



Photo: Jacob Balzani Lööv

Iña Wampisti Nunke

The Integral Territory of the Wampis Nation in the Peruvian Amazon

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In November 2015, the Wampis Nation constituted its autonomous territorial government – the **Gobierno Territorial Autónomo de la Nación Wampis** (GTANW) – with the aim of governing and protecting their ancestral territory of more than 1.3 million hectares in the northern Peruvian Amazon, according to their own development priorities. As the first autonomous Indigenous government in Peru (**Servindi 2016**), under the protection of the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Wampis set a remarkable precedent in the exercise of self-determination in the region, as they place the defense of their well-preserved territory firmly within global efforts for biodiversity conservation and the fight against catastrophic climate breakdown.

The Wampis territory: an ancestral relationship

The Wampis today have a population of approximately

15,300 people living in 22 titled communities along the rivers Santiago and Morona (*Kanus* and *Kankaim* in Wampis), in the departments of Loreto and Amazonas in Peru. The Wampis Nation belongs to the Jivaro or *tarimat shuar* ethno-linguistic family, closely related to the Indigenous Shuar of neighbouring Ecuador. They are historically famous for their warrior spirit, strong sense of identity, egalitarian ethic, and their attachment to the ancestral territory, which enabled them to resist many attempts at conquest and subjugation by the Inca and Spanish colonists. It was not until the mid-20th century that the Wampis started a progressive process of inclusion into Peruvian society. Their approach to integration was premised on the recognition of their territorial rights by the Peruvian Government (Pérez 2018).

The Wampis refer to their ancestral territory as *Iña Wampisti Nunke*. Their cultural practices, identity,



language and own forms of governance express deep knowledge about and intricate relationships with the region's forest, water bodies, wildlife and biodiversity. Their quality of life largely relies on the health of their natural surroundings. The self-demarcated ancestral territory includes all lands and water bodies along the two main watersheds, irrespective of the different legal categories and titles that were assigned to them by the state. The Wampis consider the territory not solely as the surface area or as the delimitation of jurisdiction but as something greater: "The integral territory is not only a vision, concept or idea, but a system of life" (Noningo Sesen 2017).

In the Wampis statutes (GTANW 2015), the constitutional document of their government, the territory is defined as "integral and unified", comprised of intimate relationships between people and the different beings that inhabit the interconnected levels of *Nayaim*, *Nunka*, *Nunka Init*, and *Entsa* (i.e., aquatic, earth,

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"The integral territory is not only a vision, concept or idea, but a system of life."

