

# Researchers hail innovative plan to save rainforest, reduce greenhouse gas emissions

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An innovative proposal by the Ecuadorian government to protect an untouched, oil rich region of Amazon rainforest is a precedent-setting and potentially economically viable approach, says a team of environmental researchers from the University of Maryland, the World Resources Institute and Save America's Forests.

The Ecuadorian proposal, known as the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, would protect a large area of pristine [Amazon rainforest](#), by leaving untouched nearly one billion barrels of oil that lies beneath the Yasuní National Park in Ecuador. Under the initiative, the government would sell certificates linked to the value of the unreleased carbon to provide alternative revenue to that which would come from exploiting the oil reserves.

"This is a really novel approach that could fund a lot of rainforest protection," said Clinton Jenkins, a research scientist in the University of Maryland's department of biology. "It's also an innovative way of dealing with greenhouse gas emissions."

"There has been a lot of talk about engineering ways to reduce or offset greenhouse gas emissions by removing carbon from air and burying, or sequestering, it in the ground. This approach sequesters carbon by preventing oil from ever getting out of the ground," said Jenkins.

Writing about the Yasuní-ITT Initiative in a new article in the scientific journal *Biotropica*, Jenkins, Matt Finer of Save America's Forests and

Remi Moncel with the Climate and Energy Program of the World Resources Institute, say that a number of climate researchers, including NASA scientist James Hansen, have suggested that forgoing extraction of oil and gas reserves in remote or sensitive places could be an important piece to a larger global strategy designed to limit carbon emissions and that this Initiative "is the first real offer to do just that."

"Oil and gas concessions now cover vast swaths of the mega-diverse western Amazon," said Finer, lead author of *Biotropica* review article. "Ecuador's revolutionary initiative is the first major government-led effort to buck this disturbing trend."

According to estimates of Ecuadorian officials cited in the article, preventing exploitation of the ITT oil fields, will keep 410 million metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub> out of the atmosphere.

The authors note that use of a conservation strategy like that proposed by Ecuador would be particularly beneficial in areas that also offer great ecological value. The Yasuní National Park has such multiple benefits, they say, because it is one of the most biodiverse parts of the Amazon and within the territory of some of the world's last un-contacted indigenous peoples, the Tagaeri and Taromenane.

"Yasuní is an exceptional place in the world, biologically incredible, home to un-contacted peoples, and yet - perhaps tragically - full of oil," said Jenkins. "Society faces a test of what we value more, drilling for more oil, or preserving a cherished national park and the people who call it home."

## **Skeptics and Advocates**

The Ecuadorian proposal has been lauded widely for its three-pronged effort to protect biodiversity, respect indigenous peoples' territory, and

combat climate change. However, Jenkins, Finer and Moncel note that the Yasuní-ITT Initiative also has ardent skeptics.

For example, how to pay for the effort is in question. Ecuador, a country highly dependent on oil export revenues, seeks \$350 million for each of the next 10 years in alternative revenue. Ecuador's intent is to sell certificates linked to the value of the unreleased carbon. This raises a number of technical questions, however, such as the possibility that the initiative would not result in a net global CO<sub>2</sub> reduction if the certificates were traded in carbon markets.

"The best way to minimize the risk associated with the carbon bonds is to encourage supporters to make direct donations," said Remi Moncel of the World Resources Institute. "While less problematic from the point of view of environmental integrity, it is harder to raise money that way."

Germany appears to be a leading supporter of the Yasuní-ITT Initiative. Recent news reports indicate the German government may donate \$50 to \$70 million annually to the initiative if other countries also agree to provide support for the initiative.

Additional questions tackled in the study include why a national park is on the chopping block in the first place and what mechanisms are needed to prevent future Ecuadorian administrations from drilling the oil fields.

The authors conclude that the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, with its focus on generating alternative revenue, is a potentially precedent-setting advance in avoiding damaging [oil](#) and gas development in sensitive areas and an innovative way to address climate change.

"The climate conference of Copenhagen is only weeks away. What Ecuador has proposed is a good example of how each country can come

up with home-grown, nationally relevant ideas to promote sustainable development," said Moncel.

More information: Authors Finer and Jenkins recently published a companion study entitled, "Ecuador's Yasuní Biosphere Reserve: a brief modern history and conservation challenges." It is a concise history of the Yasuní region designed to help people better understand this complicated part of the world. That article appeared in *Environmental Research Letters* [www.iop.org/EJ/abstract/1748-9326/4/3/034005](http://www.iop.org/EJ/abstract/1748-9326/4/3/034005)

Source: University of Maryland ([news](#) : [web](#))

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