Deep in the Amazon, one tribe is beating big oil

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The people of Sarayaku are a leading force in 21st century indigenous resistance, engaging the western world politically, legally and philosophically.

"Indigenous lands free of oil: The cry of the living jungle," a banner hanging on the side of a building in Sarayaku. Credit: Caroline Bennett/Amazon Watch. All rights reserved.

Patricia Gualinga stands serenely as chaos swirls about her. I find this petite woman with striking black and red face paint at the head of the People's Climate March in New York City on September 21, 2014. She is adorned with earrings made of brilliant bird feathers and a thick necklace of yellow and blue beads. She has come here from Sarayaku, a community deep in the heart of the Amazon rainforest in Ecuador.

Behind Gualinga, 400,000 people are in the streets calling for global action to stop climate change. Beside her, celebrities Leonardo DiCaprio, Sting, and Mark Ruffalo prepare to lead the historic march alongside a group of indigenous leaders. Gualinga stands beneath a sign, "Keep the Oil in the Ground." She has traveled across continents and cultures to deliver this message.

"Our ancestors and our spiritual leaders have been talking about climate change for a long time," she tells me in Spanish above the din, flashing a soft smile as photographers crush around the celebrities. She motions to the throngs around her. "We are actually speaking the same language right now."

A year earlier, I traveled to her village in the Ecuadorian Amazon to research the improbable story of a rainforest community of 1,200 Kichwa people that has successfully fended off oil companies and a government intent on exploiting their land for profit. How, I wondered, has Sarayaku been winning?

This is not the story most people know from Ecuador. Headlines have focused on northern Ecuador, where Chevron is fighting a landmark $9.5 billion judgment for dumping millions of gallons of toxic wastewater into rivers and leaving unlined pits of contaminated sludge that poisoned thousands of people.

Sarayaku lies in southern Ecuador, where the government is selling drilling rights to a vast swath of indigenous lands—except for Sarayaku. The community has become a beacon of hope to other indigenous groups and to global climate change activists as it mobilizes to stop a new round of oil exploration.

What I found in Sarayaku was not just a community defending its territory. I encountered a people who believe that their lifestyle, deeply connected to nature, holds promise for humans to save themselves from global warming and extinction. They are fighting back by advancing a counter-capitalist vision called *sumak kawsay*—Kichwa for "living well"—living in harmony with the natural world and insisting that nature has rights deserving of protection.

Naively romantic? Think again: In 2008, Ecuador's constitution became the first in the world to codify the rights of nature and specifically sumak kawsay. Bolivia's constitution has a similar provision, and rights-of-nature ordinances are now being passed in communities in the United States.

Sarayaku residents describe sumac kawsay as "choosing our responsibility to the seventh generation over quarterly earnings, regeneration over economic growth, and the pursuit of well-being and harmony over wealth and financial success."

The people of Sarayaku are the face of 21st-century indigenous resistance. Sarayaku may be a remote, pastoral community, but it is engaging the Western world politically, legally, and philosophically. Patricia Gualinga and other Sarayaku community members have traveled to Europe to meet with foreign leaders and warn energy company executives about their opposition to oil extraction from their lands, produced their own documentary film about their struggle, filed lawsuits, leveraged their message with international groups such as Amazon Watch and Amnesty International, marched thousands of kilometers in public protest, and testified at the United Nations. Sarayaku's resistance has angered the pro-development Ecuadorian government—which bizarrely hails sumak kawsay while selling hotly contested oil drilling leases—but has inspired other indigenous communities across the globe.

Defending life and land

I climb aboard a four-seater Cessna parked at a small airstrip in the town of Shell, a rambling settlement on the edge of the Amazon rainforest in southeastern Ecuador. The town is named for Shell Oil Company, which established operations here a half century ago.

Our plane flies low over the thick green jungle. The dense growth below is broken only by rivers the color of chocolate milk, the sinewy arteries of the rainforest.

The forest canopy parts to reveal a grass airstrip and clusters of thatched huts. This is Sarayaku. Moist jungle air envelops me as I step out of the plane. The villagers escort me and my daughter, Ariel, who has been living in Ecuador and is translating for me, past a large communal hut where a woman tends a small fire. Gerardo Gualinga, Patricia's brother and one of the community leaders, arrives dressed in jeans, a T-shirt,

and knee-high rubber boots, the signature footwear of the rainforest. He carries a tall, carved wooden staff, a symbol of his authority.

