Profile

Huaorani people have lived as forest hunters and gatherers in the heart of the Ecuadorian Amazon for hundreds of years. Numbering approximately 1,300, the Hauorani are a relatively isolated indigenous group inhabiting the eastern Amazonian region of Ecuador. From their tragic encounter with North American missionaries in 1956 to this day, they have held a special place in journalistic and popular imagination as 'Ecuador's last savages'. Despite the 'civilizing' efforts of missionaries, the Huaorani have largely retained their distinctive way of apprehending the world and continue to be known as skilled warriors.

Historical context

The successful claim made in 1990 by the lowland Hauorani to 600,000 hectares of territory was subject to the condition that they would not interfere with oil companies drilling there. As part of the government's strategy for developing resources even in restricted areas, the Maxus Energy Oil Company, whose claim lies within a national park of great biological diversity, was given permission to construct a pipeline and a narrow access road. Oil exploration paired with increases in lumbering activities and tourism has caused some Hauorani to retreat further into the jungle.

In 1991, in the wake of receiving territorial rights from the government after a protracted international campaign, young schooled men formed the ONHAE (Organization of the Huaorani Nation of Amazonian Ecuador). This organization now operates almost entirely under the auspices of Maxus, the company presently exploiting petroleum in the Huaorani territory and the Yasuni National Park.

Current issues

Encouraged by missionaries, some Hauorani have given up their traditional economic activities and have turned to the lumber industry for their livelihood. This has posed a serious threat to neighboring tribes. In 2003 a group of Hauorani working in lumbering attacked a neighboring Tagaeri-Taromenani indigenous village, killing 26 people. Because this sub-group of the Hauorani has had very little contact with outsiders, this massacre was condemned even in the international sphere. Although the Hauorani are estimated to be in the thousands, certain sub-groups like the Taromenani are in danger of extinction.

Caught between the conflicting objectives of petroleum development and forest conservation, they are confronted with pernicious and contradictory economic and political interests. The Hauorani continue to be threatened by oil extraction and illegal lumbering. In 2005, despite protests by Hauorani people, the Brazilian oil company, Petrobrás, continued to drill for oil in the Yasuní forest of Ecuador. Although the media reported that the Hauorani broke their agreement with Petrobrás, Hauorani leaders argued that the president of the Organization of the Hauorani Nationality signed the contract without consulting the Hauorani community. Also, eco-tourism is on the rise in this region, however tourism operators rarely consult the Hauorani before bringing outsiders into their communities.

Despite plans to protect the Yasuní National Park from drilling through a United Nations-managed fund, in August 2013 the government announced that due to lack of international support the restrictions would be lifted. In response to this, the Yasunidos, an organization that gathers indigenous communities and environmentalists, collected 756,291 signatures to qualify for a national referendum on the topic. The signatures were delivered to the National Electoral Council in April 2014 by Alicia Cahuilla, one of the most prominent Huaorani indigenous women leaders. However, in May 2014, only 359,781 were validated by the authorities out of the 583,323 needed according to Ecuadorian law. The organizations working at the project have stated that they will bring the case before the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights.