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Amazon Rainforest Defense Now Part of Activists' Global Strategy to Defeat Fossil Fuel Industry

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Construction of an oil pipeline in the Ecuadorian Amazon by Arco-Oriente that carries 80,000 barrels of crude oil from the Villano oil reserve to the TransEcuadorian pipeline. Pipeline ruptures in Ecuador have discharged over 18 million gallons of oil--more than the 10.8 million gallon Exxon Valdez spill. Photo (c) Bruce Farnsworth.

The fate of the world's climate and the Amazon Rainforest are intertwined. That was the message brought by Amazon Watch founder and board president Atossa Soltani to a session of the annual Bioneers Conference in San Rafael, CA on October 23rd.

She shared the stage with Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune in a panel on disrupting the global carbon economy so as to protect the climate, indigenous people, and the environment.

Brune was optimistic that the world is witnessing the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era and that the climate movement has the ability to resist the fossil fuel industry from the mine and wellhead to wherever fossil fuels are used. In his remarks, he laid out
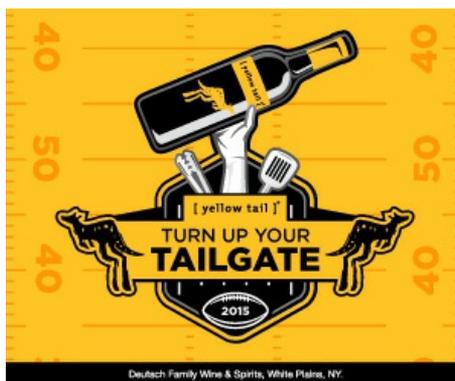
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guidelines for defeating the fossil fuel industry.

For her part, Soltani spoke of the need to keep fossil fuels in the ground "from the Arctic to the Amazon," as Amazon Watch and other nongovernmental organizations are demanding. Through Amazon Watch, Soltani is working to help consolidate an alliance of some 400 groups opposed to fossil fuel development in thousands of struggles from the global North to the South.

Soltani has been working since 1991 to protect the vulnerable Amazon region and to internationalize the struggles of its beleaguered indigenous peoples. She sees these efforts as part of a larger challenge to protect the planet.

"We are the generation that gets to decide the future for the next 1,000 years," she stated elsewhere. "Who is going to step up? It has to be us!"

The Amazon-Climate Connection

The Amazon is home to thousands of species, stores a quarter of the world's terrestrial carbon, and holds a fifth of its freshwater. Yet Soltani reports that half the Amazon is already degraded or destroyed.

As the forest is cut down and burned, much of the carbon stored in the vegetation is released to the atmosphere as carbon dioxide, heating the planet.

Billions of rainforest trees in the Amazon have for eons recycled rainfall brought by winds from the Atlantic, transpiring that moisture back to the atmosphere. Those clouds then bring rainfall to the South American continent and affect the world's weather.

"Each tree lifts up 1,000 liters, creating flying rivers of water vapor," Soltani said. But the Amazon's hydrological cycle is close to collapse, she warns.

Amazonia is increasingly threatened by drought that could lead to its destruction and conversion to grassland, if climate change remains unchecked. "This year," Soltani remarked, "the flying rivers were interrupted and off course."

Although tropical rainforest soils are relatively infertile and degrade rapidly once the forest cover is stripped away, vast areas of the Amazon are being converted to cattle ranching and to large plantations growing soy and other crops for export, much of it bound for China.

The Amazon is being besieged by deforestation, fires, oil spills, and "unsustainable megaprojects (dams, drilling, pipelines, roads)," according to a recent Amazon Watch report. If allowed to proceed, these major projects will "accelerate deforestation, displacement of indigenous peoples, and climate change." (See "Amazonia Under Threat").

Under conditions of sparse environmental regulation, mining and oil exploitation tear up the forest and disrupt its life-sustaining waterways, discharging toxic mine drainage and drilling effluents, poisoning people and wildlife.

With each hectare lost to deforestation, less moisture is available for transpiration and the remaining forest becomes drier and more fire-prone. Then as the freshly denuded land is pounded by tropical rains, the thin unprotected soils erode, degrading pristine streams and rivers.

A Pittance is Too Much

As reported by the *New York Times*, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa in 2007 had proposed leaving the oil resources of the Ecuadorian Amazon undisturbed, including the globally significant Yasuní National Park. He asked only that other nations contribute $3.6 billion to a global trust fund to safeguard 4,000 square miles of some of the world's most biologically diverse land. Nine indigenous tribes live in the Yasuní area, two still isolated from contact with the modern world.

Unfortunately, wealthy developed nations did not provide the $3.6 billion, an amount equivalent to a couple of days of spending on oil exploration by the world's oil companies. Correa subsequently reversed his position and granted oil companies permission to develop the region.

Even the culturally significant and biologically diverse Amazon headwaters in Peru and

Ecuador, where one hectare of land has as many tree species as all of North America, are now to be developed. "An area the size of Texas is about to be leased to oil companies," Soltani said.

