

***Kawsak Sacha –The Living Forest:
An Indigenous Proposal for Confronting Climate Change***

***Presented by the Amazonian Kichwa People of Sarayaku
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Kawsak Sacha

Kawsak Sacha (The Living Forest) is a proposal for living together with the natural world that grows out of the millennial knowledge of the Indigenous Peoples who inhabit the Amazonian rainforest, and it is one that is also buttressed by recent scientific studies. Whereas the western world treats nature as an undemanding source of raw materials destined exclusively for human use, *Kawsak Sacha* recognizes that the forest is made up entirely of living selves and the communicative relations they have with each other. These selves, from the smallest plants to the supreme beings who protect the forest, are persons (*runa*) who inhabit the waterfalls, lagoons, swamps, mountains, and rivers, and who, in turn, compose the Living Forest as a whole. These persons live together in community (*llakta*) and carry out their lives in a manner that is similar to human beings. *To summarize, in the Living Forest the economic system is an ecological web; the natural world is also a social world.*

Kawsak Sacha, understood as sacred territory, is the primordial font of *Sumak Kawsay* (*Buen Vivir*, “Good Living”). Not only does it provide a home for all of its inhabitants, it also emotionally, psychologically, physically, and spiritually revitalizes them. In this way it regenerates the Indigenous Peoples who live in community with these sylvan selves. *That is, the Living Forest nourishes and augments life.*

Kawsak Sacha is where we transmit our knowledge and ways of being (*yachay*). It is where our wise people (*yachak*) interrelate with the supreme beings of the forest in order to receive the guidance that leads them along the path of *Sumak Kawsay*. This continuous relation that we Indigenous People have with the beings of the forest is central, for on it depends the continuity of the Living Forest, which, in turn permits a harmony of life among many kinds of beings, as well as the possibility that we all can continue to live into the future. In essence, the forest is neither simply a landscape for aesthetic appreciation nor a resource for exploitation. It is, rather, the most exalted expression of life itself. It is for this reason that continued coexistence with the Living Forest can lead to *Sumak Kawsay*. *This encourages us to propose that maintaining this lively space, based on a continuous relation with its beings, can provide a global ethical orientation as we search for better ways to face the worldwide ecological crisis in which we live today. In this manner Sumak Kawsay can become a planetary reality.*

Proposal: Declaration of *Kawsak Sacha* (the Living Forest)

1) Our *Concrete Proposal* consists in attaining national and international recognition for *Kawsak Sacha* (the Living Forest), as a new legal category of protected area that would be considered *Sacred Territory and Biological and Cultural Patrimony of the Kichwa People in Ecuador*. Our goal is to preserve the territory of Indigenous Peoples, and especially the material and spiritual relations that we establish in the Living Forest with

the other beings that inhabit it. *This implies that these areas be declared zones that are free of oil, mineral, and lumber extraction.*

2) The Living Forest proposes a way of achieving *Sumak Kawsay* by means of the application and execution of *Life Plans* that are sustained by the three foundational pillars of the *Sumak Kawsay Plan*: Fertile Land (*Sumak Allpa*); Living in Community (*Runaguna Kawsay*); and Forest Wisdom (*Sacha Runa Yachay*). As a space for the development of *Sumak Kawsay*, the Living Forest proposes another way to think about wealth. That is, by protecting the forest's sacred places *Kawsak Sacha* ensures a healthy territory free of contamination as well as abundant productive land that can help preserve food sovereignty. *In this way Kawsak Sacha aims to serve as a viable economic model.*

