Indigenous Politics and “Local Heritage” in the 1990s: Shifting Concepts of Land Use, Land Tenure, and Self

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ABSTRACT
The development of Indigenous political organizations in the Ecuadorian Amazon is illustrative of the state of affairs throughout the region. The moral economy that had governed inter-ethnic relations until recently has given way to a political economy in which Indigenous groups have come to understand the importance of defining the issues surrounding their relations with government agencies. This has led to Indigenous initiatives in land management and territorial demarcation, but also to an increasing focus on political activity rather than practical solutions that has made it difficult for these projects to progress beyond planning and training. Nevertheless, it is too early to predict the outcome of these developments, as they are ongoing.

INTRODUCTION
Over the past 20 years tenure regimes, land use and Indigenous political strategies in the Amazon region have been changing radically. This paper approaches the problem of what we mean by “local heritage,” a term that suggests permanence, with a specific question: Why do we now hear strong Indigenous demands for land and natural resources, yet witness “development” projects, particularly in forest management, the results of which suggest their inability to manage or sustain either?

Lowland South America’s rain forest communities host a wealth of Indigenous resource management projects, particularly forest management. Yet few if any are thriving and several heavily supported ones face economic crises and questionable social and biological sustainability. Others have simply collapsed. Ironically, in many project areas residents hold title to their land and understand that tenure security often requires “land use” programs; so the risks and incentives for sound management are in place.

Technical problems, in part, reflect inexperience and limited administrative skills. However, forest management and similar conservation projects also illustrate skillful use of national and international environmental concerns to establish political alliances and solicit economic support. Either observation suggests that some social science “remedy” may lie in creating or tuning a management machine, or exposing a hint of opportunism. Rather than rush to resolve a “problem” which we identify, this paper illustrates that much of the analysis still lies in defining a situation from the standpoint of local people.
TIME AND TENURE REGIMES

Several recent studies (e.g. Hardin 1968, 1977, Bromley 1992, McCay and Acheson 1987, Peters 1994, IASCP 1995) open debate on some common assumptions regarding land tenure, common property use, sustainable resource management, and Indigenous land use patterns. Some challenge the hypothesis that secure tenure leads to improved land management and careful stewardship. Others reject sweeping generalizations that common property invites mismanagement, environmental abuse and resource destruction.

Such broad tenure/use assumptions suggest that local concerns with tenure claims and patterns of land/resource use are consistent or permanent. However, any current picture is but a single frame arrested during a period of rapid change in Indians’ relations with broader national societies. For many native Amazonians the panorama extends beyond single family plots to include broad territorial and resource claims.

Indigenous peoples, particularly those involved in their recently-established organizations, now understand their situation through new forms of socio-political analysis. As these new “communities” alter their debate with the dominant non-Indigenous society and reconfigure their ethnic boundaries, land and resource rights have become the principal themes for that discourse.

However, and critical to the initial question, the analysis is not yet “operationalized” in terms of land and resource use. Tenure regimes remain as political concerns, characterized more by regular pushing, pulling, positioning and posturing than by clearly defined management plans and production schedules. Most land use projects serve largely as expressions of local control over land and resources rather than as exercises in its management.

Meanwhile, outside observers evaluate land use programs through objective but nonetheless static criteria and standards for social and biological sustainability. Consequently, many resource management initiatives, poorly understood by social scientists and barely underway, have been proclaimed successes while their shortcomings are either glossed over or denied. But, as several widely-known projects now either totter precariously or have fallen, their situations invite, perhaps require, analysis and evaluation from current, dynamic Indigenous points of view.

SHIFTING “ECONOMIES”

As with land and resource rights, changing concepts of “community” have produced new understandings of inter-ethnic relations and the Indigenous situation in general. Previously, inter-ethnic
relations in the Upper Amazon were understood largely in terms of a “moral economy” — a frame for ordering inter-ethnic relations, related norms and patterns of reciprocity, including rights to land, resources and the fruits of production (Scott 1976). Like any other, these relations developed over time and gradually assumed a set of norms which, though unbalanced and exploitative, served to guide interaction. That “moral economy” has collapsed in all but a few settings where missionaries or others provide essential goods and services.