Shapiom Noningo Sesen, 2017



Photo: Jacob Balzani Lööv





1,327,760
hectares

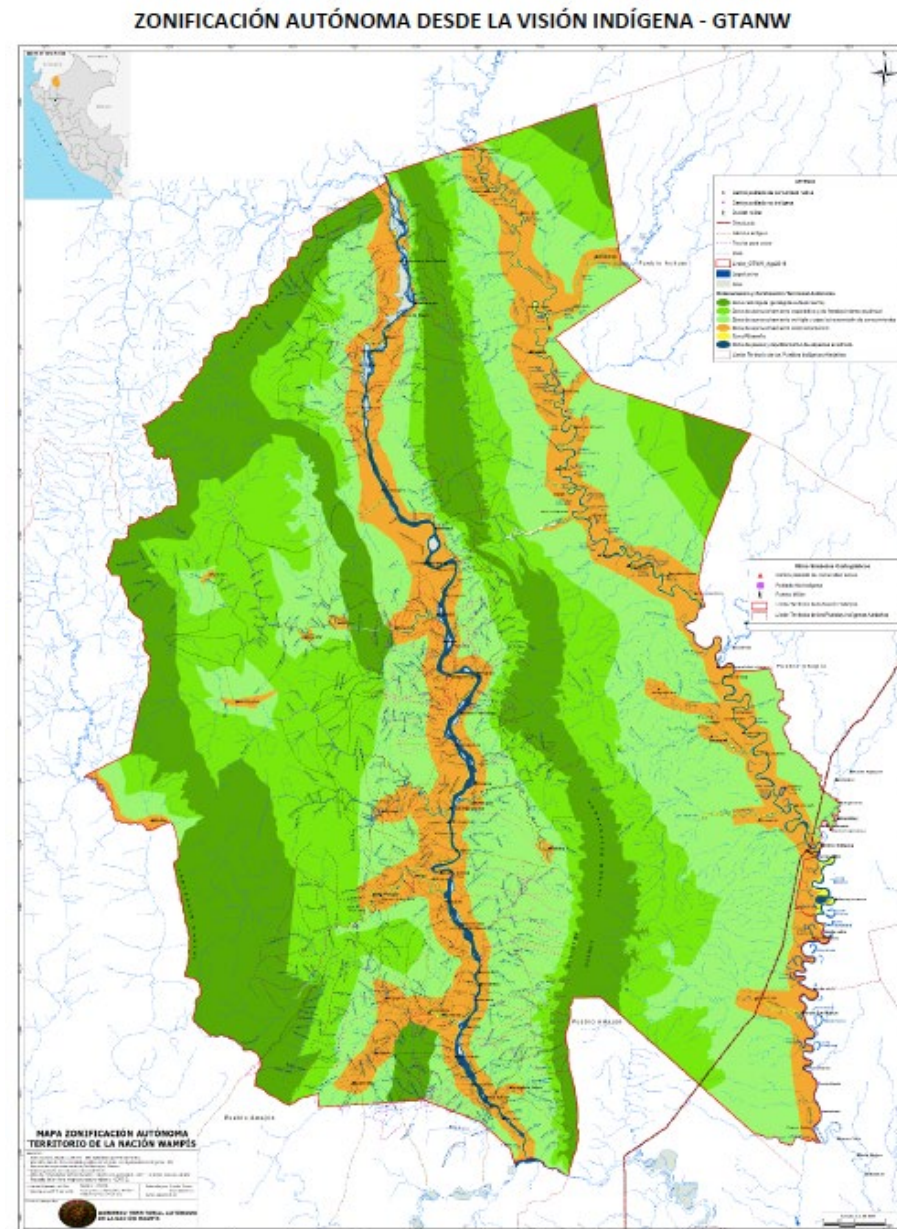


Custodians: Wampis Nation,
15,300 inhabitants



Gobierno Territorial
Autónomo de la
Nación Wampis

Autonomous zoning
of the Wampis
territory, based on
Indigenous vision.
Map: GTANW



subsoil, and space): “Our Nation and its people are part of this territory” (art. 21). The concept of “life rooted in territory” reverberates their ancestors’ inherited knowledge, wisdom and philosophies (art. 46). The Wampis asseverate that only this integral vision of territory is capable of securing their people’s good living, or *Tarimat Pujut* (art. 23). These ancestral relationships, intricately regulated between all beings, both visible and invisible to human eyes, are the foundation for their present-day autonomous governance. In this sense, the integral Wampis territory constitutes a ‘territory of life’ in its fullest sense.

The Wampis language as well as their ancestral knowledges remain alive in everyday activities and are

also reflected in the many stories about the common origin of all the *jívaro* peoples; these stories frequently refer to places where their ancestors lived. Of particular spiritual relevance within Wampis territory are the three sacred cordilleras: Kampankias, Ichinkat Mura, and Tuntanain (see Wampis Statute, art. 39). The waterfalls in these mountain ranges are particularly important places for meditation and the search of vision provided by the *Arutam* spirit of the ancestors. Acquiring vision is considered essential to become a strong and brave man or woman, a good hunter or warrior. Nowadays, vision is also central to becoming a good professional or a respected Indigenous leader.

In activities such as hunting, fishing and crop

cultivation, Wampis men and women establish personal relationships with powerful beings that exert control over the various fields of human action: *Etsa*, the sun; *Arutam*, the ancestral spirit; *Nunkui*, the mother of the earth and the plants who provides abundance; *Tsunki*, the owner of the depths of the waters and aquatic life; *Tijai*, owner of wildlife; and other spirits and beings. A good relationship with these beings prevents scarcity, hostility, loneliness, or even death. For the Wampis, political power (that is, governance) is also intricately related to the spiritual powers that emanate from the territory and the beings that inhabit it.

