

# FEATURES

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2010

## Ecuador passes the hat for Amazon protection plan

Quito is seeking donations worth US\$3.6 billion in exchange for not drilling for oil in a national park

BY HUGH BRONSTEIN  
REUTERS, YASUNI, ECUADOR

**E**cador is launching a one-of-a-kind initiative to protect a jungle reserve that contains not only a huge variety of plants and animals but 20 percent of the country's crude oil.

In exchange for not drilling for crude in a 200,000-hectare area of Yasuni National Park, the government is asking rich nations, foundations and individuals to give it US\$3.6 billion.

That's about half of what President Rafael Correa says Ecuador would get from drilling in this part of Yasuni, where the Andes mountains intersect with the Amazon rain forest.

It is a new approach to conservation and officials recognize that they might not find enough support for the initiative. But if it works, Ecuador says 407 million tonnes of carbon dioxide would be kept from entering the atmosphere.

Ecuadorian officials are flying around the world this month — including trips to Japan, Germany and the UN — meeting with prospective contributors to drum up support.

Yasuni as a whole covers an area of 982,000 hectares and is home to a huge array of birds, monkeys and other wildlife including jaguars, giant armadillos and pink-colored dolphins.

The initiative applies to three oil fields called Ishpingo, Tambococha and Tiputini, and collectively known as the ITT section.

Other parts of the park are already being drilled for petroleum, but many residents support the government's push.

"We don't want more oil because of the contamination," said 19-year-old Fani Imene, who is from the local Waorani tribe and lives just outside the ITT section.

Many in her 2,500-member indigenous



Top: The eye of a black caiman is seen in the Tiputini river in Yasuni National Park near Coca, Ecuador. Above: Hoatzins perch on a tree in Yasuni National Park. Left: Ecology students from the US play with a squirrel monkey on their way to Yasuni National Park. PHOTOS: REUTERS



Above: A frog is camouflaged among leaves on the Tiputini river in Yasuni National Park. Left: Ecuadorean troops patrol Napo River, the main entrance Yasuni National Park. PHOTOS: REUTERS

group are afraid to drink from rivers if oil wells have been drilled nearby.

A US\$27 billion environmental damages suit is being heard in a neighboring province, where residents say that US oil giant Chevron is responsible for polluting the jungle with faulty drilling practices.

This and BP's recent Gulf of Mexico oil spill disaster could bolster Ecuador's pitch for the ITT initiative.

### FIRST CONTRIBUTIONS

Ecuador will issue certificates to contributors promising their money back, without interest, should the country ever decide to exploit the oil.

Officials say the first wave of contributions is likely to come from countries such as Germany and Spain. Chile is expected to contribute US\$100,000 this week, making it the



first official donor to the initiative.

Other prospective contributors are expected to pay close attention to the certificates' fine print given that Ecuador has a long history of political instability and defaulted on its international bonds in 1999 and 2008.

"You need a substantial legal framework that can give you the necessary assurances," said Peter Linder, Germany's ambassador in

drilling in environmentally sensitive areas.

Ecuador wants to collect the full US\$3.6 billion by 2024.

### MAGIC GARDEN

"There are more species of trees in Yasuni than in all of North America," said Pablo Jarrin, director of the Yasuni Research Station, which is part of Ecuador's Catholic University and monitors the region's biodiversity.

The park is located on the equator and enjoys consistent sunshine and rain while the region's complex network of rivers creates natural barriers that separate groups of plants and animals, encouraging them to break off into separate species.

The nearby Andean mountain chain makes for steep terrain that also promotes the differentiation of species.

"These three factors interact to give us a region that is probably the richest in biodiversity in the world," Jarrin said. "The park can be seen as a kind of magic garden that contains plants that cannot be found anywhere else."

The government says contributions to the ITT initiative would be used for conservation and reforestation efforts and to fund poverty reduction efforts in the Amazon, which is Ecuador's poorest region despite the area's vast oil wealth.

Money donated will also go toward fuel efficiency initiatives and developing alternative energy sources.