Many Indigenous people now interpret their status in terms of a “political economy” — rules and practices resulting from systems of production and distribution of wealth. This provides a set of tools for understanding social and economic positions, and illustrates a status which Indigenous people now regard as unacceptable. It also identifies property which Indigenous peoples now claim or reclaim — land, resources, and culture. But “working relationships” to guide the use and distribution of resources remain to be defined through negotiation and practice. Meanwhile, emerging patterns draw from experiments with new, unfamiliar actors as well as reactions to the previous social order associated with a moral economy.

ECUADOR AS AN ILLUSTRATION

The Amazon Basin is a patchwork of cultures and communities. Nevertheless, in terms of local Indigenous organizations, recent political actions and community-based development issues, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela share much in common. Ecuador, in particular, stands out as an example of organization, political actions, land use projects and international visibility. A review of the changing concepts of land tenure, resource rights and inter-ethnic relations there introduces issues common to the region.

ECUADORIAN INCIDENTS

Six key events in the recent history of Indigenous interactions with the national political process inform the present policies of Amazonian Indigenous groups in Ecuador. These events illustrate an ongoing effort to seize the initiative in land tenure discourse that in turn has moved Indigenous organizations onto the national political stage.

In the 1970s a North American agronomist designed an integrated land use system for the fragile tropical forest ecosystem of the Ecuadorian Amazon. He argued that his model would meet a family’s subsistence and market economic needs in an ecologi-
cally sustainable manner. When the scheme was presented to national agrarian reform officials, land use specialists and representatives of Indigenous organizations, it drew nods of approval from most. The Indigenous representatives rejected it summarily.

For them the project’s land-use technology was irrelevant; they opposed the size of the model. It was designed for a 50 hectare plot, the standard holding awarded to colonists by the government’s National Institute of Agrarian Reform and Colonization (IERAC) without ever taking into consideration Indigenous land claims.

Four years later the director of Ecuador’s National Forestry Directorate enthusiastically invited local Indigenous participation in conservation programs enabled by recent forestry legislation. The Indians rejected the offer to accept members of the Indian organizations as guards within protected forest lands. They argued that their organizations should have taken part in the formal meetings which determined the new rules, rather than assisting in their subsequent implementation.

In 1988, the new government of President Rodrigo Borja selected three close advisors who set aside three hours every Tuesday to meet with representatives of the Indian organizations. Indian attendance, however, was irregular and unenthusiastic.

Eight months later, three of the Indigenous leaders accompanied one member of the advisory committee and the Assistant Director of IERAC to a small jungle Indian village, Sarayacu, to negotiate a dispute between that community and encroaching oil exploration teams. Supported by over 150 community members, the Indians sequestered the government officials for several days until they finalized a broad agreement — referred to as the Sarayacu Accords — which focused on land rights, resource control, bilingual education and development programs. Ironically, these were the same issues which made up the agenda for the sparsely attended government meetings.

By the early 1990s Indian organizations were introducing claims for large Indian territories. In June 1990, government failure to follow through with these agreements helped spark a national non-violent movement, the Levantamiento General, and in late 1992 produced a long Indigenous march from the Upper Ama-
zonian town of Puyo to the national capital, Quito. The protests produced a presidential declaration recognizing their claims and promising titles. Similar political actions and subsequent presidential decrees occurred in Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil and Bolivia during roughly the same period.

These organizations, beginning largely in the mid-to late-1980s, then began to solicit and receive funds for community-based land use and resource management programs.

These incidents and activities highlight the ongoing evolution of a broad new social phenomenon — Indian organizations — which pervades much of South America’s political arena and challenges the previously clear lines of difference, subordination, public deference, and related norms and patterns of reciprocity. That transition took place in two distinct phases, each of which is marked by a different understanding of the relationships between Indigenous groups and other entities. Here we briefly review that transition.

PERIOD ONE

Development of a “Moral Economy:” Patron-Client Relations in the Ecuadorian Amazon

Community Land and Resources

For many Indigenous groups the Ecuadorian Amazon’s physical space was divided into a patchwork of kin-based settlements with borders defined by human use and reinforced by spirit beings. Until the late 19th Century, this space was violated only by sporadic travellers, government officials and missionaries. The few permanent mission sites and government settlements were small and the residents rarely ventured onto Indigenous lands. Inter-ethnic relations had little impact on the Indigenous social and economic life or the land and resources needed to sustain it (Macdonald 1979, Muratorio 1991, Whitten 1981).