The Wampis remain associated to ancestrally used areas and *purmas* (*asaak*), which continue to be ecological, social, and cultural refuges. Although for the Wampis people these places of historical importance are relatively far from the main settlements today, the Wampis families remain the heirs of detailed ancestral knowledge about the *collpas* (ponds) and other places where wildlife, fish, important trees, plants, and other resources abound. The *purmas* of the ancestors exert in the present a kind of territorial centre of gravity for their descendants, who have the right to reuse and resettle there – and therefore mark territorial boundaries between kinship groups (GTANW 2016: 74).

Among the Wampis, a subsistence economy based on reciprocity remains. The subsistence needs are largely fulfilled by small garden plots and resources harvested from the forest, rivers, streams, and fish ponds. The type of cultivation (clearing and rotating plots) proves efficient for the conservation of the ecological levels of Amazonian forests (GTANW 2016: 66; Chicago Field Museum 2012: 312). The forest provides the space to collect wild fruits, medicinal plants, honey, insects, larvae, and game animals; furthermore, timber species and yarn palm leaves are used to build houses, canoes, spears, blowguns, musical instruments, ornaments, and various utensils.

While the Wampis still have low levels of consumption of imported products and modest need for money, some products like plantain, manioc, and peanuts



Iña Wampisti Nunke.

The Integral Territory of
the Wampis Nation in the
Peruvian Amazon. Video 3:39
min., 2021 (English subtitles).



A shared meal of meat, yucca and plantain during collective work in the chacra garden. Photo: Jacob Balzani Lööv



(in some cases dried salted fish and game) are sold in nearby towns and to itinerant merchants. The cultivation of cacao is another important commercial activity for many families.

Self-governance: the Autonomous Territorial Government of the Wampis Nation

The ancestral way of living in their territory *Iña Wampisti Nunke*, which altogether constitutes a system of life, is what provided the means for a territorial political organization around sub-basins and rivers. In the exercise of their right to autonomy and grounded in international, constitutional, and their ancestral jurisprudence, the Wampis declared their Nation's Autonomous Territorial Government (GTANW) and issued their collective governing Statute in November 2015. They became the first Indigenous Nation in Peru to do so.

The Wampis Government has a supreme decision-making body called the *Uun Iruntramu*, an assembly composed of elected representatives called *Irunin*. Additionally, there are three more levels of governance: the central government, the river-basin governments of Kanus and Kankaim, and the communal governments. Three ordinary sessions are held per year and extraordinary assemblies when necessary. The Statute determines membership, leadership, and election processes.

At the family level, the Wampis exercise a high level of autonomy in the organization of daily chores and their

economic life. The present-day communities emerged in the 1950s and 60s and are administered by the communal assemblies, which elect a board of directors headed by a president (today called *iimaru*). The board seeks agreements among families and community members. Rules about the conservation, access to and use of natural resources are generally incorporated in written communal by-laws.

In Peru, the communal property regime does not consider Indigenous peoples or First Nations as a subject of rights. In the face of increasing threats brought by the expansion of settlers arriving with the construction of Amazonian roads in the 1960s, the Wampis organised themselves in Indigenous federations. In this manner, they succeeded in taking advantage of the Native Communities Act of 1974 for the promotion of state demarcation and land titling processes that led to the legal recognition of a considerable part of the Wampis territory as 'titled communities' along the riverbanks (Chirif and García Hierro 2007). Areas collectively used by the Wampis people that cannot be assigned to a particular group (such as wildlife reserves or sacred areas) were left untitled (GTANW 2016: 38). Together with the superposition of different foreign administrative categories (districts, provinces, and protected areas), this resulted in the fragmentation of the legal status of the ancestral territory.

