

## **Forest, indigenous peoples and oil**

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The oil industry has destroyed Colombia's forests, as well as the culture and subsistence of its Indigenous Peoples. A major part of the country's territory has been affected by oil-related activities, including colonization. Some Indigenous Peoples, such as the Yariguies, have been exterminated. Others, like the Motilones, the Cofanes and the Guahibos, have been decimated. Nowadays, the U'wa people find their ancestral lands threatened by oil exploitation that could destroy their forests, their lives and their culture.

The process of territorial occupation by oil companies has been stimulated by Colombian legislation, which has provided large incentives for oil projects. Oil companies are allowed to occupy the five-kilometre area surrounding an oil well, thus displacing Indigenous and farmers' communities and destroying biodiversity-rich forest zones.

Currently, seven million hectares of Colombian land are occupied by oil operations, and ten million more have been awarded to oil companies over recent years. Thus, 17 million hectares of forested land is currently at the disposition of transnational oil companies.

### **Pipelines and Forests**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, US oil company Texaco exploited timber in the Magdalena region of Colombia, paving the way for intensive cattle ranching. Texaco's occupation also caused Colombia's agricultural frontier to shift, and within a few years the areas "claimed" by the colonialists were turned into enormous ranches.

Later oil exploitation not only destroyed the forests, but also salinized soils and streams. Furthermore, oil exploitation is accompanied by the construction of infrastructure, including roads, oil wells, camps, refineries and pipelines, necessitating changes in land use. The results are forest destruction and violations of the lives of Indigenous Peoples.

The construction of the Andean Pipeline, which traverses Colombia, provides an ugly example of the impact of pipelines upon forests. The oil company received absolute control, at no cost, of a 3,060 metre-wide strategic corridor along the 500-kilometre length of the pipeline, and the ownership of 60 metres of land on either side of the pipeline. With this gift, the Colombian government gave away more than 150,000 hectares of land to the oil company. The construction of this pipeline not surprisingly led to the colonization of the area and the destruction of existing forests.

### **Lipa Lake and the Guahibo People**

Another example that should not be repeated is the case of Oxy's oil exploitation in the Cano Limon oil site. Occidental Petroleum and its associates built an oil exploitation installation on top of the Lipa Lake, which is considered a sanctuary and spiritual and cultural centre by the Guahibos, Macaguanes, Betoyes and other Arauca Indigenous Peoples. Plentiful fish, birds, aquatic animals and plants in the area formed the main food source for these Indigenous Peoples. The oil installation led to the virtual disappearance of about 715,000 hectares of tropical forest, equally rich in biodiversity, as well as 100,000 hectares of wetlands. The supposed economic benefits cannot be compared to the invaluable ecological and cultural loss suffered by the Auracans.

### **An End to Oil Exploitation**

Oil exploitation creates a cycle in which everything that benefits the industry has negative impacts upon the region. Oil companies obviously owe a large ecological debt in Colombia for environmental deterioration in various areas and the destruction of forests and Indigenous cultures.

Currently, oil prospectors plan to invade the country's most protected forest areas: the Choco Biogeografico, the Amazon and the Orinoco. These forest sanctuaries are moreover the setting for the wars that terrorize the country. Many social conflicts are related to the past, present and future of Colombia's forests. The forests house a major part of our biodiversity, and the great majority of the country's 82 Indigenous Peoples groups live there. The forests are part of the future that Colombia is defining as part of the ongoing peace process. This demonstrates the importance of ensuring their protection.