

Attempt to remove more than 209,000 hectares from Bahuaja Sonene National Park (Peruvian Amazon) threatens all protected areas in Latin America

Ernesto F. Ráez-Luna¹

Coordinador, Proyecto Interoceánica Sur - ProNaturaleza

Investigador Asociado, Centro para la Sostenibilidad Ambiental - Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia

Coordinador, Grupo de Trabajo de la Sociedad Civil para la Interoceánica Sur

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A bill under consideration by Peruvian President Alan García's administration proposes to remove 209,782 hectares from Bahuaja Sonene National Park, to allow for oil and gas exploitation in the Candamo river watershed, the strict-protection core of the park. In 1999, a gas and oil field was found in Candamo by Mobil, but the company declined to exploit it, and the watershed was added to the park. Now, climbing oil prices would make the exploitation of the Candamo's field more attractive.

Located at the heart of the SW Andes-Amazon piedmont, with a surface of 1'091,416 hectares, Bahuaja Sonene protects at least 14 threatened animal species and shelters the Tambopata river basin, the place in Earth with the largest reported number of species of birds, butterflies, ants, tiger beetles, and other organisms. Bahuaja Sonene is one of seven emblematic nature sanctuaries highlighted by National Geographic Magazine in its September 2002 state-of-the-world issue. The park is under imminent threat of invasion by informal gold miners, illegal loggers, and coca leaf growers that surround the protected area. Removing Candamo's protected status will cause its immediate invasion and degradation, before any oil operation takes place. Even if social disarray and bad press discourage oil investments, defeating the explicit intention of the bill, the damage will be done already.

Reducing the surface of a strictly protected area would establish a perverse precedent in Latin America, and would inflict a deadly wound to Peru's park system. Since many protected areas in Peru have mining and oil potential, mutilations could spread like wildfire throughout the system. The bill has received opposition from Peru's national parks administration (*Intendencia de Areas Naturales Protegidas – IANP*). According to their opinion, the bill clashes with constitutional mandates and it would break environmental protection provisions in the US-Peru Free Trade Agreement (FTA), soon to be voted in the US Congress. Last Thursday, Congressman Earl Blumenauer (Democrat, Oregon) sent a letter to the Peruvian Ambassador, expressing concern on that regard.

According to our best knowledge, discussion of the bill by Mr. García's administration has been postponed for the time being, for fear of interfering with approval of the FTA in Washington, DC. However, the bill is only the last development in the aggressive marketing of oil concessions led by Mr. García's administration. There are already many overlaps of oil

¹ eraez@csa-upch.org / eraezluna@yahoo.com



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