

Martin, Pamela L. 2011. *Oil in the Soil: The Politics of Paying to Preserve the Amazon*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

*Reviewed by Patricia Widener
Florida Atlantic University*

Pamela Martin examines Ecuador's unique initiative to seek international funds to keep its oil in the soil in one portion of the Amazon. Ecuador's motivations are to combat climate change, to protect the region's biodiversity and the indigenous people in voluntary isolation, and to reduce poverty and inequality in the country. The state, with strong support from environmental groups, is asking the international community to provide US\$350 million per year for ten years, or approximately US\$4.55 billion, in order to protect the Yasuní-ITT block from oil extraction.

To explain the impetus and justification for this novel proposal, Martin weaves together four interconnecting themes: the Ecuadorian "good life" as identified in the 2008 Constitution; the formation of alternative norms including environmental and indigenous protections; the "social learning" that has developed from the transnational campaigns of the 1990s for environmental and indigenous rights and into greater dialogue between domestic groups and the state; and national and international political opportunity structures.

The "good life" is an interesting angle from which to examine the proposal, given that this concept is an integral component of Ecuador's new constitution and that it is presented as uniquely Ecuadorian. Simply put, though difficult to achieve, the "good life" is living "within nature, rather than dominating it, and protecting it for future generations" (p. 75). The "good life" also "signifies a turn away from a society and an economy based solely on market and profit-driven growth toward a new form of democratic development" (p. 103). Martin explores the politics of this proposal from the high standard that Ecuador has set for itself.

Importantly, this work is the first early assessment of an original global effort; it captures the personalities, the politics, and the ethical and environmental commitments that launched this effort in 2007 and that have maintained it until now. Other nations with high biodiversity and the paradox of being both low-income and oil-rich may consider it as a guide. Martin also documents the pitfalls to leading this effort from the South, while reminding the reader that the "proposal is meant as a catalyst toward action with Ecuador in the lead" (p. 99). Many points, made subtle by such a composed writer, are powerful in their implications.

Martin captures well the miscues of Ecuador's president, including his active endorsement of two Yasuní-ITT plans. Plan A is for international funds to keep the oil underground—ideally to demonstrate a global "co-responsibility" for reducing carbon emissions and protecting the Amazon's biodiversity (p. 62). Plan B is for oil exploration and extraction. These types of domestic fluctuations that inspire both international receptivity and misgivings are bal-

anced diplomatically in this account. Martin notes, for example, that given the domestic “ping-pong policy approach” of the president (p. 52), it has not been an easy proposition to promote (despite backing by the United Nations Development Program).

Martin gives a clear depiction of what has happened and an account of the individuals involved in the process. Indeed, this work leaves no doubt that some influential members of Ecuador’s political class and its environmental groups are invested in the success of this project (though the voices of indigenous leaders and lesser known environmental or human rights groups are not well heard).

But there are questions not analyzed, as is understandable given the uncertainty of a proposal that is not yet finalized or adopted. Will diagonal, directional, or horizontal drilling be permitted? If so, could equipment be placed outside of the protected area that enables underground access? Is Ecuador saving or banking its oil (even if there are guarantees that the funds would be returned) until the world’s supply declines and the price climbs higher? Why is it that some of the parties that are interested in supporting the proposal (China, Spain, Chile, and Italy for example) all have oil interests in Ecuador? And finally, if international funds are received, who will benefit from them? This final concern is not a critique of Ecuador alone but of the persistence of inequality within most nations in allocating resources.

For policymakers, scholars, activists, and other interested observers, this case study is useful for understanding the time, energy, and skill of those most committed to pushing through innovative ideas, especially given the backdrop of competing political signals. It also reveals how one “good life” plan may be advanced in a somewhat tarnished context. As identified by Martin, Ecuador is simultaneously promoting both Plan A and Plan B (which has left domestic and international advocates flummoxed), continuing oil extraction elsewhere, and possibly ignoring its new constitution. Martin is careful to note that the constitution protects the natural environment and indigenous communities in voluntary isolation, which would possibly protect Yasuní-ITT from oil exploitation even in the absence of international funds. So to argue in support of Ecuador’s constitution is also to document and to identify when it may be broken.

Despite the limitations of the proposal, Martin writes that “[t]he Yasuní-ITT proposal pushed the normative struggles of man, nature, and market to the limit by calling for a global dialog about how the planet can survive if all countries follow the capitalist, market-based path of industrialization motored by fossil fuels without a plan to conserve and protect the planet” (p. 105). Ecuador has taken this leap. So in the end, the reader is asked to go beyond criticizing an offer that attempts to emphasize “people over petroleum and human rights over company rights” (p. 103), and either assist in realizing it for Ecuador (and other nations) or draft even better eco- and people-centric alternatives.