“The community is in the middle of a three-day meeting to plan our political and development work for the next year. Come along—I think you will find it interesting,” he says, motioning for us to follow him down to the edge of the broad Bobonaza River.

We board a motorized canoe and head upstream, passing slender dugouts propelled by men pushing long poles. In 10 minutes, we clamber out on the river bank and hike up to a sandy village square.

Inside an oval building with a thatched roof, we find José Gualinga, another of Patricia’s brothers, who was then president of Sarayaku. He is holding his ceremonial staff and wearing a black headband and a Che Guevara T-shirt. Gualinga is leading a discussion of how the community should pressure the Ecuadorian government to comply with the judgment of the Inter-American Court on Human Rights, which ruled in 2012 that the Ecuadorian government should have obtained the consent of the native people when it permitted oil drilling on Sarayaku’s territory. Following hearings in Costa Rica, the court ordered the government to apologize and pay Sarayaku $1.25 million, plus attorney’s fees.

The court decision, declared Mario Melo, attorney for Sarayaku from the Quito-based Fundación Pachamama, is “a significant contribution to a more profound safeguard of indigenous peoples’ rights, and it is an example of dignity that will surely inspire many other nations and peoples around the world.”

At a lunch break, Mario Santi, Sarayaku’s president until 2008, explains the history of the struggle here. In the early 2000s, “The government let oil businesses exploit and explore for oil in this territory. There was no consultation. Many communities sold out to the oil companies. Sarayaku was the only pueblo that didn’t sell the right for oil companies to explore.”

Ecuador’s government ignored the community’s refusal to sell oil-drilling rights and signed a contract in 1996 with the Argentinian oil company C.G.C. to explore for oil in Sarayaku. In 2003, C.G.C. *petroleros*—oil workers and private security guards—and Ecuadorian soldiers came by helicopter to lay explosives and dig test wells.

Sarayaku mobilized. “We stopped the schools and our own work and dedicated ourselves to the struggle for six months,” says Santi. As the oil workers cleared a large area of forest—which was community farmland—the citizens of Sarayaku retreated deep into the jungle, where they established emergency camps and plotted their resistance.

“In the six months of struggle, there was torture, rape, and strong suffering of our people, especially our mothers and children,” Santi recounts. “We returned with psychological illness. All the military who came …” He pauses to compose himself. “This was a very, very bad time.”

In their jungle camps, the Sarayaku leaders hatched a plan. The women of the community prepared a strong batch of chicha, the traditional Ecuadorian homebrew made from fermented cassava. One night, a group of them traveled stealthily through the jungle, shadowed by men of the village. The women emerged at the main encampment of the petroleros. They offered their chicha and watched as the oil workers happily partied.

As their drinking binge ended, the petroleros fell asleep. When they awoke, what they saw sobered them: They were staring into the muzzles of their own automatic weapons. Wielding the guns were the women and men of Sarayaku.

The Sarayaku residents ordered the petroleros off their ancestral land. The terrified workers called in helicopters and fled, abandoning their weapons. The oil workers never returned. An Ecuadorian general came later and negotiated with community leaders—five of whom had been arrested and beaten—for the return of the weapons.

I ask Santi why Sarayaku has resisted. His tan, weathered face breaks into a gentle smile even as he recounts a difficult story.

“Our fathers told us that for future generations not to suffer, we needed to struggle for our territory and our liberty. So we wouldn’t be slaves of the new kind of colonization.

“The waterfall, the insects, the animals, the jungle gives us life,” he tells me. “Because man and the jungle have a relationship. For the Western capitalist world, the jungle is simply for exploiting resources and ending all this. The indigenous pueblos without jungle—we can’t live.”

Sarayaku now wants to help indigenous people around the world resist and defend their way of life. “Our message that we are also taking to Asia, Africa, Brazil, and other countries that are discussing climate change, we propose an alternative development—the development of life. This is our economy for living—sumak kawsay—not just for us but for the Western world. They don’t have to be afraid of global warming if they support the life of the jungle.

“It’s not a big thing,” he says understatedly. “It’s just to continue living.”

