

CONTESTI. Città, territori, progetti.

SPECIAL ISSUE 2026 - Bioregional planning practices across the world: a bioregional world in the making

***Buen vivir* in practice. *Cuencas Sagradas*, a bioregional plan of indigenous nations of Ecuador and Peru Amazon**

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Received: Received: December 2025 / Accepted: April 2026 | © 2026 Author(s).

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DOI: 10.36253/contest-17033

Abstract

The Sacred Headwaters Bioregional Plan (*Cuencas Sagradas*) covers 350,000 square kilometers between Ecuador and Peru. It aims to protect the Amazon by prohibiting fossil fuel extractions and prioritizing "Buen Vivir" (collective well-being) over traditional growth metrics. Led by 30 indigenous nations, the initiative is supported by a global scientific commission and ancestral spiritual wisdom. Scientifically, the region acts as a vital global thermal and hydrologic regulator. Spiritually, it is guided by *Sumak Kawsay*, a philosophy of reciprocity with the living forest. The plan promotes a "Life-Centered Economy," proposing debt-for-nature swaps and a transition away from fossil fuels. It challenges the "One-World World" logic through political ontology, recognizing the Amazon as a sentient entity and a "Subject of Rights". This model represents an "Ancestral Future," where indigenous territories are the foundation for planetary health.

Keywords: *Cuencas sagradas*, Sacred Headwaters, political ontology, life project, indigenous institutionalidad

1. Introduction and methodological context

This article explores the Amazon Sacred Headwaters Bioregional Plan (*Cuencas Sagradas*), implemented in a territory of 350,000 square kilometers between Ecuador and Peru with a population of 1,850,000 inhabitants, 52% living in the cities, 26% indigenous (54% mestizos and white, 2% afro-descendent, 17% not declaring) (ASHI, 2021). As the Amazon nears a catastrophic ecological tipping point this plan challenges the "extractivist spiral of destruction".

Led by 30 indigenous nations, the initiative proposes a permanently protected region where fossil fuels are maintained underground. The plan embraces "Buen Vivir" (collective well-being), replacing metrics of capital accumulation with harmony and ecological integrity. This "Life Project" treats the land as a web of sentient relations. The narrative combines three pillars: the scientific dimension, identifying the region as a vital global thermoregulator; the Spiritual dimension rooted in *Sumak Kawsay* (living wisdom) emphasizing reciprocity; the political-ontological dimension, focusing on the "Pluriverse" where indigenous sovereignty and the legal rights of nature redefine territorial governance.

This article aims to share practices, theoretical reflections, participant observation, grasping some daily breaths on the dynamics related to implementation of *Cuencas Sagradas* Bioregional Plan. It is an opportunity to share reflections, spiritual engagement, attitudes, emotions, behind actions, and the challenging steps of a long-term journey between research, activism, wisdom. The reflections started in 2017, the plan was issued in 2021 and the implementation is ongoing. The text is a combination of visions from the daily activities in the management, communication, dissemination, the networking, to the challenges and inspirations for the long-term transformation. It collects some fragments of the long-lasting interaction between Amazon and Padova:

- the participation in the Global Commission of the "Sacred Headwater Initiative: Territories for Life" (July 29-31, 2019, Quito, Ecuador), which brought together indigenous and civil society organizations from the Amazon, international NGOs, researchers and philanthropic organizations to work on the participatory bioregional planning processes;
- the conferences organized between *Cuencas Sagradas* and the International Master Programme on Climate Change and Diversity Sustainable Territorial Development;
- the voices and the practices of daily management collected by meetings, participation at the Global Commission, mail exchanges, review of documents;
- The discussions during the visit in Italy during the annual meeting of International Master Programme on Climate Change and Diversity Sustainable Territorial Development (CCD-STEDE).

The choice is to work through situated research activism (Borras and Franco, 2023), supporting ongoing emancipatory processes in Ecuador and Peru. From a research point of view, this case is an example of dialogue between climate justice defenders, researchers, indigenous land rights, ambitious transformation paths in the framework of political ontology. The space defined by the journal's editorial rules required choices, selections and synthesis; however, the bibliography allows for further exploration of the territorial and scientific context, as well

as the practices implemented. Details of the plan can be found in the rich documentation and web tools apparatus¹.

