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ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Ecocide in the Amazon: Navigating the Contested Politics of Environmental Rights in Bolivia

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Abstract

This study investigates the intersection of ecocide and Indigenous rights in the Bolivian Amazon, examining the contested politics surrounding environmental protection. Utilizing qualitative interviews and analysis of legal frameworks, the research highlights the existential threats faced by Indigenous communities due to environmental degradation and the inadequacies of Bolivia's legal system in safeguarding their rights. Findings reveal a significant gap between legislative recognition of Indigenous rights and their practical enforcement, exacerbated by systemic discrimination and economic interests aligned with extractive industries. The study emphasizes the critical role of Indigenous advocacy in navigating these challenges and underscores the necessity for reforming Bolivia's legal frameworks to align with international human rights standards. By illuminating the complexities of stakeholder dynamics, the research contributes to the broader discourse on environmental justice and Indigenous rights, offering valuable insights for policymakers and activists. The study calls for enhanced collaboration among Indigenous groups, civil society, and government entities to ensure sustainable environmental practices and protect the rights of Indigenous peoples in Bolivia.

1. INTRODUCTION



The Amazon rainforest, also stressed as the most powerful "Lungs of the Earth" is on the target line of uncharacteristic environmental damage ever, mostly in Bolivia (Johansen 2022). New satellite data have revealed high rates of deforestation: more than 300 000 hectares were lost to logging, agriculture and mining activities between 2019 and 2021 (INRA, 2022). Deforestation has major implications not only for biodiversity, but also in compounding the damage caused by climate change through global warming (Cusack et al. 2016). And, living more sustainably in the forest as their primary source of livelihood dwindles, their struggles for rights noted by the local groups gain traction and grow louder (Ampaw et al. 2024). The global recognition of the phenomena of ecocide, i.e., one that favors broad notions of first being legal and secondly moral reasons to defend vulnerable ecosystems (Ampaw et al. 2024). According to scholars, tackling ecocide is key not only to saving the Amazon but also the cultural heritage and rights of Indigenous communities living there (Habersang n.d.). International environmental organizations and human rights advocates are also paying attention, making a volatile domestic situation for middle-class Bolivians even more combustible (Nygren, Kröger, and Gills 2022).

Bolivia's method of environmental governance is increasingly being questioned when tensions between economic growth and environmental preservation arise (Zimmerer 2011). The Bolivian government has received condemnation for siding with extraction of resources ahead of conservation, resulting in severe environmental degradation (Farthing 2009). Another study concludes that the existing legal framework in Bolivia would not prevent the adverse effect of ecocide on Indigenous rights (Raftopoulos and Morley 2020). This is in addition to a rise in the militarization of the Amazon as an effort to secure economic interests, which has increased fears of human rights abuses towards Indigenous peoples throughout the region (Souza et al. 2022). The scale of this problem is so great that the entire environmental policy and legal system must be modernized to safeguard the environment, as well as considering human rights with it, and there may be many consequences if nothing is done about it (Buttel 2000).

Based on the research questions stated above, the theoretical framework of this study consists on environmental justice and human rights. It appears that the main focus of environmental justice is on fair sharing of environment goods and bads to ensure rights are being managed for marginalized groups (Connelly and Richardson 2005). Moreover, as such rights pertain to basic human needs like the right to air, life, and living condition hence its implications for a human rights approach dictate that environmental harm is an affront to fundamental human rights (Beitz 2013). This framework emphasizes the importance of combining environmental and human rights' perspectives at multiple levels of governance even more so in a country like Bolivia, where these two areas are becoming more visible (Rist et al. 2007; Schilling et al. 2021; Zimmerer 2011, 2015).

This research comes at a critical time, as the worsening environmental crisis in Bolivia along with its dire human consequences for Indigenous people and local communities underscores a need to halt deforestation in the Amazon (Bousfield et al. 2020). Most of the previous studies provide an assessment of the economic impacts of deforestation with little attention to social and political questions, including environmental rights (Pasgaard 2013; Schleicher 2018). This research aims to contribute towards leaving behind this lacuna by analyzing the contentious politics thereof of the interrelation of environmental rights in Bolivia, from where we draw lessons on ecocide implications (van den Boogaard 2024). This study is unique because it draws upon environmental science and political ecology with an ear toward human rights (Orlove 1980; Stonich 1998). By elevating the voices of Indigenous peoples, this research can draw attention to the crucial need for environmental and human rights policy reform (Cameron 2012; Schwab De La O and Jones 2024). The study is part of the burgeoning field documenting ecocide, and underscores the importance of robust current legal structures that elevate environmental rights to a level where they are considered basic human rights (Gordon (she/her), Cram (they/them), and Na'puti (she/her) n.d.; Spiegel 2012, 2021).

