



An indigenous girl shows a photographer her oil-covered hands after playing on the banks of the Coca River on April 18, 2020. Image by Telmo Ibarburu.

ECUADOR OIL SPILL REPARATIONS

Ecuadorians Continue Fighting for Clean Water, Reparations After April 2020 Oil Spill

August 10, 2021 [Hannah Fontaine](#)

On April 7, 2020, nearly 15,000 gallons of oil spilled into the Napo and Coca Rivers from pipelines operated by state-owned Petroecuador and privately owned OCP Ecuador. By April 14, Petroecuador announced via

Twitter that they were essentially ending their cleaning process and focusing on containment going forward. A year later, the communities impacted by the oil spill and continuing environmental deterioration are fighting to make their voices heard.



The spill is the country's third since 2009, and by all accounts, the most severe. While the government and their researchers maintain the erosion that caused the ruptured pipeline is due to natural earth movement, many outside experts claim the recent installation of a hydroelectric power plant, and the corresponding Coca Codo Sinclair Dam, have expedited the erosion process and are largely to blame for the increased loss of land that exposes and ruptures oil pipelines.

The spill came just two months after the San Rafael waterfall, previously the highest in Ecuador at 150 feet, eroded and disappeared into the river. The loss of San Rafael made areas upstream even more vulnerable to the process of erosion. At its peak, the Coca River was eroding at a rate of 330 feet per day. The pictures below show the extent of the land lost between May 6 and May 26, 2020.



A series of images showing the progression of the erosion of the Coca River from May 6 to May 26, 2020. Photos by Alfredo Carrasco Valdivieso.



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With erosion spreading up tributaries of the Coca and Napo Rivers, several highways, bridges, and indigenous communities continue to be threatened. The Ecuadorian government showed little concern for the rapidly receding riverbank until it began to threaten the Coca Codo hydroelectric dam, jeopardizing the country's power supply. Once the dam was in danger, government researchers began recommending expensive mitigation and prevention techniques, most of which have still not been implemented. The government stopped pipeline construction briefly per those recommendations, only to resume it quietly once they realized a cheap solution couldn't be reached.

The initial cleanup after the oil spill was subpar at best. Just a week after the pipeline ruptured, Petroecuador called off the majority of their cleaning crews and announced that their experts had determined the spill was caused by "natural earth movements." For the most part, government sponsored researchers and experts still maintain the sediment retention from the Coca Codo dam did not contribute to the increased rate of erosion. Outside experts disagree.

Carolina Bernal, a hydrosystemologist who studied the collapse of San Rafael and the subsequent pipeline rupture, said, "I had doubts that the Coca Codo Sinclair plant influenced what happened with the San Rafael waterfall, but now, after seeing the aggressiveness of the phenomenon, it can be linked with the sediment management of the project. Hydroelectric plants must be planned very carefully."



A local walks through the affected area. Photo courtesy of Pandayacu community.

Meanwhile, communities living near the site of the April 2020 spill are struggling against a permanently changed ecosystem and a government that refuses to take responsibility. For the nearly 27,000 individuals that live near the river, almost all of them rely on it daily for food, water, and even employment. Abel Jipa, an indigenous fisherman who lives with his family near the river, said, “The river is part of our way of life. Fishing on the Coca River is an important aspect of our culture; it is also our livelihood and provides us with food.”

The Kichwa and other indigenous communities have lived near and interacted with these waterways for thousands of years. For many of the folks living there, they had no choice but to return to bathing, drinking, and eating from the river shortly after the oil spill. Because of this, members of local communities are facing health concerns, including chemical burns from direct contact with the oil during the initial days of the spill.

In terms of clean up and containment, the short initial burst of effort came largely from government-owned Petroecuador, while privately-owned OCP provided food and bottled water to impacted communities until mid July. Citizens reported that those provisions weren’t nearly enough to sustain them, especially since they were unable to sell fish from the rivers due to

pollution. That's why many community members returned to the river to fish, drink, and bathe before it was safe to do so. In April of this year, samples taken from the river showed the continued presence of hydrocarbons and heavy metals like lead, nickel and vanadium.