Here we focus more on the contribution of the plan in framing a new indigenous institutionality, in exploring the political ontology, in creating a dialogue between scientific and spiritual foundations.

The article starts presenting the approach based on living fossil fuel underground in a life-center perspective. Then, two paragraphs explore the intertwined foundations: scientific and spiritual. The next two paragraphs focus on the main “non material” results of the plan: the exploration of the political ontology and the facilitation of the indigenous institutionality. Finally, the article deals with challenges and difficulties of the political contexts and the role of indigenous resistance through the ancestral futures.

2. The Sacred Headwaters Bioregional Plan: a multiscale approach for socio-ecological transition from fossil fuels to a life-centred economy

The Amazon Sacred Headwaters is situated in the basins of the Napo, Pastaza, and Marañón rivers (headwaters and tributaries of Amazon River, see fig. 1), a biodiversity hotspot comprising pristine primary forests and complex fluvial systems regulating Earth’s thermal and water cycles (ASHI, 2021).

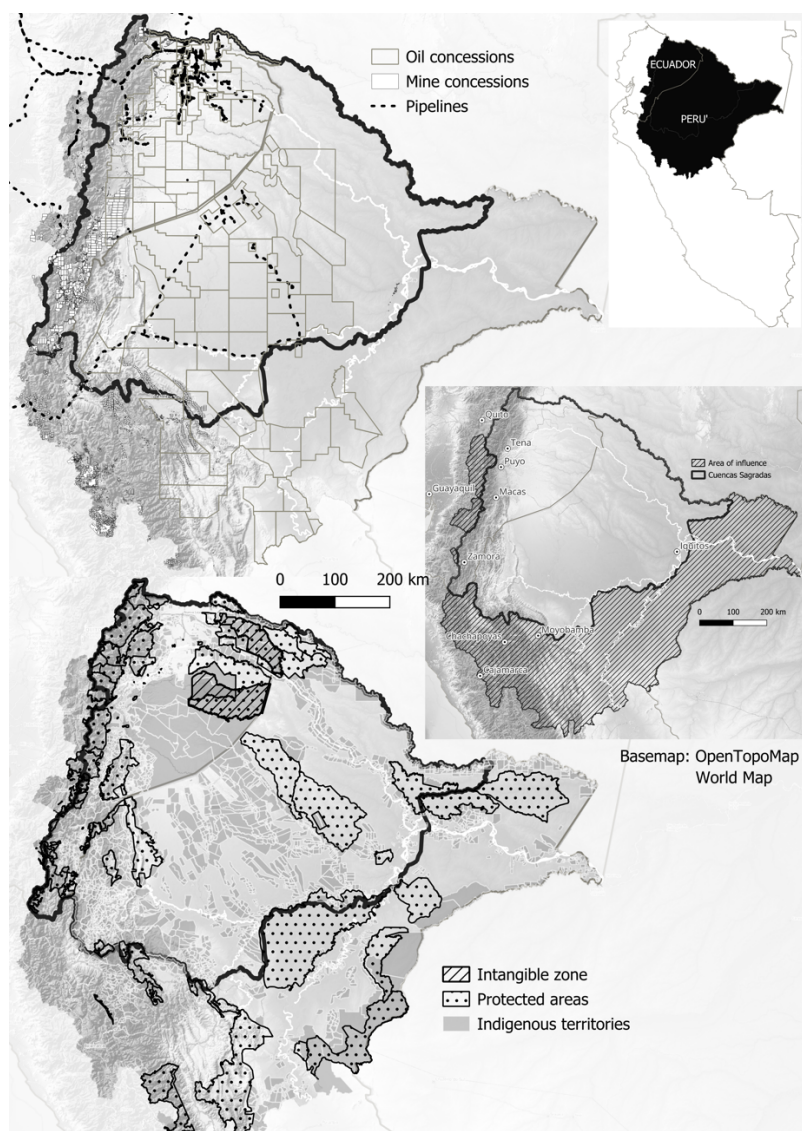


Fig 1: Maps of the Sacred Headwaters Initiative showing the area of intervention, the area of influence, the extractivist systems, the indigenous territorialities and the protected areas (prepared by Codato D., sources OpenTopoMap, World Map, <https://plataforma-csa-cuencasagradas.hub.arcgis.com/>)

¹ <https://cuencasagradas.org/>; <https://plataforma-csa-cuencasagradas.hub.arcgis.com/pages/atlas-socio-economico>.

