



ENDANGERED AMAZONIA

DEFENDING THE DEFENDERS OF THE AMAZON: CLIMATE JUSTICE, HUMAN RIGHTS AND ENERGY TRANSITION



AMAZONIA ALIVE:
PROTECT +
RESTORE
80% 2025
2030
AVERTING THE TIPPING POINT



COORDINADORA DE LAS ORGANIZACIONES
INDIGENAS DE LA CUENCA AMAZONICA

Technical Briefing: Key Takeaways

1. Violence against environmental defenders reflects a power structure that criminalises the defence of territory and protects extractive interests.
2. Being a defender of the Amazon involves taking life-threatening risks. The IACHR (2022) has pointed out that Indigenous leaders and environmentalists are subject to threats, judicial persecution, and murder for opposing extractive projects.
3. Of the countries in the Amazon basin, three have so far ratified the Escazú Agreement: Ecuador, Bolivia, and Guyana. Other Amazonian countries (such as Peru and Brazil) have signed the treaty but have not yet ratified it.
4. Protecting those who defend the forest—and recognising them as **legitimate political actors**—is a minimum condition for avoiding the tipping point.
5. In the context of the climate crisis, states are promoting an ‘energy transition’ towards cleaner sources. However, when this process ignores the rights of Indigenous Peoples or is built on new forms of extractivism, it becomes a ‘transition without justice’ (Gudynas 2021).
6. It is not just a matter of conserving biodiversity, but of restoring reciprocal relationships between humans and nature. Ultimately, a living Amazon offers the possibility of keeping all of humanity safe, and its loss would be an irreversible wound to the planet.

Foto: Jitogamaro Clan Yadiko Ceremony, La Chorrera, Colombia. **Credit:** Mauricio Granados.

Summary

Several regions in the Amazon are already facing a tipping point. The expansion of the extractive frontier—driven by mining, hydrocarbons, and illicit economies—is eroding not only biodiversity, but also the rights and lives of those who protect it. Environmental and Indigenous defenders, men and women who function as territorial guardians, face systematic threats, criminalisation, and violence in a context of structural impunity.

Through a review of international human rights frameworks, recent studies on environmental violence, and theoretical contributions from political ecology, it is argued that protecting defenders is essential to prevent the collapse of the Amazon biome and ensure effective climate justice.



Flooded Amazonian forest in the Santa Cruz Amazon of Bolivia. **Credit:** Jan Spickenbom, 2021.

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THE AMAZON UNDER PRESSURE: BETWEEN EXTRACTIVISM AND IMPUNITY

The Amazon is one of the most complex and vital ecological systems on the planet. It regulates the global climate, stores billions of tonnes of carbon, and is home to more than 500 Indigenous Peoples who have maintained a balanced relationship with the forest for millennia. However, the dominant extractive model—based on oil, mining, and agro-industrial exploitation—has triggered accelerated degradation that threatens to bring the biome to a point of ecological no return (IPCC 2023).

This crisis is not only environmental but also related to political and human rights-related issues. Violence against environmental defenders reflects a power structure that criminalises the defence of

territory and protects extractive interests. According to Global Witness (2023), at least 177 defenders were killed worldwide in 2022, more than a third of them in the Amazon. In Peru, Mongabay (2023) documented 29 murders of environmental defenders between 2010 and 2022, most of them linked to conflicts over logging, illegal mining, and drug trafficking.

The Amazon region shows common patterns: absence of the state, corruption, and expansion of illicit economies. The clandestine airstrips used for drug trafficking, illegal crops, and intensive deforestation in Indigenous territories reflect the convergence between legal and illegal extractivism (Bebbington et al. 2018). This context places defenders on the front line of risk, especially in frontier areas where institutions are weak and violence acts with impunity.



Jamner Manihuari, peruvian indigenous leader and COICA's Vicecoordinator at 2024 Climate Week protest. New York. **Credit:** Coica

THE DEFENCE OF LIFE IN THE MIDST OF ABANDONMENT

Being a defender or an advocate for the Amazon involves taking vital risks. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR 2022) has pointed out that Indigenous leaders and environmentalists are subject to threats, judicial persecution, and murder for opposing extractive projects. In many cases, those responsible for these acts remain unpunished. Violence also has a structural component: it is embedded in historically marginalised territories where the state's presence is limited to its extractive or military arm.