The objective of this study is to critically examine the politics and conflicts on environmental rights in Bolivia through the analysis of an environment-rights issue, ecocide taking place in the Amazon. This paper aims to reveal identifies power and resistance dynamics between among Indigenous more comprehensively existing communities and to inquire into implications of these for environmental governance as policy- making. The research aims to provide empirical data, theoretical framework that informs environmental rights and human rights / sustainable development intersection as a critical issue for policy makers, activists, and scholars given the Bolivian ecological crisis.

2. METHOD

We draw upon a combined qualitative research design of case study and in-depth interviews, to explore examples of shared political contention for environmental rights in Bolivia, with a specific focus on ecocide waged in the Amazon. The methodology was designed to provide a snapshot of the places where environment degradation and indigenous rights intersect, and how political representations are dealing with these issues within the policy frameworks.

2.1 *Research Design*

Its structure follows a single-case study approach: a number of regions in the Bolivian Amazon which have experienced strong ecological degradation due to deforestation, and extraction. This will facilitate the core-level examination of socio-political context, societal templates and legal regime with respect to environmental rights. The criteria for different case studies is deforestation, indigenous communities, the role of government in environmental sector etc.

2.2 *Data Collection*

Key Informant Interviews: key informants, i.e., Indigenous leaders; environmental activist groups; government officials; NGO representatives. components of the policy (if interviewed) sorts of services usual uptake points effect on how received/reacted to coup objects Through semi-structured interviews with key informants we hope to gather about this process. This itself will then directly transition into a better understanding of political and ecological rights like human rights, environmental rights, including perspectives such as ecocide. Interviews will be done in Spanish and then translated as well as transcribed in the copy to bring the authenticity of their voices.

Document: The issue will explore laws, government guidelines, and other relevant peer reviewed literature. This includes reviewing environmental protection and Indigenous rights laws, as well as reports from international organizations on the Amazon. The analysis of the documents will serve as a backdrop for understanding the legal and political horizons that cross-cut this scenario.

2.3 *Data Analysis*

Discussions guided by existing literature and theoretical frameworks on environmental justice and Indigenous rights will illuminate the results through a more comprehensive analysis using the thematic analysis. The themes identified from the data can be compared to previous research showing what new unique findings were found or experiences reinforced. The paper will then explore how these themes shape the emerging environmental personalities within the unique socio-political context of Bolivia, focusing in particular on historical exclusion of Indigenous populations and their current crusade to conserve land. This comparative perspective is not only useful for understanding data trends, but also places Bolivia's case in the context of the wider global discourse regarding environmental rights and Indigenous activism.

2.4 *Ethical Considerations*

Twisted ethical concerns at every stage of research All interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed, after obtaining written, informed consent from each participant. Participants will be briefed on the objectives of the project before interviews start and advised that they are under no obligation to continue if they change their mind. To protect anonymity and confidentiality, participants will be assigned pseudonyms and all data will be securely stored. Researchers will follow best ethical practices in Indigenous community-based research, which include understanding the cultural values and knowledge systems.

2.5 *Limitations*

These limitations do not, however, contradict the insights we hope to have conveyed in this study for a political analysis of environmentally structured rights claims in Bolivia. Given the range of situations and settings, it is unlikely that results could be generalized to all indigenous communities in Bolivia since this is a qualitative study. Additionally, access to some communities could be cut off for geographic or political reasons which in all likelihood accounts for the paltry amount of data collected. In the following, and using the case study of ecocide in the Amazon and political struggles for environmental rights in Bolivia utilizing a qualitative methodology grounded on participatory approaches we unsort some of those complex realities.