The plan prohibits industrial resource extraction replacing "development" and "growth" with "well-being," "harmony," and "flourishing." The Theory of Change recognizes as indigenous collective rights are the most effective mechanism for rainforest protection: indigenous governance delivers superior conservation outcomes compared to state-led or market-based approaches. The initiative is the culmination of three decades of indigenous advocacy in Ecuador and Peru.

The governance of Amazon Sacred Headwaters Alliance (ASHA) is composed of 28 member organizations: 25 Indigenous and 3 civil society groups, including CONFENIAE (Ecuador), AIDESEP (Peru), and COICA (representing the nine countries of the Amazon basin). The governance structure harmonizes, technical management, scientific foundations with spiritual visions via a "Global Commission" of international scholars and "Wisdom Keepers" (spiritual leaders) (ASHI, 2021; 2023).

The primary objectives of the Bioregional Plan include the protection of indigenous rights, the improvement of local living conditions, and the maintenance of cultural vitality. Specific environmental targets include achieving zero deforestation, keeping fossil fuels in the ground, and prohibiting large-scale mining and industrial logging. Furthermore, the plan emphasizes the restoration and regeneration of priority ecosystems, aiming for a state of territorial governance that is both self-sustaining and ecologically resilient. The plan extends its scope to macroeconomic solutions for Ecuador and Peru, specifically addressing the burden of external debt. It proposes innovative mechanisms such as "debt-for-nature swaps," particularly with major creditors like China. Additionally, it advocates for a global treaty on the non-proliferation of fossil fuels, aligning with Article 6 of the Paris Agreement. The objective is to utilize international climate conventions to establish high-biodiversity regions as "no-go zones" for extractive industries, supported by international financial compensation (ASHI, 2021).

To facilitate the transition away from extraction, the initiative explores the implementation of social safety nets, such as a Universal Basic Income (or minimum grant) provided by the government. This economic mechanism is intended to meet the basic needs of the population (including food and housing) thereby reducing the economic pressure to engage in or permit environmentally destructive activities. This ensures that the post-carbon transition is socially equitable and grounded in economic security for the region's inhabitants.

The plan demonstrates that human development can harmonize with nature by transitioning to a "post-carbon" economic model. The initiative supports indigenous rights and community economic activities that enhance forest's natural capital. The initiative employs legal actions at both national and international levels to halt oil drilling and mining operations. Legal and political actions aim to render industrial extraction unfeasible across the targeted 350,000 km².

Currently, Ecuador and Peru manage the Amazon through an "extractivist spiral of destruction" assuming that development requires extracting the "last drop of oil." This logic facilitates roads' expansion, uncontrolled colonization, large-scale deforestation and habitat fragmentation. Chronic oil spills have polluted the Napo and Pastaza basins transforming the region into a "sacrifice zone" to sustain urban development (SPA 2025b; Narvaez et al., 2013; Facchinelli et al., 2023; Codato et al., 2019).

The impact of this model is not merely environmental but ontological. The contamination of sacred headwaters and ancestral land loss threaten the foundations of indigenous cultures. The Ecuadorian oil boom of the nineteen-seventies triggered a massive populations' displacement, infrastructure's expansion and habitat fragmentation. While the Peruvian sector has remained more isolated, due to its remote geography and the lower quality of its oil deposits, it faces increasing pressure from logging and mining concessions that ignore the rights of the inhabitants.

The region faces persistent threats from state-led initiatives to open new oil blocks, mining concessions, and hydroelectric projects, often justified by governments as necessary for poverty alleviation or economic recovery. The plan seeks to integrate the "New Green Deal for the Amazon" into the national agendas of Ecuador and Peru. This involves engaging presidential candidates and political leaders to adopt a platform that prioritizes indigenous rights and "forest economics". The goal is to institutionalize bioregional planning as a cornerstone of national development strategies.

Immediate priorities are the cessation of fossil fuel expansion leveraging the "right to consultation" and providing rigorous environmental impact data (Codato et al. 2023; De Marchi et al., 2021). The initiative aims to counter government narratives by presenting economic analyses that demonstrate how the long-term environmental costs of extraction far outweigh the short-term financial gains. By quantifying ecological damage, the initiative provides a rational economic basis for the rejection of extractive projects.

