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MARISA HANDLER

The New Amazon

*In the face of petroleros, bribery, and soldiers, Ecuador's Sarayacu defend
a world and a way of life*



WHEN THE OIL WORKERS and soldiers arrived at their borders in December of 2002, the people of Sarayacu were ready. They had built twenty-five “Peace and Life” camps spaced evenly along the boundaries of their territory deep within Ecuador’s southern Amazon. Each camp held ten to fifteen people. When a work crew tried to enter Sarayacu land, members of the nearest camp formed a wall, holding the workers back by brandishing traditional *chonta* (palmwood) lances. Elsewhere, scouts detected four armed soldiers and radioed their location. The soldiers were met at the Bobonaza River by a cluster of enraged Sarayacu women. Their faces coated with traditional black *wituk* dye, their lances held upright, the women folded about the men as with one body. The outnumbered soldiers chose to surrender.

The women led their captives back to a village, where they requested the soldiers’ arms, sat them down, and spoke to them about the sanctity of the Amazon. They explained that the Sarayacu people are connected to the land, that it has held and supported them and their ancestors, that it is alive, that it must be treated with respect, and that oil drilling is an unacceptable violation. Then the women returned the soldiers’ guns, each one making an individual statement, a message of hope, as she handed back a weapon. Thus schooled, the soldiers were released.

This incident, memorialized in a video made by Heriberto Gualinga, has become a talisman for the Sarayacu and their allies, a shard of proof of what one determined community can accomplish in the face of some of the most powerful transnational corporations in the world—companies aided by the armed forces of a national government.

The oil workers were attempting to enter Sarayacu land at the behest of Compañía General de Combustibles (CGC), an Argentine-based corporation that had won a government-auctioned concession in 1996 to explore the territory for oil. The concession, known as Block 23, covered a 494,200-acre quadrangle of dense tropical rainforest abutting the Peruvian border in south-central Ecuador. About half of the concession falls within the boundaries of Sarayacu.

The Sarayacu (the territory and its people have the same name) number about two thousand strong. They are among the tribes of the Quichua, one of five indigenous groups occupying Ecuador's remote southern Amazon. Other indigenous communities within two of the groups, the Achuar and Shuar, have employed tactics such as civil disobedience to prevent oil exploration companies from entering their territory. So have the Huarani in northern Ecuador. But no indigenous community in Ecuador has succeeded like the Sarayacu at protecting their land from petroleum development. After years of attempts, oil companies have managed not even one unharassed visit on Sarayacu land. The resistance has combined the raw territorial vigilance captured in the video; sophisticated work with supportive nonprofit groups; and savvy intertribal organizing, making the region a critical battleground for the Ecuadorean government.

Both south and east of Sarayacu—all the way to Ecuador's borders—indige-



Sarayacu member Rebecca Gualinga talks about proposed oil exploration in 2002. The indigenous community later turned back oil workers from its borders.

nous territory has been blocked out for oil exploration in the southern Amazon. “The Sarayacu are the tipping point to the future of Ecuador’s forest and indigenous people,” says Kevin Koenig, Amazon Oil Campaign Coordinator at the California-based nonprofit Amazon Watch, which has worked with the Sarayacu for the past two years. “They are the gateway to the rest of the Amazon.”

The Ecuadorean government has developed a severe dependence on oil exports. Dominated by sales to American consumers—in 2001, 40 percent of the oil exported from Ecuador went to the U.S.—petroleum accounts for nearly half of Ecuador’s national budget income. Yet 70 to 80 percent of oil revenue goes directly to servicing the interest on Ecuador’s fourteen-billion-dollar debt. In thirty-five years of oil development, the debt has only increased, as has the nation’s poverty rate: from 47 percent of the population in 1967 to 70 percent in 2000.

International creditors, viewing the country’s oil reserves as assets to be liquidated, refuse to forgive Ecuador’s debt. The International Monetary Fund in particular is pressing Ecuador to open the

southern Amazon to development so that the country may continue making interest payments and receiving loans. “Petroleum is at the heart of all the social and environmental crises here,” says Esperanza Martinez, founder of the Ecuadorean NGO Acción Ecológica. Government officials insist that oil exploration will bring “development” to people of the forest, but the Sarayacu aren’t buying it. They’ve seen the future the oil industry brings, and they don’t want it.

MY FIRST GLIMPSE OF SARAYACU is from the window of a tiny, shuddering airplane, sputtering through the heavy skies of El Oriente, Ecuador’s Amazon. Below, the famous *mar verde* stretches languid and seemingly endless out of the foothills of the Andes: a thick cover of impenetrable green, threaded through with flat brown coils of river. Mario Santi, the elected coordinator of the Sarayacu’s *kampari* campaign (“voice of resistance” in Quichua), sits in front, my guide and host. He taps me on the shoulder, gesturing emphatically, mouthing out words over the bawl of the engine as we fly over Ecuador’s Pastaza province.