As demand for the Amazon’s rubber increased in the late 19th century, merchants travelled up and down every tributary of the Upper Amazon in search of rubber trees and Indians to tap and drain them. As these merchants settled into the Upper Amazon, they altered inter-ethnic relations through regular and intimate contact with the Indigenous population. The merchants became the principal suppliers of manufactured goods and, in turn, the recipients of most raw materials. They also became vital intermediaries between Indians and local and national authorities. Without any pretense of
social or economic equity by either group, inter-ethnic relations were guided by clear but informal norms, mutual obligations and rules of reciprocity.

Impact on Economics and Settlement Patterns

In the Upper Amazon, labor performed for these merchants/patrons did not radically alter the Indigenous life style. Neither the nature of the work nor the hours spent performing it demanded drastic reallocation of time and energy. Nor did this labor force a restructuring of the residence pattern; much of it was performed within the settlement or during periods of temporary residence elsewhere. Existing concepts of territoriality were easily extended to establish areas for gathering gold and rubber. In addition, labor extended to the patron did not radically alter existing subsistence schedules or other aspects of resource and time allocation. In brief, the norms and rules of reciprocity which generated a moral economy required only minor shifts in time allocation to meet the demands imposed by the patron. A new inter-ethnic order was established but the social and economic patterns which had generated much of the existing Indigenous social order remained largely unmodified and subsistence patterns remained intact.

PERIOD TWO

Interpretation Through Political Economy

Beginning in the 1960s, colonization changed the lives and expectations of Indigenous peoples in Ecuador and other parts of the Upper Amazon. Colonists effectively ruptured the moral economy and signaled a qualitative shift in inter-ethnic relations. Previously, outside interests depended on the region’s inhabitants, either as souls for religious conversion or as sources of cheap labor. Colonists, however, generally regarded Indian communities as obstacles to their expansion. They were more concerned with displacing occupants than negotiating relationships with them. For Indians, personalized inter-ethnic bonds diminished or disappeared as relationships shifted to impersonal private enterprises, state bureaucracies and communities of colonists, all of whom threatened the previously secure rights to land and resources. They began to redraw their maps of ethnic boundaries and reinterpret the nature of inter-ethnic relations. They also began to organize, challenging the new powers and opening political space for themselves.

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Ethnic Federations

Initiated in the Ecuadorian Amazon, Indigenous organizations, or “ethnic federations” (Smith 1983), have now established themselves throughout the Amazon basin. They have organized into local and regional federations, national pan-ethnic units, and, most recently, international organizations (Cultural Survival Quarterly 1984; Smith 1984). Most federations maintain three primary concerns: 1) defense of land and resources; 2) expansion and strengthening of their organizations; and 3) maintenance of their unique ethnic identity. Today, ethnic federations are recognized social and political forces, and have thus created niches for themselves within plural national societies. Recently, there have been efforts to incorporate them as the logical institutional link for work with development and environmental agencies (Wali and Davis 1992; Inter-American Development Bank 1993; Macdonald 1994). By the early 1980s, to an extent greater than in any other Latin American country, Ecuador’s Indian response to colonization and other external threats to their land and resources was the mobilization of a new national political sector.

Ecuadorian Ethnic Federations and Government Programs

1980-1984 The Roldos/Hurtado Administration: From Opposing Colonization to Promoting Land Rights

As a challenge to the national agrarian reform agency (IERAC) and a demonstration of their perceived land rights, several Ecuadorian federations formed a regional Amazonian group, the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of the Ecuadorian Amazon, CONFENIAE. Their 1982 congress declared that IERAC should recognize and title land along traditional boundaries, acknowledging and formalizing an existing order rather than dividing territory as if it were state property.

In 1981 the Ecuadorian congress passed a set of forestry laws — the *Ley Forestal y de Conservación de Areas Naturales y Vida Silvestre*. These laws established forest management as a national priority and encouraged the development of forestry programs by exempting from agrarian reform all protective forests, lands in permanent use for forest resources, and those with established plans for reforestation. Formally at least, this put forestry and conservation programs on a par with more environmentally destructive programs such as cattle raising, and thus encouraged programs like community forestry.

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But, as illustrated by the incident mentioned earlier, Indian organizations regarded the legislation as yet another government effort to exercise control over their land and resources without consulting with them. Rather than focusing on ways to benefit from the laws, the organizations were more concerned with how the laws were drafted and promulgated.

