

Photo: Wachachik



Sarayaku

The Living Forest of the Midday People in the Ecuadorian Amazon

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We, the Sarayaku people, also known as the Midday People, identify ourselves as Kichwa Indigenous people. We have approximately 1,500 inhabitants, organised into seven communal centres: Kali Kali, Sarayakillu, Chuntayaku, Shiwakucha, Puma, Kushillu Urku and Mawka Llakta. We live within a territory of 135,000 hectares, rich in biodiversity: *Sacha* (forest), *Yaku* (rivers), waterfalls, black lagoons, *Allpa* (soil and subsoil) and *Wayra* (air). These sustain a huge number of ecosystems and species of flora and fauna, which are of the utmost importance for the livelihoods of families, who dedicate themselves primarily to hunting, fishing, managing *chakras* (agroforestry systems) and harvesting wild products. Our territory is predominantly tropical Amazonian rainforest, and within its diverse landscape one can find hill forests, floodplains, riparian forests, wetlands, salt licks, *Mauritia* palm swamps and the *Sisa Ñampí* or “great path of flowers.”

In our history, we have experienced the pressure of religious missions, the presence of rubber bosses, dealings with Peruvian traders and confrontations with other Indigenous peoples. Despite this, we have maintained traditional ways of using and managing our territory, as well as traditional forms of organisation and relationships with nature.

The Living Forest

Sarayaku is located in the middle basin of the Bobonaza River, in the province of Pastaza, in the centre of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Our vision of Pachamama and of territory is holistic. From the day we are born, we adopt an integrated way of life that encompasses all beings of the Living Forest, a concept based on the existence of the *Sacha runakuna* (visible and invisible inhabitants of the forest). We build reciprocal relationships with the



Sacha runakuna, thus establishing and putting into practice the concept of *Sumak Kawsay*: life in harmony. In 2018, exercising our autonomy and self-determination in the General Assembly of the Kichwa Indigenous people of Sarayaku, we declared our territory to be **Kawsak Sacha – the Living Forest: a living and conscious being, subject of rights.**

The *Kawsak Sacha* provides us with energy and gives us the air that we breathe; it is fundamental to our worldview. The Living Forest is a being with whom the *Yachakkuna* (Shamans) communicate in order to receive and transmit knowledge. This learning directs and guides us towards *Sumak Kawsay*. *Kawsak Sacha* is the primary source of *Sumak Kawsay*: it provides a space for living and for emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual revitalisation. The land, or *Allpa mama*, is our mother, the origin of life and of existence. Breaking any element of this holistic structure would mean cutting the vital links between the protective beings and human beings.

¹ This report was prepared by the technical support team of the Kichwa Indigenous people of Sarayaku in collaboration with Fundación ALDEA.

The **Kichwa Indigenous People of Sarayaku** and **Fundación ALDEA** are Members of the ICCA Consortium.

Translation from Spanish: Katharine Abbott; revision: Chris Jarrett

“We, the Sarayaku People, are heirs to a history of resistance and a struggle to uphold our freedom against colonists, invasions and external aggressions because we are Sarayaku Runakuna, descendants of the jaguar, inhabitants of the Bobonaza, Pastaza and Marañón basins. Rivers which the Tayakkuna, bearers of ancient wisdom, navigated, naming the places they travelled through along the way.”

Kawsak Sacha Declaration, 2018





135,000
hectares



Custodians: Kichwa
Indigenous peoples of
Sarayaku, 1,500 members



Visit the website of
Kawsak Sacha

Self-government

Legally recognised in 1979 as the “Centro Alama Sarayacu”, our statutes were reformed in 2004, giving us our current legal status as the “Kichwa Indigenous people of Sarayaku or *Tayjasaruta*”. A new statutory reform is currently in process. Our political and administrative organisation is mixed and is comprised of traditional authorities: 7 *Kurakakuna*² and 7 *Likuatikuna*³ appointed by each community, as well as 11 leaders, women and men, who exercise self-government and the administration of our own justice system within our territory, in accordance with the Ecuadorian Constitution (2008). The Governing Council is appointed by consensus in the People’s Congress and is responsible for organising a technical support team, a *Kaskirunakuna* team (guardians of the forest), a communications team and the *Wio* security group. There is a women’s organisation called *Kuriñampí* (path of gold) and the youth have formed Sarayaku Malta Runa Tandanakuy (SAMARUTA, Young People’s Association).

