

ECUADOR'S ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES

Ecuador lies on the northwest shores of South America, facing the Pacific Ocean. Located across the imaginary line that divides the globe into north and south, Ecuador is known as 'the country in the middle of the world.'

Ecuador's four distinct natural regions - the Sierra, the Coast, the Amazon Basin and the Galapagos Islands - contain some of the world's greatest biodiversity. Ecuador is home to about 3,300 species of orchids, more than 1,500 species of birds, 350 species of reptiles, 450 species of amphibians, and more than 20,000 vascular plants. Ecuador's tropical rainforest is considered one of the richest and most complex plant and animal communities on Earth. Ten percent of the world's vascular plant species are located in Ecuador - in an area that covers just 0.2 percent of the Earth's surface.

To protect this delicate and diverse environment, Ecuador has established an extensive system of national parks, scientific stations and protected areas.

Ecuador's Constitution guarantees the right to live in an ecologically balanced environment free of contamination. It proclaims the protection of environment, the conservation of the ecosystems and the country's genetic patrimony as matters of fundamental public interest.

In 1993, after a nationwide discussion with citizens' organizations, scientists, journalists, and public representatives, Ecuador approved a document called the "Basic Environmental Principles." The Basic Environmental Policies of Ecuador were established by an Executive Decree in 1994. These policies clearly state the obligations of each person and entity in regards to the preservation of the environment.

In 1996, Ecuador created the Ministry of Environment to coordinate environmental policies, programs and projects. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Undersecretary of International Organizations, through the Direction of Environment coordinates national and international relations in issues concerning the environment and promotes policies internationally for the defense and protection of the environment.

The 1999 Law of Environmental Management established the principles and guidelines of environmental policies, determined the obligations, responsibilities, level of public and private participation on environmental management, and set the permissible limits, controls and sanctions. Under this Law, environmental management is subject to the principles of solidarity, co-responsibility, and cooperation. The law promotes waste management, sustainable alternative technologies, and respect for native cultures and traditional practices. The law incorporates the universal principles of sustainable development contained in the 1992 Declaration of Rio de Janeiro (the Earth Summit).

This law is very clear on the use of non-renewable natural resources. Economic feasibility studies and environmental impact studies are required for projects that could harm State-protected reserves and fragile ecosystems.

The delicate environmental balance of the Galapagos Islands has been threatened by activities that exploit its natural resources. In 1999, the government approved a law that limits agricultural activity, regulates immigration to the islands, monitors the introduction of foreign species, and promotes the well being of the local inhabitants and endemic species. In 1998, Ecuador received a World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Recognition Award for its sustainable development policies for the protection of the Galapagos.

In 1993, Ecuador was one of the first countries to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on Climatic Change, which calls for responding to global warming by reducing the world's production of CO2. Ecuador was the first country to ratify the International Biodiversity Agreement. In May 2000, Ecuador signed the Cartagena Agreement on Biotechnology Safety. Such initiative shows that the defense of biodiversity is one of the government's main concerns, to which authorities give special priority.

In 1999, Ecuador received the WWF's "Gift to Earth" Recognition Award for a declaration that protects 1,135,000 hectares (4,382 sq. mi.) of Amazon Basin rainforest. The regulation prohibits oil drilling, mining, forest destruction, colonization or any other activity that could threaten the area's biodiversity. The declaration contributes to the wellbeing and survival of indigenous Sionas, Secoyas, Cofanes, Huaoranis, Tagaeris and Taromenanes.

Given the difficult economic situation that Ecuador has faced in the past two decades, it has made tremendous efforts to preserve the environment. But to continue, the country needs foreign technical cooperation and financial assistance -- now more than ever.

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By Fernando Flores, Hon., Consul General of Ecuador in San Francisco