

Deep Ecology principles in action: Rights of nature and Indigenous-led defense of lands and waters in Ecuador.

The Rainforest Information Centre has a long relationship with Ecuador, starting in 1989 when we created the Los Cedros Biological Reserve with the help of a grant from the Australian Government. Through the 1990s RIC was very active with grassroots projects happening around the country. Amongst other things we supported two Indigenous nations, the Awá and Waorani, to demarcate their territories so they could better keep out logging and oil exploitation.

We had a resurgence of activity in 2017 when it became apparent that the Ecuadorian Government had sold over two million hectares of the most biodiverse and vulnerable ecosystems in the world to transnational mining companies, to explore for gold and copper. These concessions were handed out with zero consultation of people living within the concessions, and they impact on large swathes of Indigenous lands and rural livelihoods.

Among the lands marked for plunder was our beloved Los Cedros cloud forest – home to hundreds of endangered and endemic species, including the Andean Spectacled Bear, the brown-headed spider monkey, a threatened subspecies of jaguar, and amphibians and orchids only recently known to science.

In December 2021 after over four years of local and international campaigning, we had a historic win. The Ecuadorean Supreme Court ruled to eject the Canadian mining company “Cornerstone” from Los Cedros. We had based our court case on the “Rights of Nature” which is enshrined in Ecuador’s constitution – the first country in the world to do this. While Rights of Nature has been tested a few times in Ecuador’s courts, it had never before been applied to stopping extractive industries in a protected area.

Not only did this win save 5000 Ha of the most biodiverse rainforest in the world (for about A\$60,000 in legal fees, a pretty good rate of return we reckon) but the legal precedent is rippling out globally as well as encouraging further cases to be launched in Ecuador. We are currently supporting several such cases.

In April this year, close to Los Cedros, [an Ecuadorean court halted the Llurimagua copper project](#) based on the precedent that we had set. One of the cutest species saved by this court ruling was a brand new frog, found during a research expedition funded by RIC. Locals named it the “Resistance Rocket Frog”.

Just further north, an Australian owned mining company, Hanrine, has been associated with human rights abuses and environmental damage within its gold concessions. In February, RIC used a donation by Australian pollinator conservation organisation **Flow** to pay for the writing of two new legal actions, which seek to halt Hanrine’s activities and are based on the precedent of Los Cedros.

Ecuador has a growing national movement against mining. This is being led by Indigenous people who see the land as not only integral to their lives, but also with its own sacred life and spirit which needs to be protected in its own right. Indigenous cosmovisions shaped the basis of Ecuador’s rights of nature laws. Water is particularly important. Over the past few years people have marched across the country, blockaded mining companies from entering, and launched legal actions, often at serious risk to their personal safety.

In August this year, Ecuador had two national referenda – one to block oil drilling expansions in the world renowned Yasuni Biosphere Reserve, and the other to stop gold and copper mining in cloud forests just south of Los Cedros. Both referendums were decided by voters in favour of protection of these biosphere reserves! In Yasuní, oil companies which have drilled here since 2014 can no longer operate, and the move makes another global precedent for Ecuador: they are the first country in the world to vote to leave fossil fuels in the ground for climate reasons.

Environmental laws and political priorities need urgent transformation if we are going to save what's left of our ecological and cultural landscapes. We need a new vision!