

DECLARATION

INTERNATIONAL AND IVTH NATIONAL PÁRAMOS AND ALTOANDEAN FOREST CONFERENCE

Málaga, Santander, Colombia - South America
21st of November, 1999

We have concluded this *International and IVth National Páramos and Altoandean Forest Conference* as an act of reconciliation in the province of García Rovira (Santander), a province that is under the continued threat of violence and conflict. We make a statement that its inhabitants - men, women, youth and children - proclaim conditions of peace.

We have observed the abandon and indifference of national and regional political and environmental authorities towards the true concerns of the Rovirenses population who seek to protect their natural environment and sustain their traditional livelihoods. It is a history that our communities have lived from long ago, here as well as in Ecuador, Venezuela and Costa Rica.

In Colombia, we are witness to excluded and marginalised communities that are only listened to when they have to show their power of protest. Echoes of the ongoing popular demonstration of peasants and indigenous groups from the Macizo Colombiano, a resound of the negligence and arrogance of the ruling class towards the claims of the people.

We have met public officials of lower ranks but with an attitude of greater responsibility than their counterparts who occupy the positions of higher management. We have seen them with a true interest and commitment for public concerns, - civil servants that walk at the same pace as the people -. However others, although present in the venue, are still looking through the narrow window frame of their office. Moreover, the notably absent politicians continue to be "*deaf, blind and mute*"; as recited in the words of Shakira's popular hit record.

We have recognised that little is being invested, or better to say almost nothing, in the management and conservation of altoandean ecosystems; no compensation is offered to its inhabitants for their role in the protection of these vital water resources. We proclaim that this situation must change.

We have spoken of the unobjectable laws, of the necessary laws and of the unnecessary laws, we have also discussed about the essential institutions and about the ineffectual institutions. Worthy examples of ecosystem protection schemes and natural reserves have come from Costa Rica, and perhaps the gloomiest examples have come from our own country - Colombia. National

legislation on the protection of Páramos has gathered dust on the desk of the Ministry of Environment for more than a lustrum.

We have talked of butterflies, reptiles, enchanted lakes, sacred rivers, and of mother earth. We have climbed peaks and then descended rapid currents; we have talked of tapirs and the spectacle bear, and we have heard tales of imps and elves who protect the water sources, and of the spirits of animals and of the forest. We have spoken of the Irazú, the Chimborazo, the Mérida Mountains, the snow peaks of the Cocuy and the Almorzadero Páramo.

We have listened to the inhabitants of these rugged and wild landscapes who denounce those who in their haste and ambition destroy these strategic ecosystems. We have heard of the victims of infrastructural projects in regions of páramos which represent benefits for a minority and votes for the politicians, and of the so called "*necro-projects*", huge dams, interconnections and canalisations which strangle future possibilities of a truly sustainable society.

We have been witnesses to the claims of indigenous peoples who reject the oppressions and "*gen- o-xide*" of the oil companies. We have seen these communities as the true protectors of our water resources, páramos and planet earth. We have learnt from their vision of life and their responsibility towards the future.

The lack of medium and long term state policies is plainly evident, as well as the selfish role of governors that deal with the public wealth as if were their own pocket money. Their incoherence grows at the same rate as their ambitions, lack of restraint and inability to make decisions. Their failures become more apparent as they continue to neglect the essential needs of the local communities.

We have confronted the "life project" of the majority with the "doomed project" of the minority and its capital. The values of a new civilisatory project versus the loss of values of this neoliberal society.

We have seen scientists trying to explain concepts to the common people, and the common people trying to be understood by the academic class. We have acknowledged the limitations of the sciences, as well as the uncertainties of risk management analysis. We have testified how the solutions are many times worse than the afflictions themselves. The "green revolution" is one of the most common examples. As food production increases so does starvation. As the production of agrochemicals increments, so do the levels of intoxication and destruction. As science progresses in the manipulation of genes, greater is the resulting threat to life.

We have acknowledged that the ecological crisis of our páramos in Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador, as well as the conflict for water, are not the result of natural circumstances, but fundamentally a consequence of the conditions of environmental and economic inequity in our societies. It is clear that the causes of these injustices are due to a few that hold a monopoly over the economy and the

ecosystems, while others are obliged to live in inhospitable locations, which are ecologically vulnerable.