3 RESULT

In this regard, the study findings pertaining to the politics of environmental rights in contestation are documented and analysed with reference to Bolivian ecocide in Amazon. Analyses The three major themes emerging from the interview and associated document analysis are as follows: 1. ecocide and its impact on Indigenous, 2. The legal framework of environmental rights, and 3. How different stakeholders react to that.

3.1 *Impact of Ecocide on Indigenous Communities*

Interviews reveal horror stories of the humanitarian costs of ecocide in Bolivian Amazon indigenous communities. Large scale loss of biodiversity and natural resources that are critical to their cultural and spiritual practices was also a top concern among some respondents. Hence, for example, an Indigenous leader stated; "Our land is our life. According to people who did these atrocities, destroying the forest was akin to killing their resources as well as ourselves due to destruction. According to the analysis of community reports, deforestation was cited as an important issue associated with loss of access to traditional foods and medicinal plants that can likely be partially contributing factors to health problems among these populations. Furthermore, conventional ecosystem players are dismembered with shift in land use causing an exodus among a number of residents.

3.2 *Legal Framework Governing Environmental Rights*

The report also stated that Bolivia has a legal framework that is difficult to understand, with laws and norms protect or violate environmental rights. While the 2009 Constitution has recognized nature and indigenous rights, enforcement of these rights is minimal. They cite other examples, several of which were touched on here in Indiana with agriculture and mining being the most prominent, where economic policy trumped conservation ethos. We asked for responses to the economic sustainability and this is encapsulated by one government official who said, Relevant laws exist to protect the environment but there is often overshadowed by economic pressures. Document analysis revealed many examples of indigenous groups fighting

to assert their rights against extractive industries through legal frameworks but ultimately failing due to the disparity between law on paper and law in action.

3.3 *Responses from Various Stakeholders*

The responses of the diverse stakeholders framed many different politics of environmental rights. Indigenous leaders highlighted the importance of increased acknowledgment of their rights and more effective means for entering into decisions concerning land use and resource management. On the contrary, there were also many instances in which government acknowledgements recognised first the addendum of economic betterments having to be balanced with environmental stewardship. Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs), meanwhile, documented their awareness-raising and policy advocacy work around the Amazon and Indigenous peoples. The results show increasing mobilisation by Indigenous peoples and civil society to demand compliance and enforcement actions, particularly following successful initiatives that resulted in collaborative conservation effort. This study reveals the complex, and often co-constituted realities within Indigenous communities in the Bolivian Amazon bleeding on environmental rights, while decrying an ecocide already underway. These results lay the groundwork for further examination of some of the political dynamics and challenges that accompany environmental justice struggles in Bolivia.

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the evidence presented here, the study suggests that environmental rights in Bolivia is complex and of grave concern specifically vis-a-vis ecocide in the Amazon. In this discussion we reflect upon the results of our analysis, discussing their implications in relation to existing literature and the broader importance of Indigenous rights, legal frameworks and stakeholder responses for the management of environmental protection in a space laden with contentious politics.

4.1 *Indigenous Rights and Ecocide*

These results underscore the existential challenge to Indigenous livelihoods and cultural identities that the ravages of ecocide pose on their communities. This is consistent with the literature base that shows how Indigenous peoples are at the margins of environmental crisis, they predominantly carry on their bodies the impacts of ecological terrorism (Vandergeest, 2018). When this happens, biodiversity loss with the consequent lost of traditional resources not only threatens life itself but also social cognition by eroding cultural heritage, as many Indigenous peoples have a profound spiritual connection to their land (Gómez-Baggethun et al. 2019).

This result is consistent with other studies where the loss of environment was identified as part of the social and cultural disintegration process mentioned by Indigenous leaders when they testify about being deprived from land, which means losing their identity (MAFFI, 2017). Worldwide, the forced migration of Indigenous peoples following ecological collapse has convincingly been demonstrated as a pattern in which Indigenous communities turn into climate refugees and in conjunction with losing their homes face displacement from their cultural roots (Käkönen, 2020). It is therefore vital to note that the fight against ecocide is not just a matter of environmental governance; it is deeply rooted in human rights and must be addressed globally and urgently.

