

Environmental war waged in Amazonia

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(Photo: Kamilia Lahrichi for USA TODAY)

AMAZONIA, Ecuador — Indigenous communities in the Amazonian rainforest believe nature has a spirit.

Trees, flowers and plants have as much importance as human lives in Ecuador's rainforest, possibly the most biologically diverse place on the planet.

"To take down a tree is like killing a grandfather," said Humberto Javier Piaguaje Lucitante, an indigenous leader from the Secoya tribe living in the town of [Lago Agrio](#) at the edge of the Amazonia.

As he makes his way through the humid jungle with a silver stick, he explains that nature is "an ancient wealth" for locals.



(Photo: Kamilia Lahrichi for USA TODAY)

Things started to change in the 1960s, when oil operations kicked off.

Today, Ecuador has "the worst environmental record in South America," according to [Mongabay](http://rainforests.mongabay.com/20ecuador.htm) (<http://rainforests.mongabay.com/20ecuador.htm>), a U.S.-based news website covering the environment.

"Oil exploration, logging and road building have had a disastrous impact on Ecuador's primary rainforests, which now cover less than 15% of the country's land mass," [Mongabay](#) reported.

The Latin American country has been the battleground between indigenous and environmentalist groups on one side and governments and corporations drilling for oil into the Amazonia on the other in a legal wrangling of great international sprawl.

For almost two decades, Ecuadorean lawyers and activists have sued Chevron, the second-largest oil company in the USA, for allegedly dumping billions of gallons of crude residue into looms and waterways from which locals drink.

The plaintiffs speak for about 30,000 indigenous people.

Although Chevron never operated in Ecuador, the subsidiary it acquired in 2001, [Texaco Petroleum](#), did for 30 years.

In the latest twist, the [International Court of Justice](#) noted in January 2016 that the Ecuadorean government was responsible for freeing Texaco Petroleum from liability for oil pollution claims when it left Ecuador in 1992. The government certified that the oil company carried out a cleanup of oil production sites.

Chevron applauded the decision.

"It is shameful that Ecuador's government, calculating lawyers and deceitful activist groups continue to mislead the public about who is truly responsible for the environmental conditions in the Amazon," said Morgan Crinklaw, spokesperson for Chevron. "The Ecuadorian judgment has been found by a U.S. federal court to be nothing more than a fraud. Chevron will continue to defend the company, expose the truth and hold the perpetrators of this fraud accountable."

The U.S. federal court [found](#)

(http://www.chevron.com/chevron/pressreleases/article/03042014_uscourtdeclaresecuadorjudgmentagainstchevroncorporationfraudulentunenforceable.new

Ecuadorian judgment against Chevron to be fraudulent in March 2014.

The oil giant pointed to the “[unethical action by the plaintiffs](#)” lawyers (<http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2016/01/23/chevron-hails-intl-court-ruling-in-ecuador-pollution-case/>). If they win the case, they could collect \$9.5 billion in damages for environmental contamination — Ecuador’s Supreme Court ordered it in 2012.

“Had the oil spill occurred in the U.S., it could have proceeded much faster because it would not have involved a trip to the courts of another country,” said [Michael Gerrard](http://www.law.columbia.edu/fac/Michael_Gerrard) (http://www.law.columbia.edu/fac/Michael_Gerrard), a professor who teaches a course on environmental law at [Columbia Law School](#).

The Chevron case has lasted so long "because this is the litigation strategy of Chevron to prolong the case as long as possible," said [David Hunter](#), director of the International Legal Studies Program at [American University](#). "Chevron has an overwhelming amount of resources for litigation and has employed a strategy knowing that delays are always in their favor."

“We live in a paradise, and we do not want to keep seeing it being destroyed,” said Bartholome Baptista Chiwango Parilia, a [Kichwa](#) leader living in Yacuma, about an hour's drive from the city of Tena in Ecuador’s eastern province and a 30-minute trip on a canoe through the rainforest.

There is a shared feeling among indigenous tribes that the high-stakes lawsuit is a David and Goliath fight.

Many among the indigenous tribes throw the responsibility on governments and oil corporations.

“All governments in Latin America are corrupted,” Parilia said as he paddled slowly. “None of them are fair.”

In another part of the Amazonia, about a two-hour drive from [El Coca](#) city, Jose Aveiga, a farmer, showed an oil well that the Ecuadorean government drilled on what he said is his land to extract crude without asking permission.



For the past 15 years, he has been in a legal fight with the state to get rid of the well. It has decimated the surrounding plants and livestock, Aveiga said as he showed large areas of oil spilled on the ground.

“Crude oil has prevented me from producing, and my plants are dying because of oil contamination,” he said.

“I feel sickened. Do you know how many animals I have lost here? I have lost pigs and chickens,” he told USA TODAY.

If the plaintiffs in the Chevron case win the long-lasting class suit, it would empower indigenous tribes as well as civil society organizations across the globe to fight oil corporations — such as BP, which spilled more than 200 million gallons of crude oil into the [Gulf of Mexico](#) in 2010.

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