The Bioregional Plan argues that this model of development is in free fall and must be replaced by a framework that prioritizes the maintenance of life demanding a moratorium on new extractive concessions and the permanent protection of remaining primary forests.

However, the initiative has achieved significant successes in reducing the footprint of these industries. Notable milestones are the withdrawal of GeoPark from Block 64 in Achuar and Wampis territory, a victory attributed to the sustained legal and social resistance of the indigenous populations involved (Amazon Watch, 2020; Alvitres, 2022; Cannon, 2020). An important result of activism is the victory of 2023 referendum in Ecuador to stop oil extraction in the Yasuni National Park (La Hora, 21/08/2023). The shift toward a post-extractive future is conceptualized through the transition to a Life-Centred Economy. This transition involves moving away from the Gross Domestic Product as the sole metric of progress and adopting indicators of *Buen Vivir*, or collective well-being.

This framework redefines wealth not through capital accumulation, but through new metrics focusing on ecological integrity, access to clean water, food sovereignty, and the preservation of ancestral knowledge. Key components of this economic metamorphosis include:

- The commitment to leave fossil fuels permanently under the ground and establish a moratorium on new extractive concessions;
- The promotion of regenerative activities such as sustainable forest management and traditional agroforestry that enhance rather than deplete biodiversity;
- The implementation of intercultural health and education systems that value ecological wisdom and traditional pharmacopeia alongside modern scientific advancements.

Technological adaptation plays a crucial role in this transition. Rather than importing destructive urban infrastructures, the plan advocates for localized, low-impact solutions such as solar-powered river transport and renewable energy grids.

This approach acknowledges that the needs of communities have changed, requiring modern communication and health access, but it is possible to meet these needs in a way that respects the ecological limits of the rainforest.

The implementation of the bioregional vision faces significant challenges from established urban centers in the Amazon. Cities like Iquitos function as island-urbanisms, disconnected from road networks but exerting massive demands on the surrounding forest for food and resources. The urban political elites in these regions often view indigenous territorial rights and environmental conservation as threats to economic development.

In Peru, groups such as the Coordinator for the Development of Loreto have actively opposed the creation of reserves for isolated peoples, arguing that such protections hinder industrial opportunities (Coica, 2023; Servindi, 2022; Orpio 2022). Overcoming this resistance requires a profound shift in urban mentalities and the integration of green urban planning into the bioregional framework. The goal is to reduce the footprint of Amazonian cities and foster a complementary relationship between urban populations and the surrounding indigenous territories. The Bioregional Plan seeks to incorporate "Green Cities" and urban planning into its framework by reducing the footprint of urban demand on the fragile surrounding rainforest. The plan requires a total of 18 million of dollars to be implemented in 10 years, at the moment collected by individual contributions and international donors (ASHI, 2023; 2024; 2025).

3. Scientific Foundation: the living Amazon we want

The scientific foundation is provided by the ASHI Global Commission, a multidisciplinary international committee of scholars and scholars-activists and the Science Panel for the Amazon (SPA).

The Bioregional Plan issued in 2021, and the annual reporting of implementation intersect two landmarks of the scientific reflection developed by the international scientific community.

In 2021, the Science Panel for the Amazon (SPA) issued the first Amazon Assessment Report 2021, titled "The Amazon We Want," representing the most comprehensive scientific evaluation of the Amazon Basin resulting from the contribution of more than 200 experts. The report identifies critical anthropogenic stressors (mainly land-use conversion, illegal extractivism, and climate change) driving the biome toward a catastrophic ecological tipping point with the southeastern region (Brazil) already transitioning from a carbon sink to a net carbon source. To prevent systemic collapse, the SPA advocates for an immediate moratorium on deforestation in high-risk zones and a paradigm shift toward a "standing forest, flowing rivers" bioeconomy. Central to this framework is the integration of indigenous and local knowledge with Western scientific research, aiming for zero deforestation by

2030 while securing socio-ecological resilience and protecting indigenous territories as vital components of global climate stability.