It is plainly evident that the local populations inhabiting páramos and mountain forests should not be held responsible for the threat posed to these sources of biodiversity, the blame in essence lies with the models of production and social development aimed at monetary accumulation alone. These are the real causes of the impoverishment of our ecosystems and economy. Indices of poverty and ecological destruction are proportional to the levels of enrichment and destruction caused by the powerful interest groups.

We have met scientists, intellectuals and professionals that want to research with and for the people, they walk along the wild paths of the high mountains to make allies with their inhabitants. In addition, we have met peasants who for the first time have entered, not without fear and surprise, the university campus of the Province, - they have also proved to be wise-. We have seen a peasant being given the title of professor, and of professors speaking in favour of the peasants. We came to the university auditoriums to declare that the páramos are no longer issues for the academic world. We have learned that the local communities hold millenarian knowledge, they possess the seeds of our true future.

We have spoken of participation, the deceitful participation and the true participation. Of the participation that is restrained by the interest of the minorities, of the participation based on true community values, and of ludic participation with a sense of belonging. Of the participation that serves the corrupt politicians, and of the participation that proclaims radical democracy.

We have spoken of territorial planning and how these processes have more than often been camouflaged by the private sector for their own interests. Plans that completely ignore the dynamics of the ecosystems, and only look at the political boundaries of a mistaken geography. However, we have also discussed about territorial planning that seeks true social and ecological justice.

We have proposed the activation of an international and national INFORMATION NETWORK on Páramos and Cloud Mountain Forests. It is vital that these communication models for global conservation and social reform are strengthened. We recommend the formation of new alliances between institutions, local communities and environmental organisations with a commitment to protect the public commons. True coalitions formed by environmental and ecological organisations at national and international levels are also necessary. Moreover, it is urgent that financial resources are canalised in empowering environmental management from the localities.

The ***International and IVth National Páramos and Altoandean Forest Conference*** held in the town of Málaga (Santander), with the participation of international investigators from Ecuador, Venezuela, Holland, England and Spain and four hundred participants at national level representing Regional Corporations,

the Ministry of Environment, universities, municipal councils, peasant groups and delegations from regions of páramos, - organisations from isolated and far away regions of the country -, DECLARES :

1. The province of Garcia Rovira as a "*Territory of Peace for the People*" based in the principles of ecological security, food security, social-cultural security and political security.
2. Our disposition to the unity of environmentalists and local inhabitants for the defence of our natural patrimony, as represented by the ecosystems of páramos and altoandean forests.
3. The urgency of a dialogue between cultures aimed at the construction of sustainable societies, in the ambit of civilisatory change.
4. The recognition and payment of the ecological debt that the Northern States have with our people.
5. Our full support in the struggle of the Uwa indigenous people in their continued resistance against oil exploitation in ancestral lands.
6. A message of solidarity to the inhabitants of the Macizo Colombiano region in their popular demonstration for a life with dignity.
7. Our commitment to defend the páramos of the provinces of Garcia Rovira and Soto against the construction of the pending water supply mega-project destined for the city of Bucaramanga.
8. Our rejection of all large-scale infrastructural projects and forms of destructive intervention that threaten the sustainability of these strategic and fragile Altoandean ecosystems.
9. Our rejection of development models based on mono-crop plantations, including the poppy seed, that convert these ecosystems in death zones; in contrary we propose the implementation of agroecological schemes based on local food security.
10. The urgency of organizative processes at national and international levels to protect the páramo and altoandean forest ecosystems.
11. The importance of fostering investigative research, information and traditional knowledge on management and conservation of páramo and altoandean forest ecosystems.
12. The right of participation of the local population in the definition of ecosystem management and conservation policies.

13. The need to implement long-term programs aimed at the protection and management of páramos and altoandean forests.
 14. The need to define legislation and guidelines to defend and protect these regions of ecological national patrimony, - a committee from the conference has been formed with this specific purpose -.
 15. That all investments and projects related to regions of páramos and altoandean forest in Colombia should be strictly monitored and audited.
 16. An urgent appeal for financial resources to international funds and support organisations to support the initiatives of grassroots organisations in their work to protect regions of páramos and altoandean forest.
 17. That the conclusions of this conference will be communicated to the different scenes of negotiation and dialogue, as well as to the High Commissioner for Peace.
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