

A round-up of environmental news from Central America

Compiled by ENCA member Martin Mowforth

Costa Rican government plans a law to re-activate opencast mining at Crucitas

In October this year, the Costa Rican government announced that it will present a law to allow the re-activation of opencast gold mining in Crucitas in the north of the country. The government's stated aim is to open the exploration and exploitation of gold to tenders from interested companies. It also states that it aims to halt the illegal exploitation of gold by individuals who pollute the area through their use of mercury in gold extraction and who essentially steal what belongs to the country. Illegal mining practices have been a regular feature of gold mining in Crucitas. Franz Tattembach, the Minister of the Environment and Energy, said that they sought a regulated exploitation that protects the environment by applying good practice.

The country had recently won a lawsuit against the Canadian mining company Infinito Gold which had sought almost \$400 million (USD) in compensation after their mining operations had been closed in 2010 due to its environmental impacts. After the closure, however, small scale miners began to illegally exploit the gold using cyanide and mercury, causing severe environmental damage.

<https://semanariouniversidad.com/pais/mineria-a-cielo-abierto-en-crucitas-chaves-entrebrea-la-posibilidad-para-extraer-oro/>

Costa Rica's Corcovado National Park under threat from illegal gold mining

Corcovado National Park is a biodiversity hotspot that faces severe threats from illegal gold mining which leads to mercury poisoning of soil and water, eventually affecting humans through its journey up the food chain. High profits can be made from the illegally mined gold and criminal

groups are attracted to set up operations in the remote and dense forests of the area. Organised crime can recruit workers from poor communities who can work for days, extracting substantial amounts of gold before being moved on by their bosses to new spots in the Park. The remoteness and density of the forest make it difficult if not impossible for the authorities to detect and catch them.

<https://expat-tations.com/law/rampant-illegal-gold-mining-risks-corcovado-national-park-in-costa-rica/#:~:text=Corcovado%20National%20Park%2C%20a%20biodiversity,profits%20from%20illegally%20mined%20gold.>

Guapinol rights defender killed, Honduras



Guapinol land defender Juan López was killed in Tocoa, Honduras on 14th September 2024. (The case of the Guapinol defenders has been covered in numerous previous ENCA Newsletters.) This is not the first killing of defenders of the Guapinol River. In January 2023, Aly Magdaleno Domínguez Ramos and Jairo Bonilla Ayala were also killed and Oqueli Domínguez was murdered in July 2023.

A September 2023 appeal by the Public Prosecutor's Office against the Guapinol 8's final dismissal of their prosecution for peacefully protesting against the legality of an opencast mining project in the Carlos Escaleras National Park was admitted by a local court meaning that they could still face criminal prosecution.

Ismael Moreno, a Jesuit priest in Honduras, declared the killing to be a political crime aimed at paralysing the people with fear so that they would not

oppose the mining project. In 2021, Juan López had commented that environmentalists in Honduras run risks when they try to defend the 'commons' and pit themselves against the big interests. "When you leave your house, you always bear in mind that you don't know if you'll get through the day and be able to return home and see your family again."

<https://www.ohchr.org/es/press-releases/2024/09/honduras-murder-environmentalist-juan-lopez-criminalisation>

New President of Panamá promises to close the Darién Gap to immigrants

On 1st July this year, José Raúl Mulino was inaugurated as Panamá's new President. He has promised that, with the help of the United States, he will plug the immigration flow through the Darién Gap (See ENCA 89).

At his inauguration, Mulino met with the US Interior Secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas, with whom he signed an accord to repatriate migrants who cross the Darién Gap. He also met with the Colombian President Gustavo Petro who believes that plugging the Gap is unfeasible because it is too porous. Petro also pointed out that repatriations would necessitate multilateral collaborations with numerous other countries from which the migrants originated.

Mulino has also stated that he will urgently seek a project to guarantee the supply of water to the Panamá Canal which is a crucial motor of the Panamanian economy. Some Panamanian analysts believe that the most dangerous threat to the country's economy is the lack of fresh water entering the Canal – rather

than the passage and treatment of immigrants. It is worth pointing out that previous Presidents have sought the same.