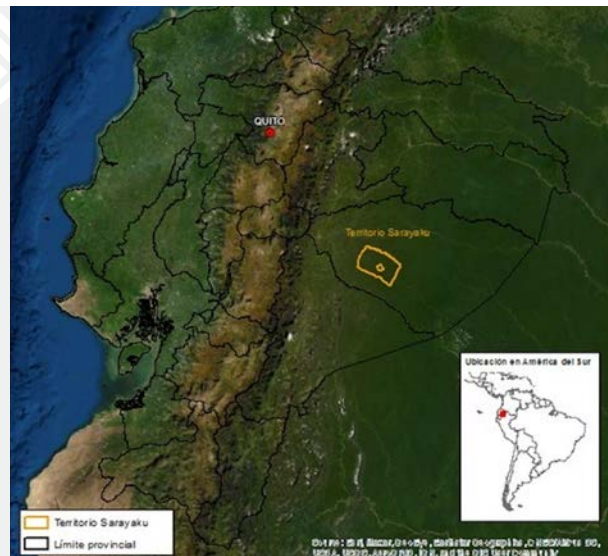
In organisational terms, we are members of Pastaza Kikin Kichwa Runakuna,⁴ which brings together the Kichwa people of the Pastaza province,⁵ and we participate directly in the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE),⁶ the regional Amazonian Indigenous organisation, which is in turn a member of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador,⁷ the national organisation. In addition, CONFENIAE is an affiliate of the Coordinator of Indigenous Organisations of the Amazon River Basin,⁸ which is made up of Indigenous organisations from the nine countries of the Amazon.

In 2018, we began the formal process of becoming a member of the ICCA Consortium and at the end of January 2020, we **decided to register** ourselves as Kawsak Sacha and a Territory of Life in the **Global ICCA Registry** and in the **World Database on Protected Areas**, managed by the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre.

The structure of our own government allows for



Photo: Wachachik



The location of Sarayaku in Ecuador and South America. Credits: ALDEA Foundation, 2021



Ayllukuna Kawsana Allpa. Zoning of the territory. Credits: Kaskiruna Team, 2018

strategic decision-making based on our experience and customs, shared orally in the community and passed down through generations. We have a Life Plan and a Natural Resource Management Plan, among other communal regulations. In our territorial management plan, we have formalised areas for human settlements, housing, crops, hunting, *tambos* (resting places) and protected areas. Each area has its own rules, which have been constructed based on traditional practices and approved in assemblies. This zoning enables the sustainable use of natural resources for building houses and canoes, hunting and fishing, harvesting fruit, developing agricultural activities in order to guarantee food security, medicine, traditional festivals and river transportation (see the zoning map above).

The *muskuy* (dream and vision) that guides us is to exercise our collective rights based on our own system of governance for the territory and its natural resources, free from the incursions of external actors.



Sarayaku, selva viviente, es Territorio de Vida. Video 2:30 min., Fundación ALDEA, 2020

Our ancestral customs and regulations for the use of natural resources are set out in a strategic plan that draws together collective approaches for consolidating our own organisation, managing the territory and taking care of nature and life.

Since 2012, all along the perimeter of our territory we have been planting the *Sisa Ñampí*, a living path of thousands of trees that, with their flowers and fruits, enable the Sarayaku territory to be seen from the air.

² Traditional Indigenous authorities that represent each community within the Governing Council of the Sarayaku People.

³ The messenger between the people and the *kuraka* (leader), they also provide security to their *kuraka*, to their community and to the people in general.

⁴ Pastaza Kikin Kichwa Runakuna is commonly abbreviated as PAKKIRU. Visit their **Facebook page (in Spanish)**.

⁵ In Ecuador, the political-administrative structure divides the country into provinces, cantons and parishes.

⁶ CONFENIAE is a regional Indigenous organisation which represents around 1,500 communities belonging to the Amazonian nationalities Kichwa, Shuar, Achuar, Waorani, Sapara, Andwa, Shiwari, Cofan, Siona, Siekopai and Kijus.

⁷ CONAIE, see <https://conaie.org/>

⁸ COICA, see <https://coica.org.ec/>

It symbolises the presence of people in the heart of the forest, resistance, solidarity and complementarity, as well as the aliveness of the land. The circles of the *Sisa Ñampí* are named after the forest beings to maintain the memory of our ancestors. The *Kaskirunakuna* watch over our territory and monitor the natural resources and their changes.

The great mountains are beings and, at the same time, home to the protective beings of all the animal and vegetable species. In the rivers and lagoons live beings that control and maintain the equilibrium and abundance of water species. In the forest, there are age-old trees that are essential to the spiritual balance with which all people communicate and connect. Furthermore, they are nodes of biodiversity that ensure the life of the forest and its inhabitants.