“Shuar territory,” he says, pointing

below. And then Achuar, another invisible line in the jungle. “And there, that is Quichua.” A few minutes later, he is pointing again, out of both sides of the plane, drawing geometric shapes in the air. “Block 23,” he hollers, “below us is Block 23.” Two minutes later, Mario is tapping me again, visibly excited. “*Mira, mira, Sarayacu.*” And there it is below us: tiny clusters of huts and cleared clay-colored squares, centered on the muddy scrawl of Rio Bobonaza.

We float down to the grass-covered strip of runway—recently cleared during a *minga*, or communal workday—and bump along to a gradual halt. Families instantly converge on the plane to greet us. The children, faces meticulously painted in wituk, stare dubiously at my backpack and sunglasses. Mario guides me through, greeting friends, laughing uproariously, plainly delighted to be home. We meet up with Marcia, Mario’s wife, and then head home to their *wasi* (a generous oblong space of about forty by twenty feet, enclosed by a four-foot-high wooden fence and covered with a thick weave of palm fronds). We stop every now and then to greet neighbors and sip

chicha, the ubiquitous drink derived from boiled, pounded, and then chewed yucca, which eventually ferments into a mildly alcoholic brew. Everywhere we stop, the people sit with us.

The slow-moving river, the pristine air, the dense old growth, the palpable stillness when the birds and humans quiet down—Sarayacu feels profoundly peaceful; the land itself feels deeply safe, as if centuries of protection have created a timeless refuge.

Ecuadorean officials insist that oil exploration will bring “development” to people in the forest, but the Sarayacu aren’t buying it. They’ve seen the oil industry’s work.

The Sarayacu would like to keep it that way, and they have mounted a sophisticated campaign to do so. In the Peace and Life camps, the people of Sarayacu spent three-and-a-half months nonviolently preventing incursions into their territory. “The resistance included youth, women, shamans, elderly,” says Santi. “It was the entire community.” Drawing upon resources from nonprofit partners such

as the Pachamama Alliance, Greenpeace, and the Rainforest Action Network, the Sarayacu have participated in the commissions and courts of the Organization of American States; gained pro bono representation by a New York-based public relations specialist; and launched a website that frequently posts blow-by-blow details of their resistance.

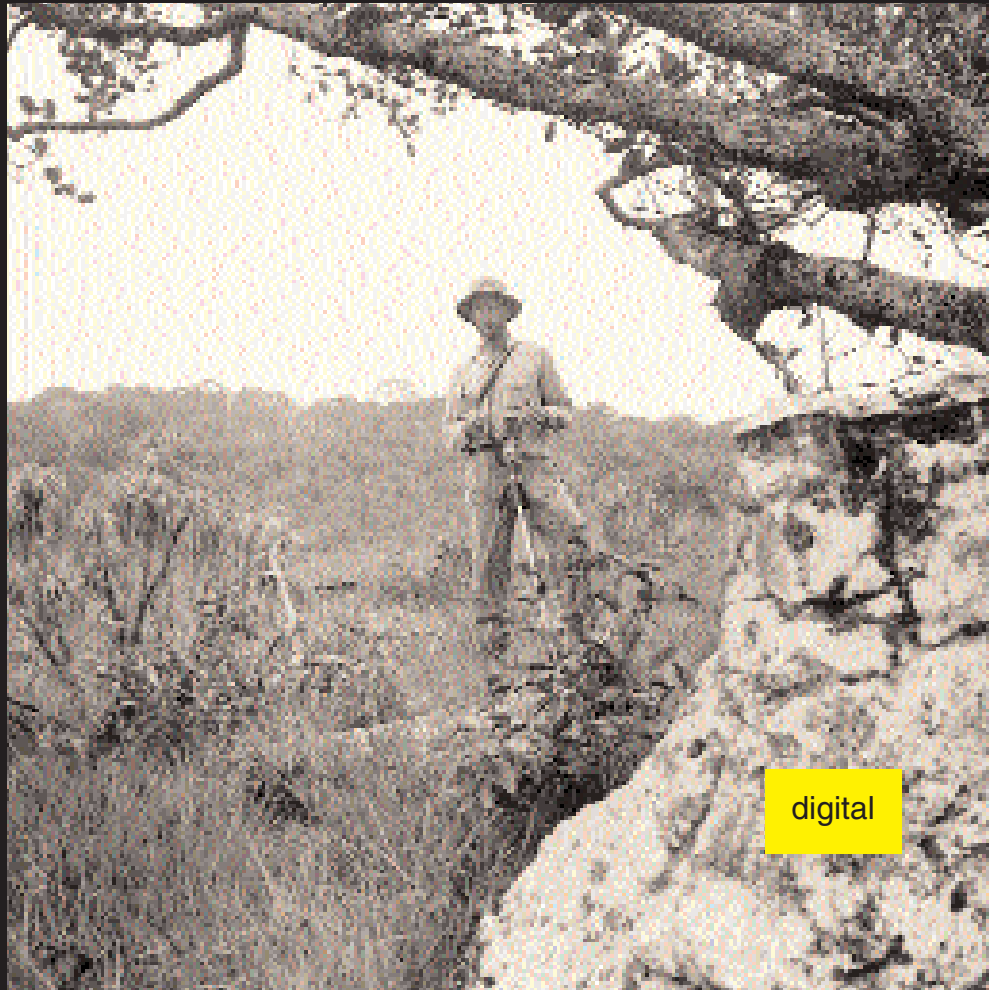
In 2003, the Sarayacu put their muscle to work, helping to organize a two-day summit representing all five