It is also worth pointing out that in the last financial year to 30th September, income from the Panama Canal reached record levels despite a 20 per cent reduction in the number of boats passing through it due to the drought and consequent lowered levels of water – see previous ENCA Newsletters.

<https://apnews.com/article/panama-mulino-immigration-darien-gap-31f214b8c9885c6e9f943c5ed9cc9ac1>
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/a-p-panama-panama-city-alejandro-mayorkas-colombia-b2572152.html>

Belize and Guatemala talk trade and border management

The judgement of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the border dispute between Belize and Guatemala is currently pending. An oral judgement may be given before the end of this year although a full judgement is expected in 2025. In August this year, however, Belize and Guatemala began talks that should strengthen ties and ease tensions between the two countries.

Belizean Prime Minister John Briceño met with Guatemalan President Bernardo Arévalo regarding trade, economic cooperation, security, joint border management, energy, tourism, migration, the ICJ process and Taiwan. A trade delegation from Belize met with their Guatemalan counterparts and discussed their access to each other's markets. Regarding the border dispute, discussions concerned measures to ease tensions in the Sarstoon River area and commitments to abide by the ICJ judgements.

<https://www.breakingbelizenews.com/2024/08/30/belize-and-guatemala-talk-trade-and-border-situation-in-successful-engagement/>

International human rights and environmental NGOs condemn violence against Garifuna communities in Honduras

In October this year, a number of US-based and international organisations joined Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective in condemning the persistent violence committed against the Garifuna people of Honduras. ENCA sent the same statement separately to the Honduran government. Selected extracts from the public statement are given below.

- We, the undersigned organisations, condemn the recent attacks against Garifuna land defenders across Honduras, where Honduran National Police, private security forces, and individuals linked to organised crime harass, intimidate and profile members of multiple Garifuna communities with the goal of displacing them out of their ancestral territories for the benefit of extractivist and colonial settler projects.
- This violence reached a new climax on October 6th 2024 when Honduran National Police shot at unarmed Garifuna leaders in the Nueva Armenia community, who were peacefully reclaiming their ancestral territory usurped by the Palmas de Atlantida Company, leaving two leaders hospitalized and in critical condition.
- This violence is not new, contained, or an anomaly. It is part of an established history of human rights violations from the state of Honduras against Garifuna self-determination.
- As organisations dedicated to the protection and promotion of human rights and the environment, we raise our concerns about the violations occurring in Nueva Armenia and we remain firm in elevating the struggles of the Garifuna people. From different parts of the world, we reiterate our solidarity with members of OFRANEH, who are not and will not be alone in this fight for their ancestral rights.

For the full text of the letter and a list of the signatory organisations, please see:

<https://www.solidaritycollective.org/post/public-statement-organizations-condemn-violence-against-garifuna-communities-in-honduras>

Costa Rican plans to resume trawling?

As if the resumption of opencast gold mining (see above) didn't raise enough doubts about the authenticity of Costa Rica's claim to be an environmental champion, it was also reported in October this year that President Rodrigo Chaves plans to resume studies to reinstate trawling.

Trawling involves dragging a net behind one or more boats and is non-selective in its target fish. It is as likely to catch sharks, turtles, molluscs, sea urchins and starfish, most of which are of no or little commercial interest. Trawl fishing has been banned in Costa Rica since 2013 by order of the Constitutional Chamber which determined that the practice harms the environment. In 2020, former President Carlos Alvarado vetoed a law to reintroduce trawling.

The Constitutional Court has stipulated that any reinstatement of trawling must reduce bycatch significantly and consider factors such as ecosystem knock-on effects.

Studies have already taken place this year and last, but are now stalled due to a lawsuit by MarViva filed against INCOPECA (Costa Rican Institute of Fishing and Aquaculture) which has failed to release the information collected and methodology used in the studies. (MarViva is an organisation that aims to strengthen institutional and local capacities to optimize the sustainable management of the sea.)

<https://marviva.net/en/by-order-of-the-constitutional-court-incopesca-must-provide-marviva-with-the-requested-information-on-the-trawl-study/>
<https://ticotimes.net/2023/06/14/marviva-takes-legal-action-to-stop-trawl-fishing-in-costa-rica#:~:text=The%20lawsuit%20aims%20to%20p ut,impact%20on%20small%2Dscale%20fisherme n.>