In defence of territory

The titling of our territory was a milestone that came about following the historic march *Kawsaimanda allpamanda jatarishun*, organised by OPIP⁹ in 1989, which triggered the Indigenous uprising of the 1990s. In 1992, the government legally recognised the territory

and granted titles that did not coincide with ancestral intercommunity and interethnic boundaries. Even though the demarcation was not as the Indigenous people of Pastaza had proposed, the titles served as instruments for defending the territory against the expansion of agricultural and cattle ranching frontiers. The Ecuadorian State issued a collective title for 254,000 hectares of tropical forests to the Kichwa peoples of the middle and lower basin of the Bobonaza River. Of these, 135,000 hectares belong to Sarayaku.

In 1996, the Ecuadorian state granted a concession for a large portion of Sarayaku territory to the Argentine oil company CGC. For their approval to oil exploration and exploitation, the company sought to divide the communities and bribe leaders. Toward the end of 2002 and the beginning of 2003, the company entered the territory by force with a military escort to carry out drilling, plant explosives and launch seismic prospecting activities.

In 2003, we took the case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) with a claim against the Ecuadorian State. In 2010, the case was referred to the Inter-American Court on Human Rights (IACtHR) after a background report in which



Children helping in the chacra. Photo: Wachachik



Women collecting clay for ceramics. Photo: Wachachik

the IACHR concluded that Ecuador violated the rights to (among others) life, integrity, property and judicial guarantees. A series of recommendations were issued to the Ecuadorian state, including reparations and non-repetition measures, some of which have still not been implemented. The sentence issued by the Court is of great importance because it strengthens jurisprudence on Indigenous peoples' rights in the Inter-American system.¹⁰

Subsequently, with the **Kawsak Sacha Declaration**, we launched a mechanism for national and international recognition of our own protection system developed in a self-determined way, respecting our collective rights and vision.

Territory of life and conservation of biodiversity

Our mission as the Sarayaku people is to take care of and use our territory in a respectful way in order to strengthen *Sumak Kawsay* (life in harmony) and ensure the continuity of the *Kawsak Sacha*, or Living Forest.

Sarayaku territory is not just a physical and geographical space. It is the place from which we elevate our emotions, connecting with the world of the protective beings of living places. The relationships we have with

them allow us to reproduce our economic systems, our technologies, our knowledge and science, our social, cultural and spiritual life and our organisational and political systems, in order to build our future, autonomously decide our destiny and ensure our continuity as an Indigenous people.

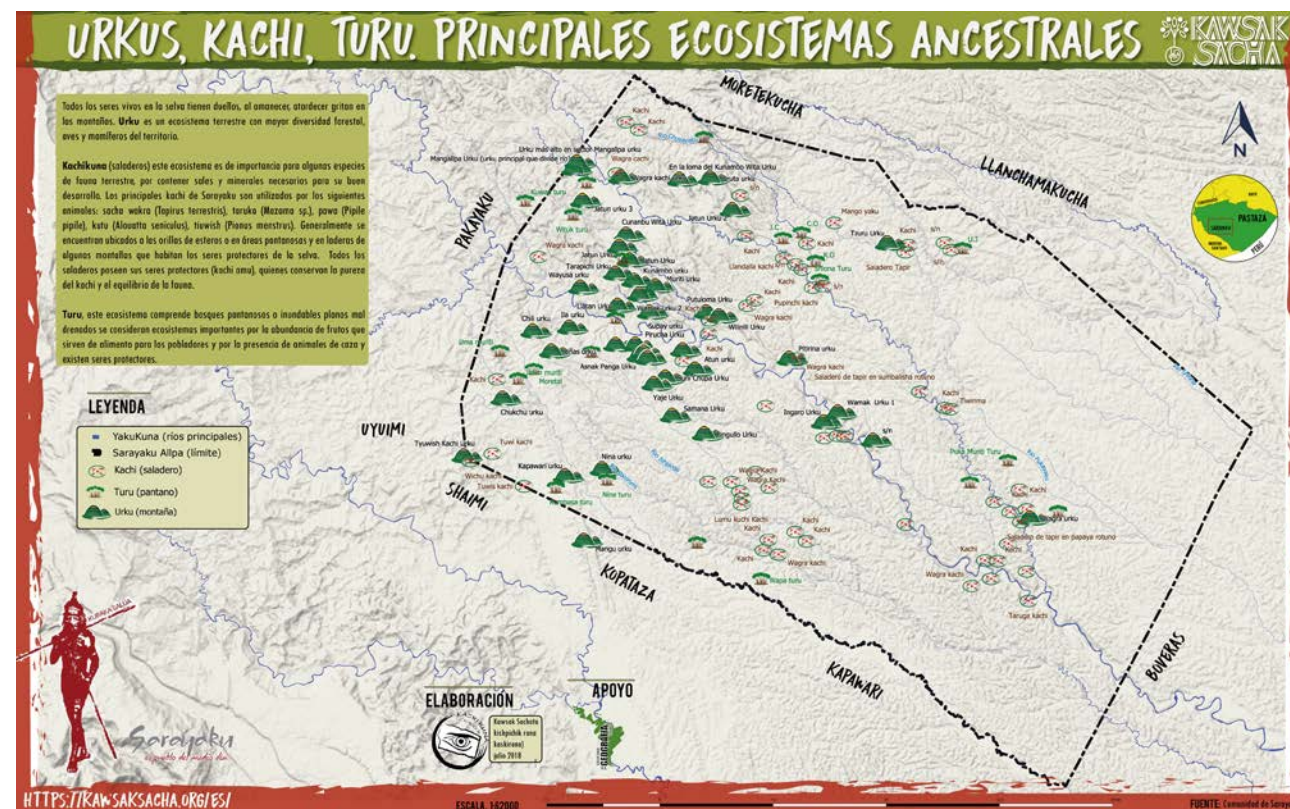
The forest is important for our people, but it is also the habitat for the protective beings of the whole ecosystem. We have our own rules and regulations for living together and for the use of natural resources. The *Kaskirunakuna* keep watch and the *Tayjasaruta* Governing Council can sanction failure to comply with the rules.