Indigenous climate change warriors

The Sarayaku story is just the latest in a long-running battle over Ecuador's natural resources. Oil extraction began in northern Ecuador in 1964, when the American oil giant Texaco set up drilling operations in indigenous lands (Chevron later purchased Texaco). When the oil company exited in 1992, it "left behind the worst oil-related environmental disaster on the planet," according to Amazon Watch, a nonprofit organization that defends indigenous rights. The devastated and poisoned region is known as the "rainforest Chernobyl."

Despite pursuing Chevron for damages, the Ecuadorian government of President Rafael Correa has embarked on an aggressive new round of oil development in southern Ecuador, opening thousands of acres to exploration. The government has cracked down on resisters, recently ordering the closure of the Quito headquarters of CONAIE, Ecuador's national indigenous organization, attempting to stop Ecuadorian activists opposed to oil drilling from attending a U.N. climate summit in Peru, and closing Fundación Pachamama, an NGO supporting indigenous groups. Most of Sarayaku's land has been excluded in the new round of oil drilling, though nearby communities, including those of the neighboring Sápara people, are threatened. Sarayaku is joining the protests of its neighbors.

José Gualinga says these struggles have bigger implications. "We are doing this to stop carbon emissions and global warming. This struggle of indigenous pueblos is a doorway to saving *Pachamama* [Mother Earth]."

Women have been at the center of the indigenous resistance. Patricia Gualinga tells me, "The women have been very steadfast and strong in saying we are not negotiating about this. We are the ones who have mobilized for life." She recounts how, in 2013, 100 women from seven different indigenous groups marched 250 kilometers from their jungle communities to Quito, where they addressed the National Assembly. In the 1990s, Patricia's mother embarked on a similar march with thousands of other indigenous women.

"We want to continue living a good life within the forest," Patricia tells me. "We want to be respected, and we want to be a model that could be replicated."

The living jungle

I follow Sabino Gualinga, a 70-year-old shaman, as he walks lightly through the dense tangle of growth. He deftly flicks his machete to make a path through the jungle for me and Ariel. He stops and points up toward a tree.

"The bark of that tree helps cure grippe [flu]. This one," he says, pointing to a weathered, gray tree trunk, "helps to break a fever. That one," he motions to a fern-like plant, "helps with psychological problems."

That night, Sabino's sons, Gerardo and José, join us in front of a flickering fire to talk about Sarayaku's journey. They are unwinding after a long day of meetings. José wears a white soccer jersey and his long black hair hangs loosely at his shoulders.

José, president of Sarayaku from 2011 to 2014, led his community to take its fight to the Inter-American Court on Human Rights. Part of the court judgment required Ecuadorian government leaders to apologize to Sarayaku. I doubted this would occur, but José was insistent that it would.

In October 2014, Ecuador's Minister of Justice, Ledy Zuniga, stood in Sarayaku's sandy community square and delivered an extraordinary message: "We offer a public apology for the violation of indigenous property, cultural identity, the right to consultation, having put at serious risk their lives and personal integrity, and for the violation of the right to judicial guarantee and judicial protections," she declared.

The court decision and official apology appear to have given Sarayaku an extra measure of protection from new oil exploration. The government must now secure at least the appearance of consent, contested though it may be, lest they get dragged back into court. "We've shown that laws can change," reflects Gerardo. "We've won not only for Sarayaku, we've won for South America."

A key element in Sarayaku's success is telling its story everywhere it can. Sarayaku resident Eriberto Gualinga trained in videography and made a film about his community, *Children of the Jaguar*, which won best documentary at the 2012 National Geographic All Roads Film Festival. Sarayaku has also embraced social media. Community members showed me to a thatched hut. Inside, young people were clustered around several computers updating Facebook pages and websites via a satellite Internet connection.

Now, says José, "When the state says, 'Sarayaku, we are going to destroy you,' we have international witnesses. We can tell people the truth."

José draws a distinction between Sarayaku's struggles and those led by leaders such as Nelson Mandela and Che Guevara. "They wanted their freedom. We don't need to win our freedom. Here in Sarayaku, we are free. But we take from the experience of these leaders. It strengthens us."

A steady rain falls on the thatched roof overhead. The fat raindrops make a hard thwack on the broad leaves of the trees. A guitarist strums softly in another hut. Chickens and children run free.

"We are millionaires," says Gerardo, motioning to the jungle that embraces us. "Everything we need we have here." José peers into the fire. "We are a small pueblo,

but we are a symbol of life. Everyone must come together to support the life of human beings and Earth.”