

RESERVA LOS CEDROS PRESS RELEASE, DATED 3RD SEPTEMBER 2021

How Green is Copper?

As we head deeper into climate catastrophe, the push to extract raw materials for an urgent ‘clean energy’ transition is impacting on resource-rich areas, including the world’s most biodiverse and vulnerable ecosystems.

With the world’s largest climate conference COP just around the corner for the first time they will be including biodiversity and natural ecosystem services into the discussion.

One of the world’s most sought-after minerals is copper. It is required for such technologies as electric vehicles and wind farms. The world’s current biggest source of this mineral is the Andean Copper Belt, which includes swathes of Chile, Peru, Colombia, and now – the investor’s biggest dream – Ecuador.

Ecuador has historically not had any big mining operations. But in 2017, all that changed. Since then, over 2.9 million hectares have been sold for open-pit mining – mainly for copper. Mining concessions cover towns, watersheds, biodiverse ecosystems and indigenous territories. Ecuador's cash-strapped government is driving the land-grab to compete with neighbouring countries, as copper prices rise in response to an escalating global demand for this important ‘transition mineral’.

Many cases around the world have shown that large-scale, commercial open-pit mining can have a disastrous impact on environments and waterways, due to heavy water use, water contamination and removal of habitats. Such an operation is now threatening one of the most biodiverse areas in the world, Los Cedros Reserve in north-west Ecuador.

Covering some 13,000 acres (about 5,256 hectares), the reserve is classed as primary cloud forest, and safeguards the headwaters of four important watersheds. Within this unique ecosystem, flora and fauna flourish. Many species found here are not found anywhere else. Los Cedros is home to over 200 endangered species. Five of these are critically endangered, including the brown-headed spider monkey and the north-western jaguar.

Ecuador was the very first country in the world to write into its Constitution the Rights of Nature, including Bosques Protector, or protected forests. Its Environment Ministry includes Los Cedros on its list of “Areas of Priority for the Conservation of Biodiversity in Ecuador”.

There was outcry, then, when in 2018 the government sold permits to explore for copper and gold within the boundaries of Los Cedros to Canadian mining giant Cornerstone Capital Resources and the country's state mining company ENAMI.

The government was taken to court by those determined to protect Los Cedros and the Bosque Protector won its case in the provincial court, stripping the mining company of their permits. The government has appealed that decision and, pending the final outcome, Cornerstone continue to explore – and exploit – the land, in direct contravention of the court order and despite overwhelming local opposition.

In an unprecedented move the highest court in the country, the Constitutional Court, agreed to hear the case. The Court aims to apply Ecuador's unique Rights of Nature laws to the protection of the forest, on the grounds of its [biodiversity, endangered species, and value for water conservation](#).

The hearing – a classic David and Goliath case – took place in October 2020 and a decision was due to be handed down in December 2020. So far, no verdict has been given, an indication of the complexity and far-reaching implications of the case.

The Goliath of the case – Cornerstone – has deep pockets, considerable lobbying power and political influence. But the David – the group protecting Los Cedros – presented a very strong case, based not only on the legal and environmental grounds, but also on financial grounds. The group prepared a report to show the monetary value of the carbon in the Reserve. Using independent scientific research that measured carbon emissions in tropical rainforests to assess the quantity of CO₂ in the trees and the topsoil, and using the value of carbon credits as per the EU ETS, it was possible to come up with an estimate of the value of the carbon available for sale as carbon credits: \$210,054,121, or \$39,972 per hectare.

If the same equation is applied to the 2.7 million hectares of protected forests in Ecuador under threat from mining, and assuming a reforestation programme of just 1% per year (or a reduction in deforestation of 1% per year), \$919 million worth of carbon credits could be generated per year. These could be sold as carbon offsets to other governments or to companies looking to offset their carbon footprint. Given the emphasis on climate change at the present time, and how keen corporations are to pin their green credentials to the company flagpole, there should be no shortage of buyers. An added advantage to Ecuador is that this would be a net increase in national income, as it would be foreign money coming into the country.

To those who value the environment above profit, it would seem to be a “no-brainer”.

Sir Jonathan Porritt, one of the UK's leading environmentalists, said, “Ecuador was the first nation to include the Rights of Nature in its constitution. It could now become the first to actually protect large swathes of biodiversity based upon this constitutional innovation, and set an invaluable precedent worldwide.”

Yet, the mining lobby is powerful; money talks; and still the judges of the Constitutional Court deliberate. The group determined to save Los Cedros does not want the case to fade away, to be swept under a government carpet, and is urging its supporters to make lots of noise to keep the case in the public eye.

Whilst Cornerstone woos the local residents with food, internet and employment they are also pushing to overturn the Environment Agency's permit that was revoked.

As politicians from around the world gather in UK for COP26, a conference focused on climate change and CO2, it is the perfect time to shine a light on this landmark case. Ecuador has the potential to earn substantial income, going into the future, by preserving one of the most biodiverse areas in the world. In doing so, it would send a clear message that it respects its own Constitution and the Rights of Nature, and that the environment does indeed have a value. Especially when it comes to protecting future generations from catastrophic climate change.

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