Other criteria for wealth

Our Life Plan is based on other criteria for wealth, oriented toward achieving *Sumak Kawsay*: having a healthy territory free of contamination, a land that is productive and abundant in natural resources, the

⁹ The Organisation of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza (OPIP) is now **PAKKIRU**.

¹⁰ See: Inter-American Court of Human Rights. **Kichwa Indigenous People of Sarayaku vs. Ecuador**. Judgment of 27 June 2012.



Urkus, Kachi, Turu. Main ancestral ecosystems. Credits: Kaskiruna Team, 2018





Hatun Kawsak Sisa Ñampi. The living path of flowers. Credits: Kaskiruna Team, 2018

Sumak Allpa. We have implemented initiatives to strengthen food security such as fisheries, diversified chakras and the experimental breeding of wild species with a producers' cooperative, the *Sumi Sawa*. Products from the forest are common goods and cannot be sold externally; only produce from the chacra can be sold.

The forest provides building materials and roofs for houses, food, medicine, crafts and construction, as well as habitat for the forest's protective beings. Major rivers flow through the territory and along their path give rise to diverse aquatic ecosystems, which provide the main source of fish and other key food species for the population.

These characteristics of the territory are an important contribution to nature conservation, climate change adaptation and sustainable use through activities like small-scale ecological tourism. They are also key to control over access to land and resources, territorial security and food sovereignty.

We have a community fund to which people with a stable income contribute.¹¹ The community fund also receives support from partners of several projects. The compensation we received from the state through the



Inter-American Court of Human Rights sentence was invested in the creation of a community bank and in buying the Aero Sarayaku airline.

Internal and external threats

The main threats to our territory are related to national policies that promote extractive activity in the Amazon (oil, mining, logging). The Constitution states that non-renewable natural resources and subsoil resources (mineral deposits and hydrocarbons) are state property (Art. 408 of the Constitution). Under this argument, concessions and authorisations are granted for exploration and exploitation phases, violating human rights, collective rights and the rights of nature. Another threat to the territory and to our life is the opening of roads, which leads to deforestation, illegal hunting and fishing and colonisation.

Furthermore, the state has reduced investment in Indigenous peoples' and nationalities' public

Reconstruction of the 'Technical House' (office of the leaders and technical teams) in Sarayaku.
Photo: Wachachik



“As an Indigenous people defending our rights, we have based our focus on the search for the autonomous management of our territory, as well as the conservation of the Amazonian ecological systems that contribute to maintaining hydrological and climatic cycles of great importance for the planet. All of this is based on the profound knowledge of the Sacha Runa Yachay (wisdom of the forest peoples).”