1984-1988 León Febres Cordero: Political Opposition and Indian Territories

Beginning in 1984, government leaders under a strongly neo-Liberal government led by President León Febres Cordero advocated unrestrained economic activities for the private sector, encouraged colonization in the Amazonian region and publicly opposed popular organizations. IERAC halted all communal land titling, yet government-awarded concessions for African Palm plantations increased and expanded rapidly, often on Indian lands. By 1985 these tactics provoked outcries from the regional and national Indian organizations (Amanecer Indio 1985) and in broadly circulated public documents and publications (CONFENIAE 1985; Carrion and Cuvi 1985).

The León government produced an atmosphere in which popular actions were treated as a threat to the state, and were met by the unprecedented presence of heavily equipped and highly visible police and sharp government statements. Most NGOs and other groups remained quiet out of fear that some form of government violence would be visited on the relatively peaceful country. By contrast, CONFENIAE’s position became even more militant. Moving deftly within a delicate political atmosphere, the Indian organizations continued to hold public meetings and maintained a relatively high public profile.

At their 1986 Congress CONFENIAE again focused on land titling, tenure regimes, and resource management. But, rather then continue to ask IERAC to title Indigenous lands, CONFENIAE resolved to oppose any further colonization, to seek an end to titling of colonist and agro-industry lands and, more importantly, to staunchly defend the area’s increasing movement towards “self-demarcation” (auto-lideración). In addition, and as a potential stimulus to future community-based forestry, the Indian organizations stated that they would take charge of any development programs within the communities.
From Political Organization to Resource Management:
The “Era of the Projects”

Until the late 1980s, the federations had focused on institution building at the local, regional and national levels. But many of the communities began to challenge the organizations, some for personal or petty political reasons and others because they questioned the exclusive focus on organization.

At the same time a growing national and international environmental movement took an intense interest in the rainforests of the Amazon. National and international cries to save rain forests were accompanied by a significant increase in international funds available for local projects. Indian groups received funds from a variety of sources and frequently referred to the shift as the “era of the projects.” In late 1987 one of CONFENIAE’s members, the Federation of Indigenous Organizations of Napo (FOIN) began the country’s first Indigenous effort to link land tenure to claims of sustainable land use.

The project’s immediate spur appeared following a March 1987 earthquake which swept away a sector of the only road which connected the northern Amazon with the capital, Quito. The government quickly cut a new road through relatively unmodified tropical forest dotted with Indian communities suddenly exposed to colonist invasion.

Scattered Indian households quickly cleared forest frontage to demonstrate their presence along the road. This small demonstration effort soon escalated to extensive logging as individual purchasers and wood product companies bought up any logs and sawn lumber visible from the roadside, and then maneuvered to obtain timbering concessions for additional cutting in the communities. The offers led to internal disputes in several communities as Indians maneuvered against each other to get the cash from lumber sales, in spite of ridiculously low prices.

FOIN’s directors recognized that the prices were unacceptable and that extensive logging threatened these communities’ future resource base. They argued that a resource management project would generate income and provide security for the future.
Expanding “Auto-Lideración”:
From Individual Communities to Ethnic Territories

Beginning in 1988, several Quichua federations shifted their attention to demarcating Huaorani Indian territory and began to physically cut lines in the forest for a 600 km perimeter which used Huaorani territory as one edge of a series of adjacent ethnic territories. The initiative shifted the Indigenous position from one of securing community borders to defining a larger unit over which they claimed a set of rights.

The immediate, expressed concern was simply recognition that rights existed and could serve as a basis for future discussions over resources such as oil, minerals, and forests. This was a quantum leap in their perception of the state. They no longer focused on demonstrating possession through use; such arguments assumed that the State had the right to place conditions on Indian lands. Resource management projects, therefore, no longer carried the same weight.

Kuna Technical Assistance

In early 1989, training in general resource management planning and conservation of fragile lands began with support from Panama’s Kuna Indians, who were among the best trained in the hemisphere. FOIN invited two Indigenous staff members from the Kuna’s Project PEMASKY to train the staff of their project (Project PUMAREN) in the general procedures of conservation and resource planning.

The team continued its work, but it was unproductive in several ways — project funds were frequently diverted or withheld, work schedules were irregular, and travel funds for work within the communities were not disbursed. Consequently, the communities, aware that some sort of federation-run project was underway, were either uncertain of its work or questioned its utility. Moreover, staff enthusiasm diminished and several members began to treat their incipient professionalism simply as a means to regular paid employment. In brief, the organization’s lack of support did little to enhance the project’s status among the technicians, the trainers or the communities.