But these programs are not foremost in the mind of Imene, who says she just wants to bring up her six-month-old daughter the way she was, surrounded by the sounds and fresh air of the forest and with her Waorani culture intact.

"For us," she said, "that's what the initiative is about."

## Purchasing power erodes prejudice on Greek island

Birthplace of Sappho and home to the International Women's Festival, Lesbos island is learning to embrace lesbian holidaymakers — and their pink euros

BY CHARLOTTE TURNER  
AFP, LESBOS ISLAND, GREECE

It's September and for a 10th year, the village of Eressos on Greece's Lesbos island has drawn lesbians from across Europe to a unique international festival for women.

In a country strongly influenced by the Greek Orthodox church and where roughly half the population is against same-sex marriage, the lesbian-run event has been quietly growing in this corner of the Aegean Sea.

Over the past decade, attendance at the two-week International Women's Festival has jumped from 30 to hundreds of women — mainly German, British, Dutch and Scandinavian, but also Greek and Italian.

The busy program of events includes women-only walks and sunset cruises, breathing and drumming workshops, Greek dance classes and lesbian film screenings.

"I've been blown away, there's no unease at all," says Lauren Bianchi, a Scottish woman in her early 20s who is at the festival for the first time and

who had read articles about difficult relations between locals and lesbians.

In 2000, when the festival launched, tensions ran high.

A poster advertising one of its events sparked the anger of the village mayor, who threatened to take the organizers to court and ban the event, vowing to drive lesbian tourism from the village.

Ten years on, the municipality is lending the town hall for one of the festival's art exhibitions and allowed the use of the beach to stage the opening event on Sept. 4.

"It was economic game play and the lesbians took the ticket and said, 'yes, if you want cash, you've got it,'" says Marianthi Lianou, a Greek sociologist in her 50s who moved to Eressos six years ago to study its small lesbian community.

Lesbian holidaymakers have been coming to Lesbos since the 1970s, attracted by the island's association with Sappho, the seventh-century Greek poet who wrote about her love for women and was born in Eressos.



Women lay on the beach at Eressos village on Lesbos island. PHOTO: AFP

According to the Sappho travel agency, lesbians now make up 60 percent of visitors to the village, rising to 90 percent in September when the festival takes place.

"My rooms are full for the next two weeks. We'd usually be dead in

September, but now it's booming," says Andreas, who runs the Sappho cafe bar and rents rooms on the village seafront.

As the economic crisis continues to pinch, he says Greek holidaymakers spent less this summer and he is

grateful for the extended season brought by lesbian tourism.

"People in the village have got used to it, especially the young people, but the old people still discuss it among themselves," he says.

These days it is the "more conservative" visitors from Athens, who fill the village in August, who feel uneasy about the lesbian visitors, says Lena Tzigounaki, a Greek woman who moved to Eressos from the capital more than 15 years ago.

Tables from her bar spill out onto the village's main square in the gaze of a large bronze statue of Sappho, one of three erected in the village in recent years.

Like most lesbian-run establishments in Eressos, the rainbow-colored gay pride flag is on show above the bar.

"When people from Athens see women sitting together, I see whole families looking strange and shocked, but locals don't find anything unusual in women holding hands, or even kissing," she says.

"But there is a limit, of course,"

she adds.

Gays in Greece lack many of the basic rights and legal provisions enjoyed in other European countries — they are still fighting for the recognition of same-sex marriage, access to IVF treatment and the right to adopt.

Hate speech is rife, but in 2005 Greece passed a law to protect employees from discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and, in the same year, Athens hosted Greece's first Gay Pride parade.

Surveys reflect a shift in public opinion: In 2008 a poll found 48.3 percent of Greeks were against allowing same-sex marriage, compared to 84 percent in another poll by the European commission in 2006.

Despite this, Greek lesbians remain "totally invisible" under Greek law, says Evangelia Vlami, an activist and founder of the non-governmental organization Lesbians for Equality.

"Without visibility, lesbians lose their sense of who they are, their issues and their problems," she adds.