indigenous groups in Ecuador’s southern Amazon: the Shuar, Achuar, Zapara, Shiwiari, and Quichua. The meeting produced an alliance of 100,000 people and an unprecedented mutual-defense pact against oil exploration. “This isn’t happening anywhere else in the Amazon,” says Amazon Watch’s Koenig. “These are historic adversaries. But there is a common threat now, with the Sarayacu thrust to the forefront.”

The Sarayacu could characterize the common threat in one name: Chevron-Texaco. Under predecessor Texaco’s control from 1971 until 1991, and then under Ecuador’s state oil company, petroleum operations in Block 1 have devastated indigenous peoples to the north of Sarayacu. Eighteen thousand miles of seismic trails (cut to set explosives every hundred yards to sound for oil), 300 miles of roads, 339 wells, and 600 toxic waste pits have left a terrible legacy. Indigenous communities are suffering from disappearing game, damaged soil, spontaneous abortion, neurological disorders, and exceptionally high rates of cancer, along with prostitution, alcoholism, and displacement. “People in Block 1 are sick,”



Ecuadorean national police guard the courthouse in Lago Agrio, where indigenous people sued ChevronTexaco over oil development in Ecuador.



WADE DAVIS

THE LOST AMAZON

The Photographic Journey of Richard Evans Schultes

Plant explorer, scientist, lover of all things Indian and Amazonian, Richard Evans Schultes never presented himself as a photographer. Still, he was quietly proud of his pictures, as he called them. Between 1941 and 1953, in twelve years of almost continuous fieldwork in the Northwest Amazon, Schultes took hundreds of photographs, mostly of plants but also of scenes and moments that captured his imagination. The walls of his

fourth-floor aerie at Harvard's Botanical Museum displayed many of his favorites: Yukuna wrestlers from the Miritiparaná, the rock silhouette of the spirit from the chasm of Jirijirimo, Makuna youths peering into the abyss of the cataracts of Yayacopi. Like the man himself, the photographs appeared as if created in another century, another world.

Schultes was a naïve photographer. For him a beautiful image

was a photograph of something beautiful. An interesting photograph depicted something of note. He was not one to dwell in nuance or metaphor, and to have had his photographs formally critiqued from an artistic perspective would have amused him no end.

All of his photographs were taken with a Rolleiflex twin-lens reflex camera, which used compact roll film with 2.25-inch-square negatives. Introduced in 1927, when Schultes was twelve, these cameras had liberated popular photography by leading both professionals and amateurs away from the cumbersome large-format plate cameras that had dominated the field. Significantly, a person using a Rolleiflex composes the shot by looking into the camera from above. The Rolleiflex's point of view is not at eye level, but at waist height. Rather than towering over his subjects, Schultes tended to photograph from below, a perspective that enhanced the dramatic presence of the individuals.

Photography, of course, is not about equipment. But the Rolleiflex was an instrument so finely tuned that in the proper hands it became a partner in the creation of art. Schultes understood the fundamentals of the craft. He watched for the soft light of dusk in the Amazon, the twilight moments so fleeting in the tropics. He had an innate eye for composition and, needless to say, fascinating subject material.

The Indians he came to know so well had for the most part never seen a camera and never been the object of a photographer's zeal. There is an innocence in each of these visual exchanges that tells much about the level of trust Schultes established through his character and work. He was, if nothing else, a good man, honest and true. Having slipped away from the confines of his own world, he experienced through multiple lenses—his eyes, the delicately honed glass of his camera, the visionary realm of the magic plants he catalogued and experienced—an exotic land on the cusp of change. He was the right person in the right place at the right time to accomplish greatness and leave in his wake a remarkable photographic legacy.

