

Land locked (w/ Video)

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A world-first project led by ANU researchers is looking at whether pristine rainforest can be preserved from oil extraction, writes SARINA TALIP.

The Yasuní-ITT area of Ecuador is as perfect a piece of the Amazonian rainforest as you could find. Densely green and humid, it teems with life: from parrots to monkeys, from anteaters to orchids. The area is so rich with life that new species are constantly being discovered.

But buried deep below the serene beauty of the rainforest is black gold: around 850 million barrels of [oil](#) – approximately 20 per cent of Ecuador's reserves. These natural wonders above the oil present Ecuador with an impossible dilemma – preserve a pristine environment, or get rich on what lies beneath.

Ecuador relies heavily on revenue from oil and gas exports for basic government functions like health, education, roads and infrastructure. But in a world first, the Ecuadorian Government is proposing to leave the oil in the ground, in exchange for help with its economic development from richer countries.

Dr John Minns is a political economist and Director of the Australian National Centre for Latin American Studies (ANCLAS) at ANU. Minns and his colleagues at ANCLAS have been awarded a \$292,000 grant from AusAID to study the feasibility of the groundbreaking idea.

Over three years, the research team will develop a cost-benefit analysis

of leaving the oil in the ground versus taking it out, including an assessment of the potential damage to biodiversity and culture in the Amazon. The project will link ANU with Ecuadorian specialists at Ecuador's Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales (National Institute of Higher Studies).

Minns says the global nature of the project is what makes it so special.

“It poses something of a new idea in international relations, which is that the responsibility to protect areas of particular environmental sensitivity should not be borne just by those countries within which those areas fall,” says Minns.

“Not every country has the same capacity to deal with environmental problems and cope with environmental protection – and so many important areas for biodiversity and carbon emissions abatement are in poorer countries.”

Because of its position on the equator, the Yasuní-ITT rainforest enjoyed much milder climatic conditions in the last Ice Age, and species that may not have survived elsewhere thrived. Just a single hectare of Yasuní-ITT boasts the same number of tree species as the whole of North America.

But with such biodiversity comes vulnerability to industry, like the extraction of oil.

“Even if the oil is handled responsibly, there are other problems,” says Minns. “[Oil extraction](#) requires pipelines and roads to be built through the area. Roads bring people and towns and settlements, which starts to disturb the balance of the area.”

Minns says that extraction of oil would almost certainly disrupt the

indigenous groups that live in the area, in particular two groups who have decided to remain out of contact completely.

“These people are largely hunter gatherer societies and live a lifestyle which hasn’t changed much since European settlement, and they want to keep it that way. The Ecuadorian Government recognises these peoples’ right to be there, but they’re right in the area where the oil would be extracted.”

Minns says the scheme is popular with the broader Ecuadorian population and is a refreshing demonstration of a commitment to real action amid the rhetoric.

“Several recent global conferences on conservation and sustainability have produced virtually nothing in terms of concrete action or proposals. This stands out as a bold proposal to make a real difference and make it immediately.”

Provided by Australian National University

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