The second Amazon Assessment Report "Connectivity of the Amazon for a Living Planet" released at COP30 (SPA, 2025), evaluates that the basin is nearing a critical ecological tipping point with 18% of forest cover lost and 38% experiencing severe degradation. The central thesis is the preservation of ecological and sociocultural connectivity (the interdependence of hydrological cycles, biodiversity, and indigenous knowledge) as the fundamental pillar for regional resilience and global climate stability. The Panel advocates for an immediate moratorium on deforestation and wildfires, the systematic dismantling of illegal extractivist economies, the legal recognition and enforcement of Indigenous Territories, the transition toward nature-based socio-bioeconomies, and sustainable urban governance. The report demands an integrated Pan-Amazonian framework to prevent irreversible collapse and maintain the Amazon's function as a vital global carbon sink.

Moving beyond the "planet's lungs" metaphor, scientific evidence (IPCC, 2019) identifies the Amazon as a global thermoregulator: through transpiration, the forest regulates planetary humidity. When deforestation and fragmentation reach a certain limit, the forest loses its capacity to generate its own rainfall, leading to a process of savannization where dense rainforest is replaced by degraded grasslands. While much of the wider Amazon is already exhibiting signs of desiccation and increased fire frequency, the Sacred Headwaters sub-region remains the most well-preserved continuous forest ecosystem in the biome. Due to its proximity to the Andes and the Equator, it maintains higher levels of humidity and biological resilience, serving as a primary refuge for biodiversity and indigenous people. The Sacred Headwaters, specifically the basins of the Napo, Pastaza, and Marañón rivers, represent a vital node in this hydro-climatic system. The bioregional plan is a direct answer to Amazon Rain Forest tipping point facing the "biodiversity collapse", the escalating climate crisis, compounded by global economic recessions and the systemic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Plan shifts the region from the "Amazon at the Edge" trajectory (extractive-based, weak governance, habitat loss) to the "Living Amazon" paradigm. (Alencar et al., 2015). The "Amazon at the Edge" is dominated by the extractive/extensive economies with weak policies' regulation and implementing institutions. The governance limiting public participation in decision making exacerbates the socioeconomic inequalities, violating of the Indigenous People and Local Community (IPLC) rights, facilitating illegal economies and conflicts, generating environmental consequences as habitat loss, degradation and pollution. The production model is unsustainable, increasing carbon dioxide emissions, deforestation, destruction of the carbon sinks and the global climate regulation. The "Living Amazon" paradigm (Alencar et al., 2021) is founded on sustainable bioeconomy, conservation and ecosystems' restoration, strong governance and the appropriate financial support toward sustainability with the fundamental participation of Amazon peoples in decision making. The new paradigm can generate diversified and inclusive economies, IPLCs territorial rights (Josse et al., 2024) halting deforestation, degradation and pollution. The "Living Amazon" improves wellbeing, justice, ecosystem services and contributes to climate change mitigation and adaptation.

By bridging applied research and indigenous stewardship, the plan promotes regional connectivity between cities (Durant et al., 2025) and regions essential for a living planet.

4. The spiritual foundation

The governance of the plan forecasts the Wisdom Keepers Council (*Consejo de Sabios*) with representative of indigenous peoples and indigenous organizations (ASHI 2021, pp. 14-15; 23-25).

The spiritual foundation is fundamental in a perspective of cosmopolitics, and the recognition of the role of the spiritual world. Below we report the reflections of Manari Ushigua, during a conference organized by the International master programme on Climate Change and Diversity Sustainable Territorial Development at University of Padova (19/10/2022). Manari Ushigua is an indigenous activist, shaman, and political leader of the Zapara Nation, an endangered Amazonian people living between Ecuador and Peru. In 2001, UNESCO recognized the "Oral heritage and cultural manifestations of the Zápara people" as an intangible world heritage including the oneiric heritage. The conference of Manari was held in Spanish, below the oral translated into English.

In the spiritual world of the Sacred Headwaters, we began working with a spirit guide: a woman. This character guided us to change the way of thinking, the way of working, and also the way of connecting with the space from which we come. What she taught us are two things. First, humanity has reached a point of chaos where there is no way out. We started to think that if we propose new things but within the existing economic and life structure that the humans have created, that system will never be able to change anything. For this spirit guide, it was difficult and complicated to simply change within the system.

The spirit taught us that we must look at where life began: to the past. When we were taken to the past, she explained how life began. It was super important to understand that when life began, our relationship with nature was one of reciprocity. Everything that we constructed or consumed was returned to the Earth little by little, and the Earth took care of dissolving it. Life was very balanced.