In twelve years in the Amazon, he rarely kept a journal. He had no time. He generally traveled alone or with one native companion, learning early to eschew the cumbersome gear that dragged down so many expeditions of his era. He wore a pith helmet, khaki trousers and shirt, a kerchief, and, in the low country, leather moccasins saturated with oil purchased by mail order from L. L. Bean. Besides a machete, hammock, and his plant-collecting gear, he brought a cam-

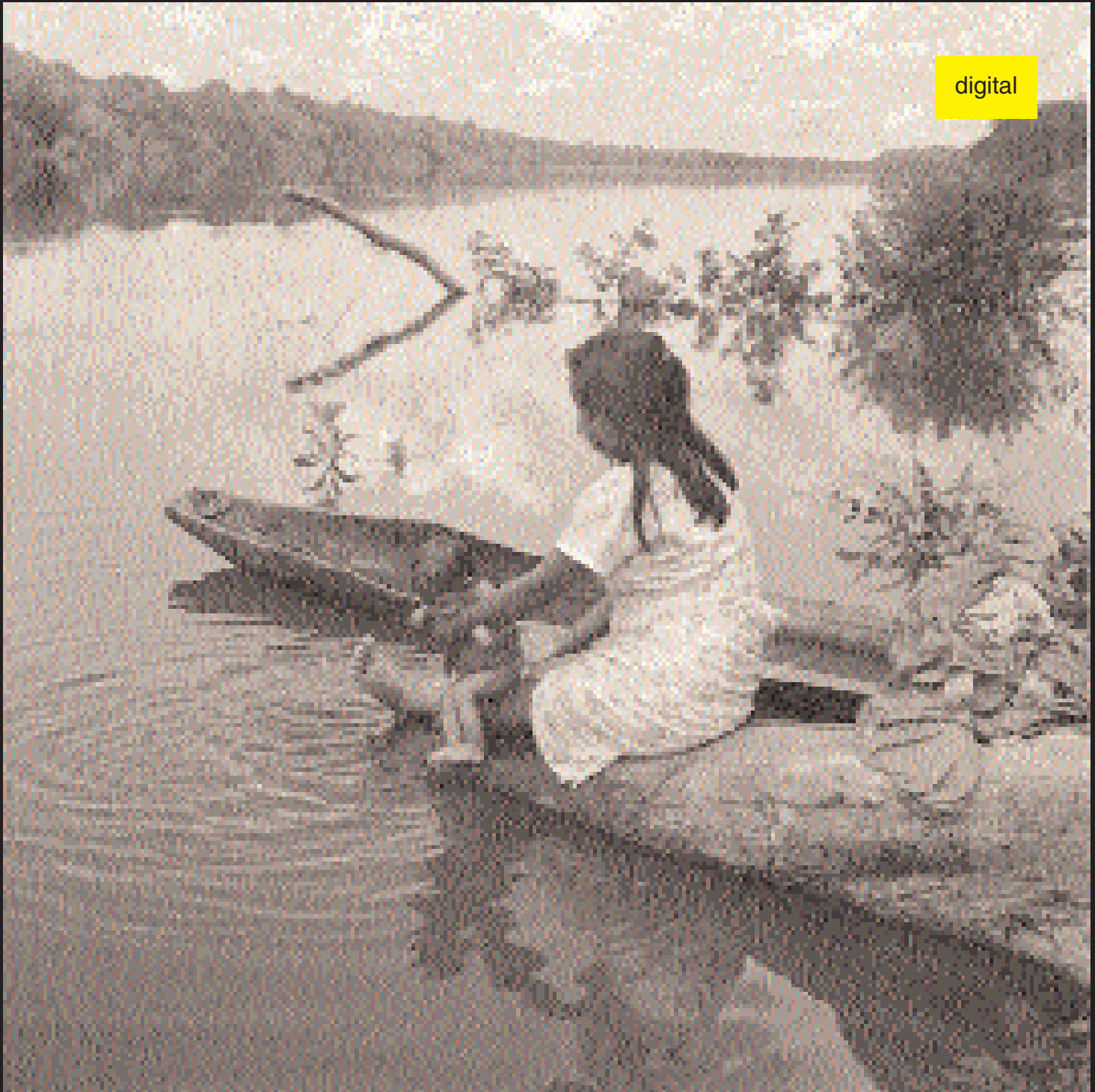
says Luis Yanza, of Ecuadorean nonprofit Frente de Defensa de la Amazonia, which is coordinating a historic \$1.5 billion class-action lawsuit against ChevronTexaco. "They are still drinking contaminated water. Their animals are dying. They cannot cultivate the land."

The Ecuadorean NGOs Acción Ecológica and the Centro de Derechos Economicos y Sociales have arranged for leaders from the affected regions to visit communities like Sarayacu to discuss the impacts of oil exploitation—and how oil companies have hidden them. They have also organized cultural exchanges. "The Sarayacu can get on a bus, head eight hours to the north, and see one of the worst oil disasters in the hemisphere," Koenig says about Block 1. "And it happened to their indigenous brothers and sisters in territory exactly like theirs."