No Indigenous people in Peru has achieved the titling of their ancestral territory as a single, integral block (GTANW 2017). However, under international law, the

state has an obligation to recognise the ancestral territories of Indigenous peoples.²

The sacred hills of Kampankias: heart of the Wampis territory

The Wampis territory is completely covered by tropical forest, except for small agricultural plots and the settlement areas. Along the Andean foothills, it is one of the few remaining regions that retains full and undisturbed connectivity between the Amazon plains and the higher altitude humid forests, thereby evidencing extremely diverse flora and fauna. The Kampankias (also known as Kampankis) range consists of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems between 800-900 meters above sea level, with endemic species and threatened species of mammals, amphibians, reptiles, and birds (the most emblematic being the jaguar, boa, and tapir).³

The tropical forests of the Kampankias are also a source of clean water and an important carbon stock, above- and below ground. It is a reservoir of seeds for timber trees and other useful plants as well as a safe haven for the reproduction of animals – which make its conservation exceedingly important (Chicago Field Museum 2012: 270).

Several protected areas, officially administered by the Peruvian government, currently overlap in part or fully with titled communities and important sacred areas



“We demand that no protected area be created [by the state], because for us that would mean losing the ancestral ownership of our territory; after having been ours, it would be controlled by the state. We would have to get permission to enter there, to make use of our own resources.”

Wrays Pérez in **Servindi, 2016.**

Carmen Pirucho, Sabia from Soledad community working at her chacra. Photo: Candy López



Fishing with nets in a subsidiary of the Kanus river. Photo: Jacob Balzani Lööv

² See, e.g., the case *Awas Tingni vs Nicaragua*: the ownership of the Indigenous territory is not determined by the land title of the property granted by the state; rather, the granting of that title constitutes the recognition of a pre-existing right. The legal justifications for the Wampis' right to their territory, as well as the viability of the concept of integral territory, are detailed in legal (GTANW 2017) and anthropological (GTANW 2016) reports.

³ A rapid biological inventory found more than 20 species of plants, fish, amphibians and reptiles described for the first time by Western scientists, as well as a unique floristic composition (Chicago Field Museum 2012).





Wrays Pérez, former Pámuk of the GTANW (2015-2021), speaking to the general assembly. Photo: Kathia Carrillo

of the Wampis territory: the Tuntanain Communal Reserve, the Ichigkat Muja–Coordillera del Condor National Park, and the Zona Reservada Santiago-Comaina (ZRSC). The ZRSC was established in 1999 as a transitory land-use category for areas that are envisaged to become protected areas in the future ('reserved zone').⁴ It extends from the Rio Santiago in the west to the Rio Morona in the east, and from the Peru-Ecuador border in the north to the Manseriche gorge in the south, and overlaps the entire Kampankias range and a considerable area of titled communities.

Given that Kampankias constitutes the heart of the Wampis' ancestral territory, and that its remarkable state of conservation is due to the fact that they have vigorously defended it for centuries, the Wampis oppose this categorisation as 'reserved zone' and state interference in its stewardship. Instead, they insist that the Peruvian state recognise it as an integral part of the Wampis' ancestral territory, under their self-determined governance and conservation.⁵



Since 2014, the **Wampis** run an autonomous environmental monitoring programme on the Santiago River (Kanus). Video: 2:20 min., 2021 (English subtitles).

A constant challenge: defending the territory for future generations and for the world

The Wampis have defended their territory with impressive success against colonization and other threats. The good state of conservation of the territory, with the forest cover intact, is undoubtedly thanks to this defense. A well-known example of their organisational capacity for territorial protection is the resistance to a series of decrees and laws enacted during Alan García's government (2008), which aimed to facilitate private investment in the Amazon by weakening the collective rights of Indigenous peoples (such as the right to ownership of their territories). This led to Indigenous mobilisations, which were attacked by the armed forces in June 2009, close to the town of Bagua, leaving 34 dead; an (known as the 'Baguazo' or 'Bagua massacre').

While such mobilisations have been an inevitable recourse in some cases, the legal route was and still is a main strategy for the Wampis' territorial defence. In 2019, they achieved, through a historic ruling in their favour, the annulment of oil lot 116 (overlapping the Kampankias hills), due to lack of consultation (Pérez 2019; Okamoto and Doyle 2019). And in 2020, joint legal complaints with the neighbouring Achuar people contributed to the **withdrawal of the company Geopark** from oil lot 64 (also superimposed on their

territory) prior to the start of the oil exploitation phase (see campaign on nacionwampis.com; also, Chirif and Barclay 2019).