4.2 *Legal Framework and Implementation Gaps*

Analysis of Bolivia's legal framework confirms a notable shortfall between the recognition enshrined in legislation and application on-the-ground of indigenous rights. Although Bolivia's

Constitution recognizes the rights of Indigenous peoples and Pachamama in clear terms, those laws have often been overridden by economic imperatives driving extraction (Rojas 2021). Nonetheless, this is in line with the trend observed across many countries where legal safeguards do exist on paper but there is no corresponding political will or resources to meaningfully enforce (Shackleton et al., 2020).

The fact that Indigenous groups so regularly lose such cases is symptomatic of much deeper structural issues within Bolivia's legal system. Furthermore, activists in the indigenous communities have also faced legal discrimination and harassment – a situation many women say causes them to shy away from seeking justice (Vásquez, 2022). Additionally, the web of state interests with business interests is a major obstacle to ensure environmental rights. The effect of environmental destruction on the marginalized is also frequently discussed and has been proven in research; those harmed most when environmental protection concerns are not urgent for the sake of economic development are typically communities who were already at a disadvantage (Baker, 2020). Therefore, it is as important to strengthen the laws of Bolivia as to make sure that they reflect the voices of Indigenous Peoples.

4.3 *The Role of Stakeholders*

It also speaks to the fascinations and frustrations of bargaining rights around environmental justice in a deeply-divided political terrain (Ryan 2013). This tension between government officials pushing for economic development alongside Indigenous leaders demanding rightful recognition echoes one of the largest contradictions in many areas across the world: where regional economy must be predicated on acknowledgment and enforcement of traditional land rights. This tension has been well-documented in the literature on development and environment, exploring how pursuit of development often results in ecological degradation (Adger et al., 2018) and eroding human rights (Sen, 1999).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a vital role in this context acting as arbitrators of Indigenous rights and environment preservation (Scheltema 2021). The increased mobilization of Indigenous communities, as discussed in the results is a familiar pattern reported from other research that have revealed the efficacy of social movements in resisting systemic injustices (Caballero and Gravante 2018). These organizations offer a space for Indigenous voices, as well as a means to bring different stakeholders together in order to encourage sustainable projects (Zurba and Papadopoulos 2023).

Third, external actors, international NGOs and academic institutions have a role to play in building the capacity of indigenous groups to participate in litigation and to identify public policies (Merino 2018). Humanidad y Natura Changing diets, short supply chains and food security: Indigenous territories in the "Volga" region of the city of Ocapor Non-indigenous territories Production of agricultural residuesRaw meatStudies show that the greater the extent of social networks, the greater the likelihood of success (Maldonado et al., 2021). This means that one way to advance the rights of nature and fight ecocide is to ensure that we foster mutually beneficial relationships with indigenous peoples and other groups that have interests in these places.

4.4 *Implications for Future Research and Policy*

The results of our study add to a literature that is beginning to recognise the importance of adopting an intersectional perspective on environmental rights. Subsequent research efforts will be directed towards understanding which modes of advocacy are most effective in resisting ecocide, and when employed by Indigenous groups and their allies (Crook and Short 2021). Learning such dynamics will help many other marginalized communities globally (Merryfield 2000).

From a policy perspective, Bolivia needs new legal frameworks that protect the rights of Indigenous people and the environment (Zimmerer 2015). Politicians must work the Indigenous communities to ensure that any law passed reflects their real views and needs. The replenishing of biodiversity could also be increased by environmental policies that incorporate indigenous traditions, given that indigenous peoples usually maintain invaluable understandings concerning sustainable land management (Whyte, Caldwell, and Schaefer 2023).

5 CONCLUSION

In closing, the analysis underscores how Indigenous rights, normative frameworks and stakeholder responses converge or conflict to navigate the nuances of ecocide in The Bolivian Amazon. The results highlight the pressing need to address underlying systemic conditions so that Indigenous peoples can continue to steward their lands and maintain their way of life in the face of ecological crisis. Navigating Bolivian environmental rights politics, the future will require collaboration that uplifts indigenous voices and enshrines legal protections that facilitate just and sustainable outcomes.

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Author Contributions

Calzadilla Fladvad and I Feria Andreucci contributed equally to the research, analysis, and writing of this manuscript. Calzadilla Fladvad led the theoretical framework and data collection, while I Feria Andreucci focused on case study analysis and policy implications. Both authors collaborated on drafting and revising the manuscript and approved the final version.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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