Before we fly into Sarayacu, reachable only by plane, boat, or radio, Mario and I meet in the Sarayacu's office in Puyo, the nearest city. This office, the hub of their outreach campaign, holds two desks, one laptop and one desktop computer, one fax machine, one printer. Its walls are decorated with posters decrying oil exploitation. One of them reads, "Our land is our future." Mario himself is small, with a long ponytail and a wide smile. He holds himself with exceptional dignity and composure. "We are warrior people," he tells me. "Our strategy has been threefold. One level is international, the second is within Ecuador, and the third is on the front lines of Sarayacu."

When the Sarayacu decided to guard their territorial borders, they contacted Amazon Watch with concerns about the danger of violence; Amazon Watch sent them digital cameras to record the resistance and any potential abuse on the part of workers, plus solar panels to charge cameras and radios. Amazon Watch, in turn, uses the Sarayacu's materials, including video documentation, to pres-

digital



Cubeo mother bathing child at Soratama, Río Apaporis

THE LOST AMAZON

era, a spare set of clothes, and a small medical kit. For food he lived off the land, carrying as emergency rations only a few cans of his beloved Boston baked beans, less for sustenance than to boost his morale when things got rough. For reading he took Virgil, Ovid, Homer, and a Latin dictionary, as well as the eighteenth-century journals of the Spanish explorers Ruíz and Pavon.

The Northwest Amazon remains the wildest area in South America. On a map it is roughly triangular in shape, with a base running from Sibundoy through Iquitos in Peru and then along the Amazon to the Brazilian city of Manaus, with the apex at Puerto Carreño, the point at which Colombia projects into Venezuela and touches the Orinoco River. This was the world into which Schultes disappeared: Hundreds of thousands of square miles of undisturbed rainforest, traversed by thousands of miles of unexplored rivers, the homeland of some thirty unacculturated and often uncontacted Indian tribes representing six distinct language groups and sharing a profound knowledge of forest plants that had never been studied by modern science. It was, as he would write nearly fifty years later, a land where the gods reigned.

Within that immense forest he came to know not just the plants, but also the people who understood them best. From the Cubeo, he learned of *ipadu*, the powdered coca taken each day and throughout the night around the men's circle in the flickering light of the longhouses. The Yukuna tied magic herbs to his arms and taught him to wrestle. The Tanimuka dressed him in bark cloth and ritual masks, transforming his spirit into that of an animal to dance the Kai-ya-ree, the mythical story of the birth of the world. The Makuna took him to the geographic point of origin, a sacred rock where the primordial anaconda had come to Earth from the Milky Way. Among the Tukano, he became the first outsider to inhale the Semen of the Sun, a psychoactive powder. It turned out to be yet another new hallucinogen, derived from the blood-red resin of a forest tree previously unknown to science.

The key to Schultes's success lay both in the respect that he displayed for the Indians and in the time that he was able to live with them. Whereas most botanical expeditions, both in his day and since, would be measured in weeks, perhaps months, Schultes spent years in the most remote reaches of the forest. A window onto this world is provided by a letter written by Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff. On July 10, 1952, Reichel-Dolmatoff, who would become one of

sure Texas-based Burlington Resources Inc., which holds a 25 percent share of Block 23. (Paris-based Perenco holds the remaining 25 percent.)

The Sarayacu are also media savvy. "They have done a great job of creating spaces where their message can get heard," says Koenig, noting the tribe's role in a successful press conference to publicize the 2003 intertribal alliance. "The Sarayacu were the ones with the press list, writing up the release, calling the reporters."

