

Oil road turns tribes into meat traders

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There's no such thing as a free ride. In Ecuador's Yasuní National Park, one road, built by a foreign oil company, came with unlimited free transportation for local people. Environmentalists now say these free rides transformed local tribes and fuelled a bushmeat trade that might not have otherwise existed.

The situation, they say, illustrates the importance of anticipating the indirect impacts of such schemes before they can harm both the communities and the environment.

In the early 1990s, Texan oil and gas company Maxus Energy forged what is now known as the Maxus road by cutting a line 140 kilometres into Yasuní National Park. The road allowed them, and Repsol, the Spanish and Argentinean oil company which later bought its operations, to access and exploit oil reserves that lie deep within the natural park and within the Waorani ethnic reserve. The Waorani (also Huaorani) people, in return, got free rides along the road.

"The oil company provides a bus that continuously travels along the road for the Waorani at no cost," says Esteban Suárez of the Universidad San Francisco de Quito, who led the research for the Wildlife Conservation Society.

Mutual benefit

Such an arrangement is not an unusual one for a company exploiting tribal land. Across South America and Africa, oil and timber companies "buy" the support of local peoples with anything from direct payments to indirect subsidies.

"Oil companies usually use their large economical resources to solve every problem with local communities by putting in some money, building a house for a local leader, or maybe providing basic services like education or health," says Suárez.

He adds that this creates a relationship between industries and local peoples where the tribes become dependent on the companies – sometimes even threatening to throw them off their land if the companies do not continue injecting resources into the communities.

In Yasuní, the road has also had negative effects on the local wildlife. The Waorani are a semi-nomadic people who hunt to feed themselves. Selling wild meat is illegal in Ecuador, but this is poorly enforced and shortly after the Maxus road was built, a wild meat market emerged at the town of Pompeya, where the road plunges into the reserve.

'Luxury' items

From March 2005 to May 2007, Suárez and his colleagues monitored the market. It is an informal affair. Every Saturday, up to five "buyers" show up at the river dock. Hunters and fishermen pass through with meat and fish, which they sell to the handful of buyers. Come midday, when the flow of hunters and fishermen has ebbed, the buyers depart in trucks or public buses, laden with their purchases which they will sell in towns and cities where wild meat is considered a luxury good.

The amount of meat and fish traded at the market more than doubled over the two years that the researchers were making records. The Waorani, many of whom have now abandoned their semi-nomadic lifestyles and settled down in three villages along the Maxus road, supplied nearly half of the trade, mostly with pig-like peccary, rodents called paca and woolly monkeys.

The peccary that was most commonly traded is a species in decline and the woolly monkey is threatened with extinction. Another local tribe, the Kichwa, sold mammals and fish.

Culture and wildlife

The real problem, says Suárez, is that the market transformed local societies. He found that without the free bus, the Waorani communities were unlikely to have participated in the trade at all. But free transportation meant they could access wider areas and carry more game.

"People started to hunt and fish not only provide food for the family, or maybe to exchange meat for some other goods within the community, but as a way to get cash," says Suárez.

In 1995, the Waorani staged demonstrations, occupying Maxus Energy's oil wells. One of their claims was that the company should respect the community's "cultural, organisational and territorial integrity".

Indirect impacts

The Yasuní example illustrates the cascading impacts of energy development in isolated areas, says Margaret Symington, leader of WWF's Amazon Network Initiative. "It serves as a warning that these kinds of indirect impacts need to be taken into account in environmental impact assessments", she says. "The problem is, mitigating them is often much more complicated than mitigating the direct

impacts derived from a project's physical footprint."

It's not just the Waorani's traditional culture that is being chipped away by the Maxus road. Suárez has just completed further research showing that the abundance of the traded species has dropped significantly in the hunting area around one of the Waorani communities. "We think that the continuous growth of the market poses a threat for the wildlife of the national park," he says.

In Africa, the Wildlife Conservation Society has found ways of working with timber and oil companies to ensure their activities do not wear down wildlife and cultures. Each situation is different, and Suárez himself says there is "no easy solution".

It would be unrealistic to ask that the Waorani stop using the road to boost their income, but David Wilkie of WCS says encouraging the people to focus the hunt on species that are not threatened and have high reproductive rates could be a first approach.

We contacted Maxus Energy, but they declined to comment. Repsol did not return our enquiries.

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