Forest Management — Lessons from the Palcazu

After initial training the team focused on production systems. They sought and obtained training in natural forest management from members of the Yanesha Forestry Cooperative of Peru’s Palcazu Valley. In January 1991, technicians travelled from Peru to identify forest lands where natural forest management would be most appropriate. Surveys indicated that no individual community
had sufficient forest to support a single-community-based forestry enterprise. Accordingly, several communities formed a coordinating committee to parallel the FOIN team, but they soon sought to undertake the work independently. They did not see much value in the technical team and also began to question the idea of “common forest property.” So community members redesigned the so-called “community forest” by mapping the land into single family-owned plots.

Meanwhile, the federation’s enthusiasm shifted further toward the politics of positioning. At present a variety of activities are still underway in the area, but progress is slow. Local and international NGOs seek alternative international markets for PUMAREN products and the project staff, as well as the communities, have received support and advice from several experienced and enthusiastic technicians who have worked with the Yanesha Forestry Cooperative. Nevertheless, there has been a progressive loss of interest on the part of the federation and an increasing sense of cynicism on the part of the communities.

CONCLUSION

Drawing heavily from observations on a specific country and project, this brief paper nonetheless suggests a regional pattern. After a burst of enthusiasm, as the community-forestry project moved to the details of project planning and implementation, the presence and support of the federation’s leadership diminished and focused on national and regional political activities.

However, now is not the time to pass judgement on the organizations or to suggest that community-based forest management is impossible under any circumstances. Difficulties arose when the federations tried to balance their political priorities with the detailed technical and administrative work needed to design and implement resource management projects at a community level.

It would be heartening to suggest that the two needs can be realized at the same time, but, at the moment, this is simply not the case in the Upper Napo. Moreover, reports of project work in other areas indicate that few have advanced beyond planning and training. Similar situations mark most Indigenous resource management projects, including those using sophisticated electronic and similar technology, as illustrated in the Winter 1995 Cultural Survival Quarterly (*Geomatics: Who Needs It?*). Most projects are still demarcating or planning future work. Few have become effective production units or successful enterprises.

Planning and training are essential phases of all projects. But, to suggest that such a broad range of local projects now find themselves at the same stage of project development simply by coincidence
pushes the limits of credibility. The similarities suggest and support the initial observation: though Indigenous organizations now evaluate their situation skillfully through a broad political economic frame, the organizations and communities have not yet moved to operationalize that understanding. That is not to suggest that they cannot or will not, but simply that they have not at present. Despite the desires of international observers, support groups, and local communities for rapid advances to resource management, they do not appear imminent.

Though potentially discouraging, the present situation is not cause for despair. The changes in status and role which have come about in many Indigenous communities since the appearance of local organizations illustrates some of the most successful and non-violent social change in the hemisphere, if not in the world. These efforts should be recognized and applauded for what they are and where they have taken Indigenous peoples, not elevated falsely or denigrated prematurely for what they are not.

REFERENCES


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**Theodore Macdonald**

Director of the Cultural Survival Center, the research wing of Cultural Survival, and Associate Director for the newly-established Program on Nonviolent Sanctions and Cultural Survival at Harvard University’s Center for International Affairs. After serving in the Peace Corps in Ecuador from 1967-1970, he studied Anthropology at the University of Illinois-Urbana, where he received his doctorate in 1979. Since 1974 he has conducted field work among the Quichua Indians of the Ecuadorian Amazon. As Project Director and also as South America Resource Management Program Director for Cultural Survival, he has worked with native peoples throughout Latin America since 1979.
Theodore Macdonald Working Group

The tensions in Ecuador today are generated from issues regarding the relations of Indigenous peoples with the government, international aid agencies (NRDC, USAID, etc), international resource corporations (Conoco, timber interests, and so on), advocacy groups charged with protecting or arguing for their interests, and with other Indigenous groups.

The political structure is of primary importance in this discussion. The government is unwilling to treat the Indigenous organizations as equals, since this would justify the Indigenous peoples’ claims to land tenure. Also, there is a question as to who is empowered to govern funds received in the form of endowments for resource extractions. The gift economy is also problematic because money and material benefits are provided to appease the groups rather than providing these benefits with a defined, measurable challenge to put them to a certain use.

