

Bolivia must practice what it preaches

Monday 27 May 2019, by [BIGGS Shannon](#), [BUXTON Nick](#) (Date first published: 24 May 2019).

A tribunal of jurists, ecologists, legislators and indigenous leaders declared that the Bolivian government has violated the rights of Mother Earth and indigenous peoples.

Bolivia's first indigenous president set out a bold and inspiring vision to save the planet from climate and environmental breakdown just over ten years ago.

[In an open letter, Evo Morales said "Mother Earth is ill."](#) He urged the industrialised countries to drastically reduce emissions, increase technology transfer, and provide aid to those most affected by climate change.

Most of all, Morales said the international community had to address the structural causes of climate change. Morales declared that humanity faced a choice "to continue in the ways of capitalism and death, or to start down the path of harmony with nature and respect for life".

Mounting anger

His prophetic words were largely sidelined or ignored at the time, but are echoed in the rising movements of schoolchildren, Extinction Rebellion activists, supporters of rights of nature and people calling for a Green New Deal.

They express the mounting anger that political leaders have so far chosen the deadly path of self-destruction, evident in the reports of ever-rising greenhouse gas emissions and the possible extinction of a million species within our lifetime.

So it is disturbing, despite his prescient warnings, that Morales seems to have made a choice to destroy a rich, biodiverse Amazonian region and indigenous territory within his own country.

That was the conclusion of a tribunal of globally renowned jurists, ecologists, legislators, activists and indigenous leaders, [which declared on 15 May that the Bolivian government had "violated the rights of Mother Earth" and "the collective and individual rights of the nations and Indigenous peoples of TIPNIS"](#).

In most countries, "nature" is seen as property, to be owned and destroyed for profit. The Rights of Nature, now law in nine countries including Bolivia, seeks to redefine ecosystems as having the right to exist and regenerate their vital cycles.

Unique laws

As rights-bearing entities, ecosystems have legal standing in a court of law. Evo Morales was once a champion of the Rights of Nature, and enacting it into law for Bolivia.

The decision by the International Tribunal on the Rights of Nature came in response to a petition by indigenous communities in the Amazonian region of TIPNIS who opposed a government-imposed

road that would cut through the heart of their territories.

The tribunal's investigations found that the road had been approved without any environmental impact assessment and without the full prior, free and informed consent of its indigenous peoples.

[Studies show that the TIPNIS road, currently under construction, will likely lead to the deforestation of 50 percent of the territory's rainforest](#) within 20 years - a complete breach of Bolivia's own unique laws that recognise the rights of nature.

As the former Bolivian ambassador to the UN, Pablo Solon, put it: "We might expect neoliberal extractivist politicians to do this. But it's particularly painful when it is done by former comrades who wave a banner of Mother Earth in the air while crushing those very rights under foot."

Systemic shift

The truth is that the world needs the radical systemic shift Morales urged a decade ago, one that changes our relationship to nature and prioritises the environment and people over profits.

This is no longer a position held only by activists, but increasingly by scientists, too. The IPCC report in October 2018 said keeping temperature increases below 1.5 degrees centigrade requires "far-reaching transitions in energy, land ... and industrial systems" for which there is "no documented historic precedent."

Similarly, the UN Global Assessment on Biodiversity released in May 2019 notes that only "transformative change" can hope to stave off mass extinction, which they define as "a fundamental, system-wide reorganization across technological, economic and social factors, including paradigms, goals and values."

The UN Biodiversity Assessment also contains strong conclusions that the Bolivian government would do well to consider as it decides how to respond to the Tribunal on the Rights of Nature.

Notably, they show how land-use change, such as the building of roads, oil exploration or expansion of the agricultural frontier into intact ecosystems is the single biggest cause of biodiversity loss, far more than even climate change.

Deeply cynical

Conversely, they show that nature that is managed by indigenous peoples, while under ever more pressure, is declining less than in other regions.

The report [explicitly states](#) that the world "would benefit from an explicit consideration of the views, perspectives and rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, their knowledge and understanding of large regions and ecosystems, and their desired future development pathways."

It would be a tragedy if the Bolivian government decides to choose the path of destruction in TIPNIS just as more of the world's people recognise the wisdom of Morales' words on the need for "harmony with nature and respect of life".

Yet powerful words without action are not only empty, they are deeply cynical and deceitful. Bolivia is hardly unique in choosing industrial development at all costs over nature - nor is it clearly as culpable as the richest countries who have already decimated their natural environments.

But for a moment, Bolivia's government seemed to point to an alternative path to well-being, a path

that we all must take for humanity's survival.

It would be wonderful if the Bolivian government would start again to walk that path, exploring with all who love this planetary home a new way to live in harmony with Mother Earth.

These Authors

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