For the Amazonian Indigenous Peoples, territorial defence is not a political option but a way of life. 'Defending the forest is defending life,' says Jamner Manihuari, Cucama Cucamiria leader and defender of the territory in the Peruvian. The forest is not a resource but a living entity, part of a relational network that sustains existence.

Despite formal recognition of the right to defend rights—enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (UN 1998)—implementation in the Amazon region remains insufficient. National protection mechanisms are fragile, bureaucratic, and, in many cases, inaccessible to remote Indigenous communities. In Colombia, the Early Warning System has identified persistent risk patterns between 2022 and 2025 (Ombudsman's Office 2023), while in Brazil and Peru judicial criminalisation is used as a strategy to silence dissenting voices.

Of the Amazonian countries, three have so far ratified the Escazú Agreement: Ecuador, Bolivia, and Guyana. Other Amazonian countries (such as Peru and Brazil) have signed the treaty but have not yet ratified it.

ENERGY TRANSITION AND AMAZONIAN JUSTICE

In the context of the climate crisis, states are promoting an 'energy transition' towards cleaner sources. However, when this process ignores the rights of Indigenous Peoples or is built on new forms of extractivism, it becomes a 'transition without justice' (Gudynas 2021). In the Amazon, hydroelectric, mining, and green hydrogen projects are advancing under the banner of sustainability but often involve **territorial dispossession and loss of sovereignty**.

From an Amazonian perspective, a fair energy transition requires going beyond technological replacement. It involves recognising the autonomy and knowledge of the peoples who have protected the forest without relying on fossil fuels. For states, this means gradually abandoning their dependence on oil and gas, which sustain deeply unequal extractive economies (Svampa 2019).

Indigenous peoples offer alternatives based on the bioeconomy, local energy sovereignty, and the protection of the standing forest; these proposals are now being discussed in initiatives such as Amazonia for Life: protect and restore 80% by 2025, led by the Coordinator of Indigenous Organisations of the Amazon Basin (COICA).

DEFENDING THE AMAZON MEANS DEFENDING THE FUTURE

The defence of the Amazon and that of its defenders converge as one and under the same cause. Violence against leaders and territorial guardians is not a marginal phenomenon: it is the most extreme symptom of a development model that conceives nature as a commodity and territories as zones of sacrifice.

Thomas Lovejoy and Carlos Nobre warned that if deforestation exceeds 20 to 25 per cent of the original coverage, the Amazonian system could collapse and turn into a savannah (Lovejoy and Nobre 2018). In 2024, RAISG data indicate that around 28 per cent has already been lost. We have exceeded the threshold at the regional level, but in some regions of Brazil and Bolivia the time for mitigation has passed and the forests have disappeared. Defending the Amazon is literally defending life.

COICA has burst onto the international scene to change not only the narrative but also to focus on the need to protect and restore the Amazon and its peoples as a crucial measure to protect the planet. The era of empty rhetoric and COPs without bind-

ing resolutions is over. At COP30, which will take place in Brazil – with the Amazon as the epicentre of the global conversation – we cannot ignore the tipping points of no return that humanity is facing.

Climate justice will not be possible without territorial justice. Protecting those who defend the forest – **and recognising them as legitimate political actors** – is a minimum condition for avoiding the tipping point. As Escobar (2016) and Kimmerer (2020) point out, it is not just a matter of conserving biodiversity, but of restoring reciprocal relationships between humans and nature. Ultimately, **a living Amazon offers the possibility of keeping all of humanity safe**, and its loss would be an irreversible wound to the planet.



Jamner Manihuari, peruvian indigenous leader and COICA's Vicecoordinator at 2024 Climate Week protest. New York . *Credit: Coica*

About the author



Jamner Manihuari, Deputy Coordinator, COICA. Indigenous leader of the Kukama Kukamiria people, originally from the Achual Tipishca Native Community in the Loreto region of Peru. With more than 27 years of experience, Jamner has dedicated his life to defending the rights of Amazonian Indigenous Peoples and the governance of their territories. He has chaired key organisations such as the Coordinadora Regional de los Pueblos Indígenas (Regional Coordination of Indigenous Peoples, CORPI SL), the Federación de Comunidades Cocama Cocamilla (FEDECOCA, Federation of Cocama Cocamilla Communities) and the Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana (Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest, AI-DESEP), coordinating local, national, and international efforts for climate justice, territorial recognition, and organisational strengthening. He is currently studying law at the Technological University of Peru, reaffirming his commitment to the legal and political defence of Indigenous peoples.

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