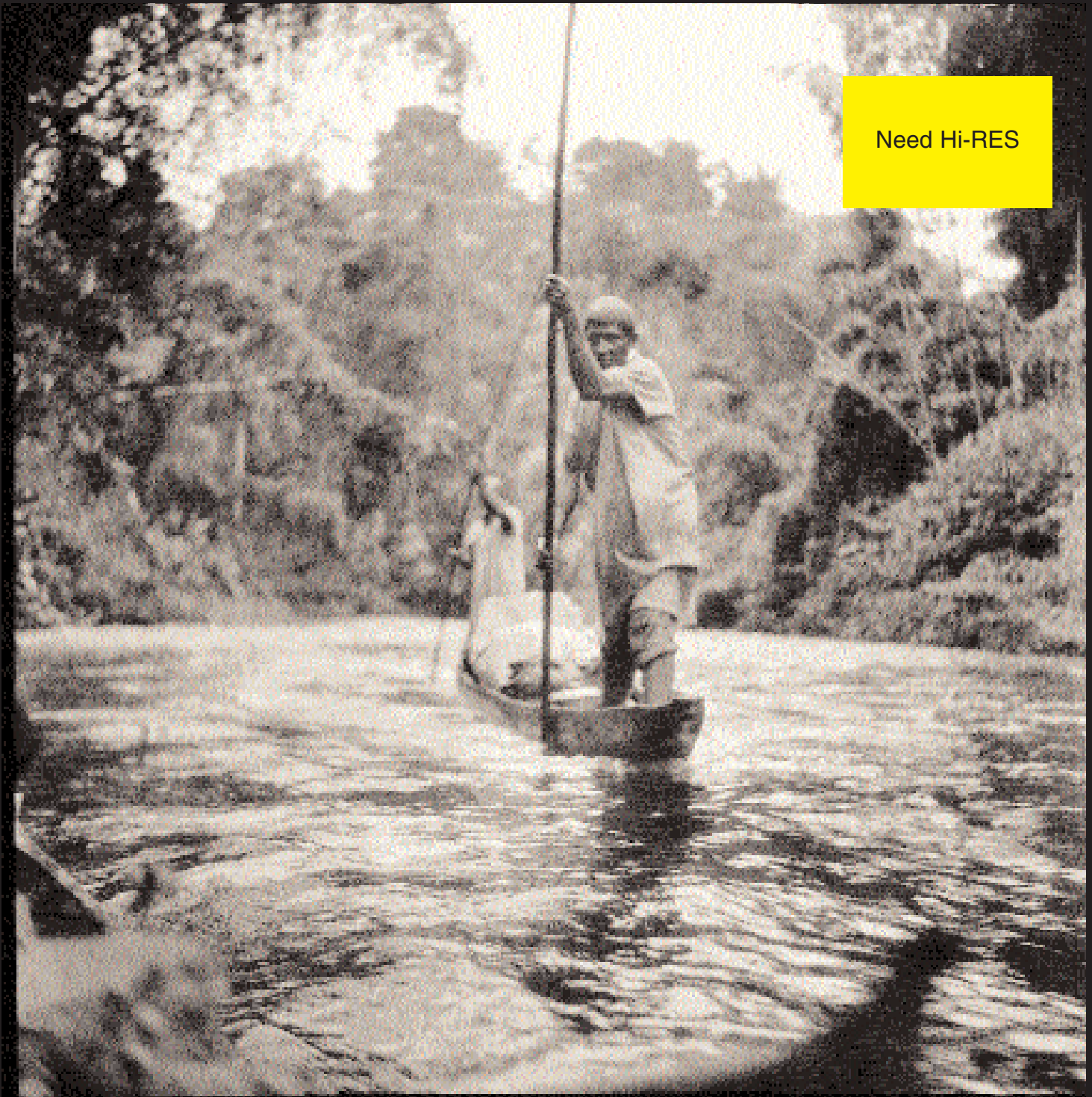
The tribe has also pursued their campaign in the global arena. In March 2004, Sarayacu President Marlon Santi presented their case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington D.C. After Ecuador's government representative didn't show up, the case went to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. On July 6, the court provisionally found in favor of the Sarayacu. On the same day, Ecuadorean Minister of Energy and Mining Eduardo Lopez announced a "total opening" of Ecuador's southern Amazon to oil exploitation, and called organizations that oppose this opening "undesirable."



Huarani Indians, clients in a suit against ChevronTexaco, wait to march to the courthouse in Lago Agrio in 2003.



Kamsá youth with the blossom of Culebra Borrachera, Sibundoy, June 1953



Cofán polling upstream Quebrada Hormiga, April 1942



THE LOST AMAZON BY WADE DAVIS, CHRONICLE BOOKS, 2004

The falls of Yayacopi, Río Apaporis

THE LOST AMAZON

Schultes's closest friends, met him for the first time:

"A steady rain was falling and the dank smell of forest was in the air. The people surrounded us....Most of them had malaria-worn faces; wiry little mestizos clad in tatters shook hands with us; in the background were some Indians, most of them naked, some with trousers. A tall stranger, gaunt and bearded, dressed in crumpled khaki, but unmistakably American, walked up to me and said: 'I am Richard Evans Schultes.'"

"There was something in his expression," Reichel-Dolmatoff would recall, "in his eyes that alerted me. The next day I noticed the same expression on his face. We had gone a few miles upriver and now were standing on the riverbank and in front of us, on the other side, the forest was rising like a wall. We looked in silence and then Schultes said, as if speaking to himself, 'I know every tree, every single tree one can see from here.' He was standing very quiet, eyes wide open, with up-drawn eyebrows. 'That man's a fanatic,' I thought, but immediately I corrected myself; no, that was not the word. He had not been talking about trees; it wasn't about trees at all. The forest meant something else to him; the forest was a mediator."