3) Understood as *Territory*, the Living Forest, thanks to forty years of communal effort, is now demarcated by a border of flowering and fruiting trees visible from the air. We call this vital cordon a Frontier of Life or Trail of Flowers (*Jatun Kawsak Sisa Ñampí*). By means of the flower's ephemeral beauty, the Frontier of Life conveys the fragility of life and the fertility of the Living Forest that it both surrounds and protects. In keeping with the central pillar of *Kawsak Sacha* –that the forest is composed entirely of communicative relations among the various selves that make it up– this Frontier of Life aims to communicate to outsiders the delimitation and existence of the area categorized as *Kawsak Sacha*. Any outsider can thus appreciate the beauty of the Living Forest and the living presence of Mother Earth (*Pachamama*) thanks to a multi-colored cloak of flowers. At the same time it creates the possibility of beginning to dialogue with the beings that make up the Living Forest. In this way the Frontier of Life creates a permanent forum for communication among beings. This can help the entire world recuperate the original understanding of Mother Earth as a shared home. Furthermore, since it produces flowers and fruits that feed the beings of the forest, the Frontier of Life fosters the life of the forest. Finally, its regular maintenance by community members seeks to teach our youth the basic principles of *Kawsak Sacha*. *In sum, the Frontier of Life is a symbol of life that manifests Kawsak Sacha's principles at the same time that it serves as a tool for its protection. The message it delivers is aimed at the entire world with the goal of reaching the hearts and minds of human beings everywhere, encouraging us all to reflect on the close relation between Human Rights and the Rights of Nature.*

Kawsak Sacha is a robust proposal capable of defending the Rights of Nature as it is enshrined in the Ecuadorian Constitution, which, in addition, also legally recognizes the importance of maintaining healthy ecosystems as a foundation for *Sumak Kawsay*. Regarding the Rights of Nature, our proposal emphasizes that in order to extend rights to Nature, one must first recognize its entities as persons (and not mere objects). As persons, the beings of the forest relate to one another as well as to the Indigenous People that share their land. *So, based on our continuous life together with the beings of the forest, Kawsak Sacha emerges as an authentic way of guaranteeing the Rights of Nature in those spaces that have not yet been decimated.*

Conclusions

We urge the world community to make an effort to achieve a real metamorphosis (*tiam*). We need to shift from a modernizing model of development—a model that treats nature as material resource—to the alternative of *Kawsak Sacha*, which recognizes that forming community with the many kinds of selves with whom we share our world is a better way to orient our economic and political activities.

Kawsak Sacha proposes an indissoluble link between human beings and the visible and invisible beings of the forest. It is for this reason that the Rights of Nature are so closely related to our Human Rights as Indigenous People, guardians of the Living Forest. Nevertheless, this link is ignored by the State and whichever government happens to be in power. Worse yet, in its desire to civilize, develop and modernize, the State ends up violating the very rights of this conjuncture of human and nonhuman life, in which we, Indigenous People, take part. It seems hypocritical to us that the very governments that put forth solemn discourses criticizing imperialism, capitalism, and colonialism, are promoting, in the supposed name of democracy, large-scale neo-colonialist extractive projects on our lands, thus threatening Mother Earth. We make manifest that the gradual disappearance of this ensemble of life that *Kawsak Sacha* seeks to sustain is nothing more and nothing less than “*ecocide*”—that is, it is the *systematic extermination of an ensemble of living interrelated selves*. And this crime against Humanity and Nature, has, until now, gone unpunished.

With the hope of putting a brake on this violence, our proposal is an urgent call to the world community to respect the Rights of Nature and of the Indigenous Peoples, who, here and now in the twenty-first century, with strength and vigor, affirm our responsibility to continue defending the Living Forest for the good of our Mother Earth, and for our present and future generations.

To conclude, we summarize our *Kawsak Sacha* proposal: the entire world is peopled by beings that sustain our planet thanks to their way of living in continuous interrelation and dialogue. This vision is neither a quaint belief nor a simple conservationist ideal. It is instead a call to the people of the world to learn once again to feel this reality in their very being. This metamorphosis will only be possible once we learn to listen to and dialogue with these other beings, who are part of a cosmic conversation that goes well beyond the dialogue of the deaf until now carried out exclusively among us humans. Entering into this broader conversation with all living beings can be the foundation for a more sustainable economic life, one that is more respectful of Mother Earth. And it would be the basis for conceptualizing, building, and disseminating a genuine *Sumak Kawsay* in our world—a world that today is threatened by an ecological crisis of planetary proportions.