In the Sacred Headwaters, we started thinking: if the beginning was like that, and the future is at a point of failure, not for the Earth, but for us, then we must review this carefully. If we operate within the system, proposing solutions from the system's vision, we have no way out because we are too involved/focused on how much financing we can get to fight a problem. Within the system itself, the energy doesn't provide a solution.

The practice we have adopted is to go into the forest (*selva*). When we enter the forest, we leave the human system and enter another system of life where there is no structure, where no one tells us that this house or that piece of land is mine. It is a system where many things are liberated. We can see the life of the plants, the life of the river itself, and that relationship with water and with humanity.

We learned something very interesting. If you have seen the forest or any part of the forest, the trees are all together. There is not just one species; there are thousands of species, millions of species. In that connection, they generate energy, life, knowledge, and wisdom. That wisdom connects with the smaller plants below. These smaller plants act as a filter of wisdom that reaches us, the humans.

This wisdom tells us that we, as humans, must first recognize what we are. Sometimes, we don't understand ourselves: what we think, what we feel, and what we do. The plants say: "Look, I am practicing this life (Good Living), but I don't need more things to feel good and to start working on what my body needs."

The plants live in a giant community without fighting or competition. They only generate perfect balance and harmony. Together, they bring forth a wisdom that is never static; this wisdom has life. This means that each of us is a being who possesses a self beyond this visible body, what we call the Jaguar. It is the spirit that articulates life, the invisible part.

The living wisdom of the trees says: If our body is not well because it is only living in the visible part of life, it begins to confuse many things, and this confusion causes illness. We value things that we shouldn't value, but we do, because the actions we take are not based on the invisible truth. We make decisions, create policies, laws, and structures without understanding what we are doing.

Therefore, the trees tell us that if we are spirits, we must also enter that world (the invisible part of life, the world of the spirit) to understand what we are doing. In that world, we will be able to experience the proposals we are creating firsthand, walking and experimenting to understand. If something is wrong, we can change our strategies. The spirits and the mountains say that to embrace this concept of Buen Vivir, we must prepare our body. Our body must be healthy. If there are worries, we must start clearing those worries. If our heart is unbalanced, we must balance it. From that point, we look for what we need to live well, and then we act.

We must think very carefully about what we want to do. The Sacred Headwaters proposal, seen from the past, is a re-planning for the future, confronting the problems we have created. Climate change, natural disasters, conflicts, and pandemics are here; we are experiencing them. The world of the spirits recommends that this is the moment to prepare ourselves psychologically and understand why the Earth is creating so many natural disasters. The Earth is generating a new energy to continue living, but in this process, there will be many losses of family and friends.

Our actions must now be much wiser, much more intelligent, to face these realities. Many people are afraid to face these things. If we enter the world of the spirit, we will understand exactly what the Earth is doing and what our role must be in this time to align ourselves with the energy the Earth is creating.

The recommendation we are making is that in the great spaces where we are studying, we must seek the wisdom that our elders call *Sumak Kawsay*. *Sumak Kawsay* is a series of visions that we must internalize as humans, because the core idea is that the world is one. This wisdom is not stable; it is alive.

The proposal of the Sacred Headwaters is this: If we remove these millions of hectares of forest, what will happen to the world? If we don't protect all these forests where indigenous peoples live, where our dreams are connected, we are making a huge contribution. Although many countries tell us that by taking care of the forest we are poor, this concept must change.

The *Cuencas Sagradas* are proposing a path based on *Sumak Kawsay*, which says the world is one, the forest is one. We have to start taking care of these forests, not just the Amazon forest, but all the forest in the world, to protect our human presence. If we don't do that, the fight is for our own existence as humans. By destroying the forest, we are killing our own history of life.

The Sacred Headwaters, along with the concept of *Sumak Kawsay*, is proposing to train new leaders of this time who can lead and change the structures we have created, proposing new ones. When we change, we will understand the mistakes we have made.