A map of the Western Amazon. Source: PLOS ONE (see below)..
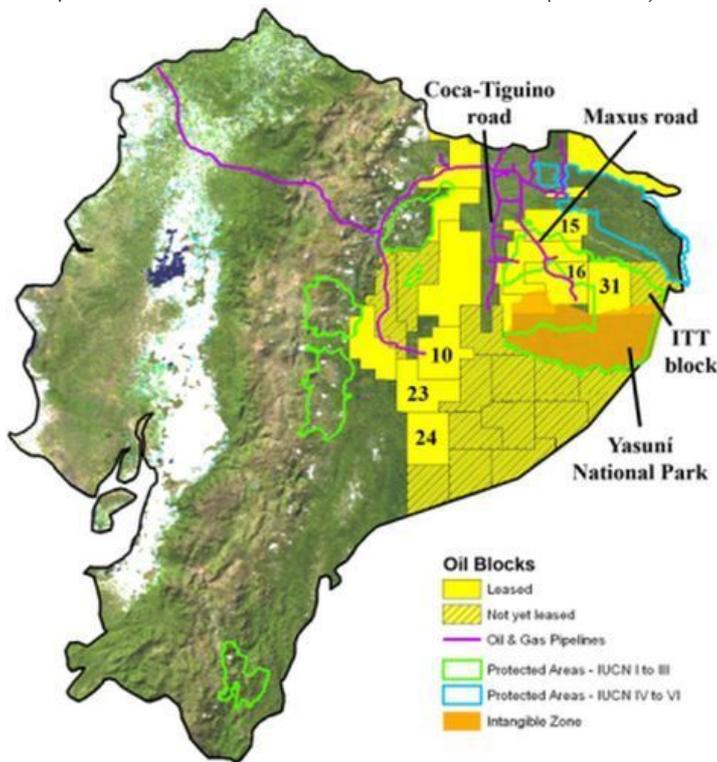
More than two thirds of the Ecuadorian Amazon is divided up into oil and gas blocks as seen here on this map of Ecuador, which includes all Amazonian protected areas and key features. Source: Finer M, Jenkins CN, Pimm SL, Keane B, Ross C (2008) Oil and Gas Projects in the Western Amazon: Threats to Wilderness, Biodiversity, and Indigenous Peoples. PLOS ONE. 3(8)

Arctic Drilling Chilled

Coincidentally, on the day Soltani spoke, Sierra Club Director Michael Brune was able to share news of a major environmental victory: the Obama Administration had just cancelled two oil lease sales scheduled for the Beaufort and Chukchi Seas in the Arctic Ocean as part of the Federal government's 2012-2017 offshore oil and gas leasing program.

A few weeks earlier, Royal Dutch Shell had announced it was halting its $7 billion oil drilling effort in the Chukchi Sea. Those operations, the target of an Earthjustice lawsuit, had aroused vehement protest from Greenpeace USA and from environmentalists in Seattle where the Shell Oil rig had been berthed.

But that was just one project, Brune noted. For the time being at least, the two new oil lease cancellations protect vast swaths of the Arctic Ocean from oil exploration.

"You can see manifestations of climate change from the Arctic to the Amazon," said Brune, who has visited the Arctic. "It has been generally worse than most people understand." Parts of the Arctic have warmed by 15°F.

"The idea that we could replace fossil fuels with renewable energy has been shown to be practical and more affordable than fossil fuels. Solar and wind now are cheaper than gas, coal, and nuclear power," Brune declared.

"Now we can clean up our air and water, diversify our tax base, create jobs, cut rates for ratepayers, and save money for the community."

Three Rules for Defeating the Fossil Fuel Industry

"2015 is the beginning of the end [for the fossil fuel industry]," Brune asserted. "We're not talking about the do-gooders on the fringe. The solutions that we want are the mainstream. It's going to be the dominant idea of how society will be powered." He then proposed three rules for defeating the fossil fuel industry.

Rule 1: We have to stop it all.

"Our movement is big, broad, and diverse enough that we can resist every element of the fossil fuel industry," he claimed, "wherever oil, coal, gas are procured, transported, burned, and stored. We have the ability to fight it everywhere and we should do it in a way that knits our [movement together]."

Rule 2: Define the solutions, and put passion, energy, and intellectual firepower behind them.

Describing one of the many possible approaches to halting fossil fuel development, Brune advised the Bioneers audience that, "the way to . . . stop fracking or pipelines is to show how our alternatives are better." Will that be enough to stop all fossil fuel development by some of the world's wealthiest and most powerful corporations, an observer wondered.

Rule 3. Do it together.

Stressing the importance of breadth, diversity, and environmental justice, Brune said, "The movement is making progress to do it together but needs to make sure that the voices of impacted communities are given prominence. To change everything, we need everyone, said Brune, echoing a theme made popular by author-activist Naomi Klein. "Our alliance, our solidarity with each other, has to be deep, heartfelt . . . sincere and profound."

"The way we're going to affect systemic change is to empower millions of people to work for change," he concluded. He himself has taken a page from that playbook. Under his leadership, the Sierra Club has grown to two million supporters, and he has taken the Club to the forefront of the struggle to move beyond fossil fuels to a clean energy society.

A Just Transition

The climate movement, Soltani asserted, has an obligation to develop principled policies to guide a just transition to a post-fossil-fuel society. "We need to invest in the economic transformation of the impacted communities. It is possible. . . . Now when oil prices are down and oil workers getting laid off is the time to come up with a transition plan." Amazon Watch has already held talks on the economic transition with some major trade unions.

As a broad rights-based movement, the climate movement needs to care about workers' rights just as it cares for human rights, indigenous rights, and women's rights, Soltani indicated. Although the problem of insuring a just transition is a challenging one, she said, "These rights-based movements will solve the problem."

"We need to take care of communities that are dependent on fossil fuel as we take care of communities whose health is impacted by burning the fossil fuel," she added.

* * *

This is the second of two articles on climate strategy discussions held in conjunction with the 2015 Bioneers Conference in San Rafael, CA. The first article, "Looking Ahead to Paris, Leading Climate Activists Gather in California to Share Strategies and

Inspiration," appeared on October 22, 2015.

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