Kawsak Sacha Declaration, 2018

¹¹ Teachers, project technicians, and other people who have a stable income contribute one per cent of their monthly income to the community fund.



institutions. Among these are intercultural bilingual education and intercultural health, which were created as a result of the Indigenous movement. Territorial planning processes and development management at a local level do not incorporate the decisions expressed in Life Plans. Similarly, national policies drive land use change and land grabbing.

Another direct threat are legal harassments against the exercise of our collective rights through complaints and claims made against leaders of our people. Added to this are militarisation of the territory and persecution, threats and victimisation of leaders and defenders of human rights and the rights of nature, which have occurred under states of emergency declared based on unclear arguments.

Finally, an ever-present threat is that the state, through its respective institutions, does not recognise our organisational process and right to prior consultation or the legal status of the Kichwa people of Sarayaku, given that the authorities do not recognise the treaties and international instruments that promote Indigenous peoples' rights.

A living territory, free of extractivism

In the process of self-determination and in the exercise of our rights over our territory and identity, our objective is to sustainably preserve and conserve our territorial spaces and the material and spiritual

relations that we establish as Indigenous peoples with the Living Forest and the beings that live there.

Floods and the COVID-19 pandemic

In mid-March 2020, while the Ecuadorian government declared a state of exception and a health emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic and initiated a lockdown, we faced four consecutive floods when the Bobonaza River overflowed. Over 30 families were left homeless, and 80 per cent of the population lost their chakras, seriously impacting food security. Four schools were left unusable. Bridges and community roads were destroyed and means of transport were damaged because the current swept away several canoes and motors. We suffered a double crisis: the global COVID-19 pandemic and the disaster caused by the floods.

The government's call for a lockdown did not take into account any solutions for getting supplies to communities in the Amazon. Emergency payments were offered to vulnerable groups during the pandemic and to flood victims, but in order to receive these, people had to go into the city, in clear contradiction of the restrictions on movement.

After two months of isolation, we started going to Puyo, the capital of Pastaza Province, to stock up on food, medicine and other products. In turn, Sarayaku students and professionals who had been outside the territory returned. These movements inevitably lead to COVID-19 infections. Ninety per cent of the adult population were infected and four elders died.

Since the start of the pandemic and without really knowing what COVID-19 was, we increased the consumption of traditional medicine in our households as a way to lessen symptoms. The Amazonian Indigenous peoples' relative resistance and ability to recover from the disease could be linked to the consumption of medicinal plants and our way of life, in harmony with Pachamama.

Faced with the complexity of the situation and completely abandoned by provincial and national authorities, we adopted our own COVID-19 contingency plan, which promoted use of traditional medicine as a preventative measure in all households. In each community centre, a group of men and women who are knowledgeable about medicinal plants was formed to collect, store, prepare and distribute the remedies. An Internal Emergency Operations Committee was

created. A team of volunteer paramedics was set up to help vulnerable people with symptoms of the illness, coordinating with the *Wio* security team to provide an emergency response. All this occurred despite the destruction of our main lines of communication with other communities¹² and the city of Puyo.

We have taken urgent and culturally appropriate measures to safeguard our right to life, our collective rights and the rights of nature through strengthening community initiatives.

References:

Visit our two websites, sarayaku.org and kawsaksacha.org, for more information and ways to support our struggle.



Kawsak Sacha for the world.
Video 5:50 min., English
subtitles, Kawsak Sacha 2019

¹² The main bridge that connects the seven Sarayaku communities was destroyed by the flooding of the river.

The positioning of the Kurakas in the Pachamama (May 2019). Photo: Wachachik



Anniversary of the Atayak association for the preservation of ancestral wisdom. Photo: Wachachik





About this report

This chapter is part of the Territories of Life: 2021 Report, composed of local, national, regional and global analyses of territories and areas conserved by Indigenous peoples and local communities (sometimes abbreviated as “ICCAs” or “territories of life”). The report is part of an ongoing process to develop the knowledge base on territories of life in support of Indigenous peoples’ and local communities’ self-determined priorities. It is produced by the **ICCA Consortium with the support of several partners**.

ICCA Consortium. 2021. Territories of Life: 2021 Report. ICCA Consortium: worldwide.
Available at: **report.territoriesoflife.org**.

About the ICCA Consortium

The ICCA Consortium is a global non-profit association dedicated to supporting Indigenous peoples and local communities who are governing and conserving their collective lands, waters and territories. Its organisational Members and individual Honorary members in more than 80 countries are undertaking collective actions at the local, national, regional and international levels across several thematic streams, including documenting, sustaining and defending territories of life, as well as youth and intergenerational relations.

Learn more about the ICCA Consortium at
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