One of the challenges that groups like Cultural Survival must face is developing negotiation skills within the Indigenous communities. There is little doubt that conflict and disagreement will continue. As a result, the only way to avoid bloodshed is to empower the Indigenous peoples with the negotiating skills necessary to achieve their goals, instead of using international aid groups as “translators” of the needs of the community. The image of the large, powerful, wealthy foreign entities arriving to save the small and helpless native Quichua Indian is simply no longer an adequate or justified perspective.

There is a commonly held belief that the Indians will destroy their lands if they are not provided tenure, but the reality presents a much different picture. They do not want to build or cultivate their lands simply to gain the “legal” right to it. Management plans may be useful, but they must come from the Indigenous parties. The Indians have excellent ideas, but due to overenthusiastic foreign involvement, a lack of a negotiating framework or background, and a political system that is slow to accept this potentially threatening entity, they have been unable to articulate these ideas.

The discussion commenced with a question regarding the Conoco - Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) negotiations in Ecuador, in which the NRDC represented Indigenous groups who would be affected by Conoco oil exploration. Negotiations became very complex and costly, and Conoco eventually withdrew. This case

For more information about the Conoco-NRDC negotiations, interested readers are referred to articles in the September 27, 1993 and May 2, 1994 *New Yorker*, as well as letters in the August 25, 1993 *New Yorker*. 
was presented as a model of the inability of those concerned to listen to or allow the Indians to speak for themselves and, instead, impose what is believed to be best for them by outside groups.

The following excerpts are highlights from the discussion:

**Emily Harwell, Moderator, Yale F&ES:** I’m interested in learning more about what is generating the current tensions between local organizations and community members who don’t see these organizations as benefiting them.

**Ted Macdonald:** It’s a Pandora’s box. There is no community with a singular focus, in which everyone is always in total agreement. This would really be the subject of a whole other seminar.

There was an earthquake in March of 1987 that destroyed the road between the oil fields and the capital. So, very quickly the Ecuadorian government cut a road through what was virgin forest, an area containing about 40 Indigenous communities. They did this with the support of USAID under some very strange circumstances — the government had been claiming that everyone in the region was literally starving to death because supplies had been cut off. Of course, the road had only been built a few years before, and supplies were continuing to be transported by river, as they had been for several thousand years. USAID’s modest contribution enabled us to work with the communities. Because the road had been opened, the Indian organization realized, there would be an influx of colonists into the area. What this organization was very good at was alerting the local people to this, which was something they had not realized. Essentially what people did was build a shack and clear some forest to plant corn along the road to demonstrate their presence. Loggers began to come through, buying trees for about 75 cents apiece. Though a small amount, it was a source of money where there had been none. So, the people were being encouraged to deforest, and the leadership of the organization at that point asked us to bring in the technical assistance that would help develop a natural forest management and conservation program.

When the government changed six months later, and the new regime eased the aggressive colonization policy and agreed to recognize Indian organizations, interest in the project dropped off, because it had been seen primarily as a challenge to the old government, as a way to demonstrate control over land and resources. Even so, there was still tension within the communities. There were people who wanted to continue selling wood, while others were more concerned about tenure. The communities
began to fight among themselves and to question these organizations, which were functioning in the political arena and traveling to Quito and Washington and so on. There was a certain amount of jealousy, and there had been no tangible results. So one of the goals of our work was to provide the long-term technical team that could actually provide services to these communities, separate from the political maneuvering.

There was still a lot of tension. The earlier government had divided many communities by promoting alternative, funded organizations, and by giving gifts to communities. Schoolhouses and the like, while not necessarily addressing the political goals of the communities, were at least tangible benefits.

There continue to be significant disputes between local organizations and the members of the communities. These organizations are, in fact, democratic grassroots representation, yet there remain tensions. Our strategy has been to deal with these federations so as to come up with regional strategies, rather than working simply with individual communities, which had been the pattern as far back as the 1950s. In practice this is difficult and somewhat frustrating.

Nevertheless, the political gains made by these organizations are real and are very significant. They do represent the communities, and they are quite strong.

Celia Nyamweru, Anthropology, St Lawrence University: I have two questions. The first concerns the role of oil companies in the region, as described in Joe Kane’s article. I would like to know what your take on that article is because it seems that the international oil companies are going to move into the region no matter what. My second question is more general — to what extent do you think the Indigenous posture, i.e., that they own the land and that they can do with it what they wish, regardless of any concerns of sustainability, has been stated as an overt agenda, and what will groups like Cultural Survival do in response to this?

