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Women, Cocoa and Natural Resource Conservation in the Ecuadorian Amazon

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Abstract

The Waorani, one of the seven “nationalities” that inhabit Ecuador’s Amazon rainforest, live in one of the most highly contested areas of the country. They inhabit an ethnic reserve which is partially surrounded by the famous Yasuní National Park, one of the global biodiversity hotspots which also happens to be situated above some of the most conspicuous crude oil reserves, the country’s main export.

For centuries they have inhabited their ancestral lands but the increased presence of “alien” actors, such as petrol companies, has changed the dynamics of their territory by establishing infrastructure and by kick-starting a drive to modernisation which has had dramatic effects for indigenous populations, such as pollution, deforestation and uncontrolled wildlife extraction.

In this environment the Waorani, lead by their own women’s association (AMWAE - *Asociación de Mujeres Waorani de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana*) and aided by the support of other international NGO’s, are pursuing the objective of finding new, economically viable and sustainable means of income. They have chosen chocolate production as their best option and have begun by planting *Theobroma cacao*, a native species, in previously deforested plots, thus reclaiming marginal areas and linking them to their communities. Their objective, which is on the verge of becoming reality, is to be able to process the raw cocoa beans, a cash-crop, into an own brand of chocolate by integrating into an existing value chain. The sales of the chocolate will benefit their communities as the raw cocoa will be purchased above market price at an increasing rate, thus raising the financial and social status of the Waorani.

There are many difficulties to be overcome however as the Waorani are only recently converting from hunting to agriculture. In this qualitative student’s investigation the deeper meaning of cocoa will be explored from the perspective of AMWAE, using ethnographic enquiry and interpretative phenomenological analysis.

In collaboration with AMWAE a number of entries to the territory have been arranged which have provided primary data for the production of a MSc. thesis written at Wageningen University (NL) under the framework of the International Master in Rural Development, supervised by Universiteit Ghent (BE).

Keywords: Amazon, chocolate, cocoa, gender, relational place-making, Waorani