Another achievement includes the abandonment, due to lack of consent, of a cross-border highway from the Ecuadorian side (known as the *quinto eje vial*), which would have provided access to the Kampankias range with the risk of encroachment by settlers. Likewise, thanks to coordinated action and constant pressure on national authorities, in 2018 the Wampis succeeded in expelling illegal gold mining, installed along the Kanus (Rio Santiago) since 2014. Despite the evidence of the strength of their organisation, the Wampis are aware of the possibility of the return of these and the existence of other threats, which is why they reiterate the need for permanent vigilance.

There are also plans to build 20 hydroelectric dams and a 'fluvial highway' on the Marañón River, close to the southernmost part of the Wampis territory. Both megaprojects pose serious threats to aquatic ecosystems and human subsistence, especially considering that the survival of the Indigenous peoples living in the area is closely linked to the territory. Illegal logging⁶ and the regularisation of small timber concessions in Peru's new forestry and wildlife legislation (Law No. 29763) is another source of concern and discontent. Internal challenges include the pressure

on their self-reliant economies due to population growth in some communities, and the disrespect of communal regulations, in some cases leading to scarcity of fish and game animals.

With the constitution of their Autonomous Territorial Government and the issuing of its Statute in 2015, the Wampis defined a series of priorities to strengthen their self-governance. They trained Wampis technicians in communications and launched an autonomous radio station (Tuntui Wampis), as well as a training programme for young Wampis leaders, in order to

⁴ The extension of the ZRSC was initially 863,277 hectares and later reduced to 398,449 ha. See Supreme Decrees **DS 005-99-AG** and **DS 029-2000-AG**. Also, Barclay et al. (2009).

⁵ See: *La Nación Wampis rechaza la pretensión de SERNANP de expropiarle Kampankias*; **Nacion Wampis, 25. Feb. 2021**. This rejection is nothing new. E.g., the **Chicago Field Museum (2012)**, stated that "The ZRSC [...] encompasses forests that the region's indigenous inhabitants have protected effectively for many years. As a result, indigenous residents are in disagreement with the Reserved Zone and have proposed that it be declared part of Wampis and Awajún territory."

The Oleoducto Norte pipeline of PetroPeru, which caused a major oilspill at Mayuriaga in 2016.
Photo: Jacob Balzani Lööv



revalorise cultural identity. As part of this effort, Wampis youth have designed culturally appropriate methods to build a Common Plan of Life (*plan de vida*) with the Wampis communities.

The design of protocols for external relationships, which promotes the respect of their people's right to give or withhold free, prior and informed consent, is another element in progress (Barclay 2020; Okamoto y Doyle 2019). Likewise, they decided to strengthen their environmental monitoring through the formation of communal committees to watch over the conservation and sustainable use of nature's bounties, according to the autonomous zoning plan (see map).

Finally, the Wampis' autonomous government seeks: (1) the recognition and respect of the Wampis people as rightsholders over their ancestral territory; (2) the autonomous determination of the internal ordering and governance of the territory according to customary law; and (3) the comprehensive protection of their integral territory by themselves, for both present and future generations, and for the Wampis as well as the world.

An man building a trap for ground birds, a construction that can take up to two days and is accompanied by traditional songs. Photo: Jacob Balzani Lööv

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People at work in the Mayuriaga oil spill. The disaster affected 30 km of quebrada before polluting the Rio Morona, affecting all the downstream population. Photo: Jacob Balzani Lööv

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⁶ Since 2020, a sharp increase in demand for balsa wood has become a concern (see **Mongabay, 28.01.2021**); the extraction is driven by timber traders from across the border in Ecuador. The GTANW has repeatedly demanded action from the Peruvian Government to implement border controls and has organised several interventions to stop the unregulated cut and trade of timber (see Nacionwampis.com, e.g.: **20.10.2020; 25.11.2020; 23.03.2021**)



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**.

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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.

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