Twenty-one years later, in the fall of 1973, I found Schultes at his desk in Harvard's Botanical Museum. I introduced myself as an undergraduate student from British Columbia and said that I wanted to go to the Amazon and collect plants, just as he had done so many years before. At the time I knew little of South America and less about plants. Asking nothing about my credentials, he peered across a stack of dried herbarium specimens and, as calmly as if I had asked for directions to the local library, said, "well, when would you like to go?" A fortnight later I left for South America, where I remained for fifteen months.

Just before leaving Cambridge on that trip, I stopped by his office, hoping to pick up a few tips. He had three vital pieces of advice. First, I was to avoid pointless high leather boots, as all the snakes strike at the neck. Second, he recommended that I bring a pith helmet, because in twelve years he had worn one and never lost his bifocals. Third, he insisted that I not come back from the forest without having tried *ayahuasca*, the vision vine. Then he handed me two letters of introduction that, as it turned out, might as well have come from God, such was his reputation throughout Colombia and beyond. And so I went, as others had, and did what I could to honor his trust. 🐍

The Sarayacu's resistance to oil exploitation dates to 1989, when it used civil disobedience to prevent ARCO from completing a drilling project in Block 10, part of Sarayacu territory. That opposition prompted the 1989 Sarayacu Accord, which called for a halt to those oil operations until environmental measures were enacted, and promised the tribes communal title to all indigenous land in Pastaza.

The government renounced the agreement the following year. And so in 1990 the Sarayacu, along with tens of thousands of others, marched in the first of several massive peaceful uprisings in Ecuador held through the early 1990s. In 1992, President Rodrigo Borja bowed to the protests, this time granting actual title deeds to the Achuar, Shuar, Shiwiar and Quichua for approximately 70 percent of the Pastaza province—three million acres of land.

But Ecuador's constitution retains the old Spanish principle that while the land belongs to the people living on it, the resources underground still belong to the state. In 1996, without consulting the Sarayacu, Ecuador auctioned off a number of land holdings for oil exploitation, and CGC bought one of them, Block 23,



U.S. lawyer Steven Donziger, with some of his 30,000 clients in a lawsuit against oil pollution in Ecuador.

later selling shares to Burlington and Perenco. “They never filed an environmental impact report,” says Santi, noting that the constitution requires that CGC file such a report on the seismic testing it tried to conduct in 2002. “They broke the law.”

Because of political resistance in Pastaza, the CGC did not enter Block 23 between 1996 and 2000. But in a standard tactic employed by oil companies in Amazonia, it did attempt to buy the sup-

Every tribal member aged ten years and older participated in the campaign, occasionally with painful consequences.

“I went with the students in early 2003 to defend our land, and our natural resources,” says Maria Machoa, a teacher at the high school in Sarayacu Center. “I had to leave my little girl [with elderly caregivers]. She was sick, but we needed more people, so I went. When I returned,” she says, her voice low and rough, “she only lived another couple of

incorporating new allies. “Right now, we need to continue with our lives,” says Mario. “But we are ready. As soon as they announce that they are entering, we go straight to the borders.”

TOWARD THE END of my visit in Sarayacu, a contingent of controversial visitors arrives: Federally funded medical officials, invited by the community, come escorted by uninvited soldiers in an army helicopter. The Sarayacu are disturbed, particularly since one soldier is walking around with a video camera. When I ask the group’s leader, Colonel Marco Renteria, why the man is recording, he assures me that it is routine: “We film like tourists do. It’s just a graphic reference.” I ask him if it is possible this tape will assist the army in escorting the CGC. He reddens with anger and grows defensive. “No, it is not possible. We are here to help them develop. Nothing more. Nothing more. Look around. Don’t you think there can be more progress here?”

Later I watch the line of mothers with their babies in their arms. I watch as time and time again the pediatrician hands out drugs for parasites contracted from drinking river water. And it is in Sarayacu’s dilapidated clinic, filled with tired mothers and squealing children, that Renteria’s question returns to my mind. “Should there be more development here?” I ask Marcia as we walk to her home together.

“Why do we need it? Look at all the wealth here.” She gestures widely, taking in the river, the sky, the jungle. We are trudging through the stubborn Amazonian mud, me struggling to keep up, as usual.

“But what about a clinic?” I persevere. “What about better medical care? That kind of development.”

“We have our own medicine. Yes, it is good that the doctors are visiting,

Stymied in their divide-and-conquer tactics, the CGC offered the entire Sarayacu community \$60,000 in a bid to gain community consent. The Sarayacu said no.

port of individuals within the native community. “They wanted to give me money because I am a leader,” says Medardo Santi, the Kuraka—traditional head—of Calicali, one of the five community centers that comprise Sarayacu. “I said, if I take money from you, it would kill my family.” Stymied in their divide-and-conquer tactics, the CGC offered the entire Sarayacu community \$60,000 in a bid to gain community consent. The Sarayacu said no.

