were spilled in the Amazon. Clockwise from top right: Pipes that carry the oil; a public notice in Peru regarding oil exploration (few villagers could read it); an Ecuadorian well waiting to be cleared.

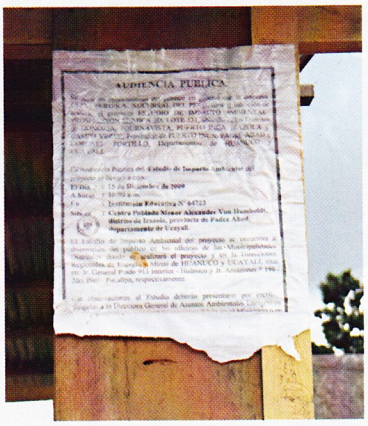
Many scientists agree that the Amazon Basin is at a tipping point, and yet massive, landscape-altering, multinational projects are widespread. The Harakambuts in Madre de Dios, Peru, are fighting against Hunt Oil, tens of thousands of illegal gold miners, and the construction of the Inambari hydroelectric dam. In northeast Brazil, the recently approved construction of the Belo Monte Dam, the third largest in the world, will divert the flow of the Xingu River and flood vast areas of pristine rain forest, disrupt sensitive ecosystems, and relocate 12,000 people. Several companies are vying for the drilling rights to Ecuador's largest undeveloped oil reserves, the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) oil block underneath Yasuní National Park; however, a rare alternative has been suggested. The Yasuní-ITT initiative proposes the country will not drill if the world community helps fund a compensation trust to create renewable energy projects and low-carbon development, thus preventing 407 million metric tons of carbon-dioxide emissions. Some see it as ransom, others see it as a last hope.

Frustration and mistrust have been brewing in the Amazon since Francisco de Orellana crossed the region in 1542. They've reached a boiling point as indigenous groups that have been pushed deeper and deeper into the forest have nowhere left to go. A study in the *Environmental Research Letters* found that 48.6 percent of the Peruvian Amazon is currently covered by 52 active oil and gas concessions, nearly six times as much land as was covered in 2003.

"Peru's government is trying to kick-start an oil boom, and the extent of the Amazon that can be explored by companies has quintupled in the last few years," said David Hill of London-based Survival International.

In mid-2009, an uprising in Bagua, Peru, saw spear-toting natives block a road for 55 days in protest of the region being opened up to transnational oil and logging companies. Law C169 of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, set up by the International Labor Organization and ratified by Peru in 1994, obliges Peru to consult indigenous people in cases in which the state or a company plans to exploit the natural resources in the land that the indigenous people occupy. That didn't happen here, and Perenco, the British-French company that has found oil in the





region, is promising a $2 billion investment.

On June 5, the government called in 600 heavily armed DINOES policemen, who were backed by an Mi-17 helicopter and an armored vehicle, and opened fire on a crowd of protesters at dawn at the spot on the highway known as the Curva del Diablo, the Devil's Curve. In the aftermath, 24 police officers and at least 9 indigenous people were dead, though indigenous leaders and human-rights groups insist many more were killed, and witnesses allegedly saw police burning bodies and throwing them into rivers from helicopters.

"Bagua happened because Peru's government is trying to sell off the Amazon without the permission of the people who have lived there for hundreds of years, and whose rights to it are recognized in international law," said Hill.

The protesters have since faced political persecution, and the Peruvian government even proposed dissolving AIDESEP, Peru's national indigenous organization. AIDESEP's president, Alberto Pizango, has been forced to seek asylum in Nicaragua. A formal commission into what happened went on behind closed doors, and the indigenous rejected signing the document in January 2010 because it watered down the police's role in the incident. The incident barely made international news.

As I waited along the Río Aguarico for a canoe to cross to the village of Dureno, in the Ecuadorian Amazon, Cofán leader Emergildo Criollo told me about when Texaco first arrived on Cofán land (where the modern city of Lago Agrio sits today), in 1974. He was six years old when the first helicopter appeared. Everyone in the village ran into the jungle and hid. Boats came and unloaded machines. In three months, ten hectares of forest were cleared. The Cofán abandoned their old village and moved deeper into the forest, to present-day Dureno. In six months, Texaco was there, too.

Soon the river was covered in oil. Everyone had stomachaches from drinking the water that was now contaminated. The alligators turned black and the fish changed color. Noise from the wells scared away all the animals, which the Cofán depended upon for food. Throughout Cofán history the shaman could cure any ailment. Now, new diseases and pains appeared that the shaman couldn't cure. They had rashes, headaches, fevers, and the women began having miscarriages. For many women, this happened multiple times.

When Criollo had his first child, it died within three months. When his second child was three years old, he came home after drinking river water and began vomiting. He died 24 hours later. Criollo's brother, uncle, aunt, and cousin would all die of cancer. The people of Dureno soon began to believe that the river was contaminated and began drinking the rainwater. Soon that was polluted, too.

An estimated 30,000 people in the Ecuadorian Amazon, who call themselves *los Afectados,* have taken the oil giant to court in the case *Aguinda* v. *Texaco*. In 2009, a court-appointed expert deemed Chevron, which bought Texaco in 2001, responsible for an estimated $27 billion in damages, one of the largest environmental lawsuits in history. The plaintiffs claim that, from 1964 to 1990, 18 billion gallons of toxic wastewater were deliberately dumped, 17 million gallons of crude oil were spilled, and hazardous waste was left in an estimated 1,000 unlined pits. They call it the Amazon Chernobyl.

Chevron, which declined to comment for this article, has vigorously denied these charges. It has claimed in court and press releases that Texaco didn't break any laws and that they are not liable for any environmental damage. "For the U.S.-based contingency-fee lawyers, this case has never been about facts, evidence, or law," it says on Chevron's website. "Instead, it has been a constant campaign of misinformation designed to pressure Chevron into a large financial settlement."

The outcome of the case could send shock waves across the region. Indigenous people are organizing themselves, and realizing not only that foreign corporations can be held accountable, but also what could happen if they don't take a stand.

By taxi, Lupita de Heredia, a spokeswoman for the Amazon Defense Coalition, showed me pit after pit between Coca and Lago Agrio. Trails of black led from the pits, and swirls and sludge could be seen in streams hundreds of yards away.

In the town of San Carlos, I saw a mother and her infant at the medical center with a rash related to drinking contaminated water. Most of the children here have it, the nurse told me. For years, the people who bathed in and drank from these streams simply pushed the crude aside and filled up their buckets, she said. They didn't realize there was anything wrong with the water. In the lawsuit, 1,400 cancer deaths are being attributed to the contamination. Chevron claims that the majority of health problems in the region are due to feces in water and poor personal hygiene. Their experts found no hydrocarbon contamination in most of the pits.

At a schoolhouse in Primavera, I spoke with teacher Wilmo Moreta, who disputes these experts. "What the companies did was a biological war," he said. "They didn't need guns. They say they left us with benefits? There are 20 wells near here and not one running toilet."

He showed me the rash that covers his body, and skin that has become so thin that the slightest impact causes a major wound. "We are afraid we will die and no one will know what happened here," he said.

In Lago Agrio, I stopped by the office of Pablo Fajardo, the lead Ecuadorian attorney in the Aguinda suit, to hear the latest developments. He pointed to a wall with approximately 200,000 neatly stacked documents. "This is the case."

Tens of thousands of lives in Ecuador and Peru, along with the future of the most biologically diverse ecosystem on Earth, have come down to lawyers and technical details in piles of paper, which, ironically, probably comes from trees illegally cut from the same soil. Take off the 3-D glasses. This is as real as it gets.