

Amazon 'uncontacted' tribes at risk from new highway plan

David Hill

19th January, 2012

Tweet 145

15

Like 241

Tension is mounting in one of the remotest regions in the Peruvian Amazon over plans to build a highway through the country's biggest national park

The Alto Purus park is inhabited by at least two 'uncontacted' tribes, one of which was photographed on a beach in the park five years ago.

Carlos Tubino Arias Schreiber, a congressman from the Fuerza 2011 party, has been promoting the need for the highway in Peru's Congress, in what has become an increasingly aggressive publicity campaign.

'In Purus the monkeys and plants have more rights than human beings,' he stated on 18 November last year after a visit to the region. 'The national parks have cut it off.'

But plans for the highway have drawn fire from environmental and human rights groups concerned about its potential impact on the rainforest and the 'uncontacted' tribes living there. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF), which helped set up the park in 2004 and now supports its ongoing protection, calls it 'an area of incredible biodiversity' covering 'some of the most pristine forests in the southwestern Amazon' and home to jaguars, monkeys and pink dolphins.

'There are only a handful of places left in the world as biologically and culturally important as Peru's Alto Purus,' said Chris Fagan from the Upper Amazon Conservancy (UAC), an NGO working in the region which released a damning statement about the highway on 7 January. 'To cut it with a road would compromise the integrity of the entire basin and trigger the swift demise of some of the last isolated hunting and gathering tribes on earth.'

The inaccessible region

Currently the Purus region, in south-east Peru, is only accessible by plane. A highway would connect it to the rest of the country and, so say those in favour of it, develop the local economy.

'Something must be done about Purus' isolation,' Tubino told Peru's Congress on 5 January. 'Three and a half thousand people are living in an unacceptable and unjust situation which creates many kinds of problems: exorbitant prices, difficulties with education, and, above all, lives threatened when there are medical emergencies. Human beings are worth more than trees and animals.'

On the day Tubino visited Purus in November last year, local indigenous organizations issued a statement categorically rejecting the highway. The reasons cited by the organizations, including Eco-Purus, FECONAPU and ORAU, were 'loss of environmental services', 'loss of food security', loss of land belonging to one of the 'uncontacted' tribes, 'loss of biological diversity', and the 'possible invasion of our territories by colonists and mestizos.'

Their statement also claimed that the local Catholic priest, an Italian named Miguel Piovesan, is behind plans for the highway and has been applying 'constant pressure' to have it built.

The Upper Amazon Conservancy (UAC) agreed. 'The road controversy first emerged as an obscure proposal with little public support by Piovesan,' said its 7 January statement. 'After intense political maneuvering, Piovesan succeeded in bringing his case to the legislature, which promptly shelved the project, citing a lack of public support in the region.'

Piovesan has now 'reemerged', the UAC said, pushing a 'campaign of misinformation' and continuing 'to push his road plan with the Peruvian media.'

Piovesan met Peru's president, Ollanta Humala, in Lima in December.

'Without a highway there will be no development for this region,' said the latest edition of Purus' parish magazine, dedicated to a demonstration in December in Purus in favour of the highway. 'Purus today feels excluded.'

Local split on support for highway

The UAC claims that most of today's supporters of the highway are outsiders hoping to plunder the rainforest for its riches.

'Nearly 80 per cent of Purus' inhabitants are members of indigenous groups, the majority of which have organized against the proposal,' the UAC said. 'The road's supporters, meanwhile, are largely minority mestizo settlers in the provincial capital of Puerto Esperanza, relative newcomers to the region and many former loggers who would benefit from improved access and increased opportunities for resource extraction.'

Survival International's Jonathan Mazower called the highway 'a road to ruin.'

'The worst thing you can do to the Amazon and the people who live there, particularly if they're uncontacted, is build a road through their territory,' Mazower said. 'Every time that happens, the result is the same: lots of people die.'

The WWF gave the then president of Peru, Alejandro Toledo, a 'Gift to the Earth' award when he created the Alto Purus park, more than 2.5 million hectares, in 2004.

'With WWF support, authorities, indigenous communities and local partners protect one of the largest national parks in the Amazon,' the WWF claims

But that could be threatened if Tubino and Piovesan get their way. WWF-Peru program coordinator, Jorge Herrera, based in Lima, said the highway would put 'voluntarily isolated populations in grave danger of being decimated by confrontation with loggers, hunters and illegal miners.'

Peru's current president, Ollanta Humala, visited Purus on 23 December, just eight days after he met with Piovesan. Two days before that, one of Peru's leading indigenous organizations, AIDSESEP, wrote to Humala warning him that Piovesan has been trying to rally support for the highway for years and that it would have devastating consequences.

'Since 2001 until the present day, the Catholic priest Miguel Piovesan has been trying everything he can to promote the construction of the highway, supposedly to 'solve Purus' isolation,'" AIDSESEP said. 'This is without considering the negative environmental impacts that this kind of project would have, such as the destruction of millions of hectares of the rainforest, the death of the indigenous people living in voluntary isolation, and the invasion of indigenous land.'

The proposed route for the highway is from Puerto Esperanza, Purus's only town, to a settlement on the Peru-Brazil border, Inapari, where it would connect to the 'Inter-Oceanica' road system leading to Peru's Pacific coast in one direction and Brazil's Atlantic coast in the other.

The 'uncontacted' Mashco-Piro tribe

One of the 'uncontacted' tribes in the park is known as the 'Mashco-Piro', possibly the largest group in Peru living without contact.

The highway would also cut through Purus' Communal Reserve, used by the 'contacted' indigenous people in the region, and the Madre de Dios Reserve for 'uncontacted' tribes. This was established in 2002 after vigorous lobbying by local indigenous organization FENAMAD.

'The proposed highway is a major concern for us,' said Jorge Payaba, the director of FENAMAD's isolated peoples team. 'We have a great deal of information demonstrating that the areas that the road would cross are used by the Mashco Piro in voluntary isolation.'

The highway would contravene a new law passed last year by Peru's government guaranteeing indigenous people the right to be consulted about and in agreement with any project affecting them. Carlos Tubino called that law a 'historic page' in Peru's Congress's history, and a move towards respecting the environment and the country's 'native peoples.'

In total, there are an estimated fifteen 'uncontacted' tribes in Peru. Many of them are believed to have had some form of contact with outsiders many years ago, but today prefer to live without it.

Miguel Piovesan refused to respond to questions about the highway. Carlos Tubino did not respond at all.

Is this something others should read? If so... 

READ MORE...



HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

A day in the life of...Nicola Peel, Amazon activist and filmmaker

Nicola Peel's new film Blood of the Amazon tells the story of the world's largest environmental lawsuit and investigates how the oil industry threatens a fragile rainforest environment. By Jan Goodey



NEWS ANALYSIS

News special: Vedanta victory masks threats to indigenous people

We report on the other tribes - including the Penan in Sarawak and the Guarani in Brazil - facing similar threats but being ignored by the media



NEWS

Oil companies Perenco, Repsol-YPF and ConocoPhillips under fire over Peruvian tribes

Activists call for corporations to withdraw from Amazon area because of disease and violence fears



HOW TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Securing a future for Amazonian rubber-tappers

A pioneering initiative is helping to rebuild the traditional local economy and livelihoods of the Amazonian rubber-tappers



NEWS

Greenwash award exposes Brazilian company

Brazilian cattle-ranching company named and shamed for destroying the land of an uncontacted tribe