The company’s legal right to conduct seismic exploration expired in 2000. Nevertheless, in 2002, the CGC announced that it would be sending its workers into Sarayacu territory with armed escorts. That’s when the tribe decided to establish the Peace and Life camps, and the hard work began: cutting paths through the thick jungle foliage to mark borders, hefting huge supply sacks to the border, setting up the camps, taking fifteen-day shifts at the border for every two days’ rest at Sarayacu Center, the largest of Sarayacu’s five villages. Those not on the border stayed in the Center coordinating this resistance, or in Puyo organizing a global campaign.

hours more.” I ask her if she will return to the borders if the company tries to re-enter. “Yes, of course,” she replies quickly. “As if I’m not angry enough with those *petroleros*.”

Since the December 2002 confrontation between the soldiers and the chonta-wielding women, the CGC has not returned. After eight years of attempting to enter Block 23, and an investment to date of ten million dollars, the CGC has gotten nowhere, and the other oil companies have fared no better.

But the standoff in 2002 has only raised the stakes. In March of 2003, the Ecuadorean government extended the CGC’s contract in Block 23 in response to the indigenous defense. In February 2004, then-Minister of Energy Carlos Arboleda stated that the government “is prepared to provide all security guarantees to the CGC so that it can continue operations in Block 23.” Should the CGC and military again attempt to enter Sarayacu territory, the community would immediately return to a state of emergency, re-mobilizing the twenty-five Peace and Life camps—this time with about one hundred fifty people each,

although not the army. But no, we do not need more things. We have everything we need here.”

Mario echoes her words. “The word ‘development’ is a lie; it is egoism and only means poverty for the indigenous. The ‘developers’ have wreaked five hundred years of barbarism in our world.” He points out that the Sarayacu have plans to continue developing ecotourism, to export native ceramic work, and to implement sustainable “agro-industry”—from modernizing crop production for subsistence foods to packaging and exporting their medicinal plants.

Like other tribes in the region, the Sarayacu have lived off fish from the Bobonaza and wild game such as tapir for centuries. They also maintain small fields of yucca and banana, and collect fruits such as those of the chonta palms and nuts like the underground *mani*. Partly because they are geographically remote, partly because they have been less willing to relinquish their culture for western accoutrements, the Sarayacu rely relatively heavily on medicine stemming from centuries of shamanic wisdom. The *sabios* (shamans) of Sarayacu tend traditional healing plants such as the famous *ayahuasca*, used for entering into trances for spiritual purposes. The Sarayacu’s numerous shamans “make them very strong,” says Nathalie Weemaels, a Belgian agricultural engineer who has worked with the tribe for the past few years. “They [the Sarayacu] call themselves ‘the land in the middle,’ as in the middle of the universe.”

Unlike members of other communities in Amazonia, everyone I speak with in Sarayacu is well versed on oil exploitation and related global issues. And no other community in the region, perhaps on the continent, engages so thoroughly and openly in consensus-making deliberations. When the CGC announced it would be entering Sarayacu in 2002, for

example, the matter went to the Consejo Gobierno, a democratic assembly that deals with the logistics of running Sarayacu. But like any major decision, the question of organizing the border camps first went through the entire community in a lengthy *Asemblea del Pueblo*.

Sarayacu’s own system of indigenous education, which ranges from preschool to a university, reinforces the communal spirit. “It is different here because we think like a family, and participate in all aspects of the community,” says Joel Malaver, Director of Sarayacu Center’s high school, which focuses on agriculture, accounting and management, and conservation of natural resources. “Other kinds of education are very individualistic; people only want to succeed themselves. We have a mix of traditional education and the positive aspects of modernity. We try to foster an awareness of the importance of ecological preservation.”

One example: The tribe runs a sophisticated natural resources management program, developed in collaboration with a German university. For three years, Dionisio Machoa, who manages the program, enlisted the entire community to

count the animals on Sarayacu territory. In 2001, the community decided to set aside land to preserve large animals fundamental to their diet, such as tapirs. It is the fauna that disappears first once oil exploitation begins: Large animals escape to quieter areas, detonations kill fish, and workers with sophisticated weapons swarm in, ignoring tribal hunting restrictions. “We are not indigenous without the wild meat we eat,” says Machoa.

Johnny Dahua, an attractive twenty-three-year-old who worked out of the Puyo office during the resistance, is a typical product of the education system. Like many other young Sarayacu men, he wears his black hair in the traditional waist-length style. And like other youths, he became familiar with the Chevron-Texaco disaster at Sarayacu Center’s high school. “We learned how the petroleros come and offer us marvels,” says Dahua. “We learned about Block 1, and how they destroyed everything.” And they learned to fortify themselves against soldiers and the temptation of bribery and corruption. “Money comes and goes,” Dahua says, “but if you guard the jungle, it will be here a thousand years.” 🐾



A wasi, or home, in Sarayacu territory in Ecuador’s southern Amazon.