Exposed sections of the Trans-Ecuadorian Oil Pipeline System on April 7, 2020. Photo via private archive.

In September 2020, almost six months after the oil spill, Alliance for Human Rights Ecuador released a 26 page report based on samples they took from six spots along the affected rivers. They learned that pollutants were present in all stages of the water cycle, even rainwater. This indicates that some of the oil spilled into the river evaporated and is re-entering the land through rainwater, furthering the cycle of contamination. Those living in the area had noted the change in appearance to the rainwater, and even now, a year later, are still reporting the same visible signs of pollution.

Indigenous communities living along the river are disheartened by the lack of response from the government, but not discouraged. Since the spill,

activists have been demonstrating outside of the local Judicial Court and even brought a lawsuit to the government and the two oil companies responsible for the spill. It has still not been settled. In response to the delayed justice, Abel Jipa said, “For us, there is no justice. For those with money, there’s justice, but for the poor, justice doesn’t exist.”

Marches began last July and included a long journey to reach the courts. Miguel Grefa, a member of the Huataraco community, said, “The leaders of the communities had to travel for several hours in a canoe, leaving our families to demand attention and justice from the government and the companies Petroecuador and OCP. But if they don’t do anything, we will return with our whole communities.”



Rafael Yumbo, an indigenous environmental activist, gives comments to reporters at National Judicial Council in Quito, Ecuador’s capital, on March 5, 2021. Photo by Vincent Ricci.

Activists have made good on that promise. On the one year anniversary of the spill, several hundred Kichwa community members and environmental activists marched to the Judicial Council and local prosecutors office in an effort to encourage local authorities to take more decisive action. Despite relative silence from the local and national government, folks living along

the river have been vocal about their disapproval of the handling of the spill since the beginning.

The Alliance for Human Rights Ecuador interviewed communities living along the river as part of their report. They reported interacting with crews in charge of cleaning up the spill, telling engineers to eat the local fauna and asking “what’s it like to drink water from the Napo River?”

Later, when the companies wanted to end the clean-up and their responsibility for the impending environmental effects, community leaders were told not to sign any settlements. An individual interviewed by the Alliance for Human Rights reported, “They wanted to make [the leaders] sign a settlement saying that the remediation is finished and that the Coca River is clean, but since that is not true I told the leaders not to sign.”



An image of the Coca River taken in early April 2020. Image courtesy of the Panduyacu community.

The lasting environmental devastation is why many activists and locals are requesting financial reparations. One community member told the Alliance for Human Rights, “They launched a chemical to disperse the oil stain but here it remains, more dead fish appeared with that chemical, the people who live here are suffering a lot.”

Another community member added, "In reality it is not doing a real remedy, the contamination here is for life. We have found stretches with oil they are leaving, they are not doing it the way they should."



Their persistence is a large part of the reason the spill has remained in the limelight, even over a year later. COVID compounded the effects of the spill since rural communities have been unable to get supplies from cities due to government shutdowns. Holger Gallo, president of the Kichwa indigenous community of Panduyacu, said, "We need the authorities to see and accept this environmental disgrace. The Coca River is devastated... Oil can be found all over the banks. We want to know who is responsible, and we want environmental remediation actions and restoration of the affected areas. Nature has rights."



Hannah Fontaine | Harvard University Alumni

Hannah is a recent graduate of Harvard University who wrote her thesis about the connection between the state-sponsored violence of the Guatemalan Revolution and the lack of prosecutorial and judicial success for women who are survivors of sexual violence in the country today. In the fall, she will be attending University of Wisconsin-Madison for law school where she plans to focus on

immigration and criminal law. Hannah has been working with Latina Republic since October 2020 and her favorite part about writing articles is using quotes from interview subjects to emphasize their voices and experiences, telling their stories as they want them to be told and highlighting the successes of organizations and movements working to make their communities better.

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