TM: The Indigenous groups do claim the right to manage their lands as they please, but no, they do not say that they will destroy the land. This idea is part of a political game, and you need to ask who is saying this. You need to remember that there is a significant gap between Indigenous communities and the self-proclaimed “environmental” community, as Janis pointed out last night.

As for Conoco, we felt that they were the one company in the world (Chevron is now talking about it in Papua New Guinea) that was willing to talk to Indian and environmental organizations and to meet mutually agreed-upon standards. We met with
them, and they said they had a commitment to this approach, and were ready to negotiate with Indigenous groups. They asked us to facilitate the process, but we declined — we said that first we should check in with the organizations. I think that Conoco was prepared to get involved in making endowments to the communities and so on, but they got scared away when the negotiation process started to look like it would be messy, with certain other environmental groups opposed to the whole idea. Another company got the concession an hour after Conoco withdrew, and they’re doing everything the wrong way. I think the article was way too simplistic, because it’s not just a question of big, bad oil companies versus innocent natives.

CN: Would the Ecuadorian government allow direct negotiation between the Indigenous people and the corporations and Indigenous administration of any endowments that come out of such negotiations?

TM: My sense is that there was enough international leverage to have pushed the government to accept some arrangement of this sort — an international body that would administer the endowment. Everyone could have benefited from this arrangement — the humane oil company, the pioneering government, and of course the Indigenous groups. I think that this is a tragic lost opportunity.

Julie Greenberg, Yale F&ES: It’s clear that you think that the allegations made by Joe Kane are too strong, but could the NRDC have taken better steps to find out what the Indians wanted?

TM: The biggest single problem was that they tried to move too fast. They were being pressured by Conoco to come up with an environmental plan. They should not have agreed to fit into this time frame for someone else’s advantage. They needed more time to be able to talk with the communities and to reach a consensus.

Andrea Esser, Clark University: What groups does Cultural Survival talk to in developing strategies to help these people? Specifically, what are the gender, class, etc., patterns developed from interviewer to interviewer? For example, I know of one case in which a male interviewer spoke with only male group members, yet used this sample as representative of the whole.

TM: Yes, this is a huge problem, and it is often based on assumptions that are simply not true, such as that only men engage in forestry. It is a serious problem that cannot be solved by any formula. This is where anthropology comes in — you need to elucidate the nature of the order in the community so as to be able to know if what you are hearing is representative of the community or not. For any project, you can find somebody in
the community who is interested in it, but does that make them representative? This is why projects that are initiated by a community usually get more long-term support from the community. Gift-like projects that come down out of the heavens often don’t work very well because they don’t fit into the standard norms of reciprocity. It’s someone else’s idea, so there’s not a lot of interest in getting it done. There is a discontinuity between what is given and what is expected, and many communities are based on reciprocity. It goes back to the larger question of how one deals with a community. It is not sufficient to dump money on the people, you need to be seen as working for them.

Michael W. Finkbeiner, Land Surveyor: How does the situation in Bolivia compare to that of Ecuador?

TM: Both countries have similar political structures. I have been speaking only of the Amazonian peoples, not those Indigenous people in the highlands. Ecuadorian Indigenous groups have copied the structure of Bolivian groups — the issues of land, natural resources, and dignity. At present, Bolivia has no incentives in place to protect the forest, so, economically speaking, it is better to cut them down, and the Indigenous groups are having a rough time.

Henry Kernan, Forestry Consultant: Do Ecuadorian citizens still have the right to clear land and cut timber on public lands?

TM: Yes, but those lands are being increasingly regulated, and the right applies only to unoccupied lands (tierras valdeas), which usually are also Indigenous territories. This is where demarcation and extractive reserves and so on demonstrate use on lands that do not appear to be “used” in the sense encoded in these laws.

John Bela, University of Massachusetts: How successful are local Ecuadorian groups compared to the larger environmental organizations? What impact is David Neal and his environmental group having?

TM: David Neal, of the Missouri Botanical Gardens, is a salvage botanist, going ahead of the bulldozers, climbing trees and gathering data prior to destruction. He is a bit naive and has been criticized for being too cooperative with the corporations who are mining the areas. We have cautioned him about this but, on the other hand, he sees this as an opportunity that he can’t turn down because the areas will be lost regardless.

As for the other part of your question, the answer is that it is mixed. Some environmental groups ally with local organizations to help in management, while some have clear political agendas. Leftist alliances, for example, try to construct a permanent opposition to the government through the local Indigenous groups.