When we put a mirror in front of us, we only look at our face and say, "I am handsome." But the spirit is urging us to look into our heart, where the beauty is, because beauty is connected to two realities: the invisible part and the visible part of life. The heart has two portals: a visible portal and an invisible portal. That is why we must work hard with the heart to understand these two portals. Our creations, our actions, must generate a new beauty for us to live. The elders say that the care of our life will not depend on other beings. It will depend on how we, from now on, want to proceed to care for the history of humanity. The wisdom that was established is alive; it is always in movement, just as we see on Earth. And at that point, we must enter to continue learning new things and generating new knowledge for our life.

5. Political ontologies, life projects, cosmopolitical tolerance

The bioregional plan uses narratives, lexicography and structure of the discourse facilitating the dialogue with National and International institutions, donors, organizations working in territorial planning, environmental management, development, handling standard descriptors: vision, mission, objectives, activities indicators and so on.

The conceptual foundation of the initiative transcends conventional conservationism focusing on "life's dignification" and the planetary well-being. The framework is rooted on the security of ancestral territories, fundamental prerequisite for the existence of both human and non-human beings. In this view, climate regulation is a byproduct of a more holistic goal: the protection of the intrinsic "right to life" within these ecosystems. Without territorial security, the biological and cultural continuity of these communities, the ecological integrity of the region cannot be sustained.

The *Cuencas Sagradas* Bioregional Plan is not just an environmental, development or territorial plan: despite bridging ontologies it is something else, or it can be different things.

It is an example of "Life Project" (Blaser et al., 2004): a counter-hegemonic alternative to the universalizing discourse of "development". Development is often framed as a neutral, inevitable process of economic and social improvement, driven by development projects or territorial plans, "neutral tools" externally imposed by the "One-World World" (Blaser et. Al., 2004; Blaser 2010; De La Cadena, Blaser, 2018) that seeks to incorporate Indigenous territories and bodies into global markets.

The "life project" is defined as an ontological articulation of a collective's vision for its future, deeply inscribed in local histories, spiritualities, and place-based relationalities (Blaser et al., 2004). Unlike development, which is typically top-down and predicated on the extraction of "resources" (Sachs, 2019; Max-Neff et al, 1986; Lang et al., 2023), life projects emerge from the bottom-up. They are not merely "alternative developments", rather, they represent alternatives to development (Esteva, 2013; Kothari et al., 2019). They are grounded in unique ways of being (ontologies) where the separation between "nature" and "culture" does not exist. In a life project, the land is not an inert object to be managed but a web of relations involving ancestors, non-human kin, and sentient landscapes (Blaser et. Al., 2004; Blaser 2010; De La Cadena, Blaser, 2018; Escobar, 2014).

Life projects are central to the politics of the pluriverse. When Indigenous communities of *Cuencas Sagradas* resist oil extraction and deforestation, they are not simply negotiating for a better share of the profits; they are defending a specific mode of existence. Life projects represent the "autonomy of the local" in the face of globalization, asserting the right of communities to define their own pathways toward well-being (Blaser, 2024). Life projects are characterized by relationality, where the pursuit of the "good life" (such as *Sumak Kawsay* or *Buen Vivir*) is inseparable from the health of the ecosystem and the maintenance of reciprocal obligations between all beings (Blaser, 2024, pp. 186-191).

The Blaser's conceptualization of life projects provides a rigorous analytical tool for understanding modern indigenous movements. It shifts the focus from "poverty" or "underdevelopment" to the preservation of ontological integrity. By recognizing life projects (as this concrete example of *Cuencas sagradas*) scholars, policymakers, planners can move toward a "cosmopolitics" that respects the multiplicity of worlds and acknowledges that there is no single, universal path to the future. Life projects are situated examples of political ontology: a foundational shift in social theory, moving beyond the study of politics within a single reality to the study of the politics of reality itself (Blaser, 2024, pp. 24-30). The core is the critiques to the modernist "One-World World" (OWW) assumption: the belief that a single, objective physical reality exists and is merely interpreted

differently by various cultures. Political ontology argues for the existence of a Pluriverse: a world composed of many worlds, each with its own distinct ways of being, knowing, and relating (Blaser 2024; Escobar, 2018; 2020). Many socio-environmental disputes, particularly those involving Indigenous communities and extractive industries, are not merely disagreements over resource management or economic distribution. Rather, they are conflicts between divergent ontologies (Blaser, 2013). For instance, where a state or a company sees a "natural resource" (oil, forests, water), an Indigenous community may see a "sentient ancestor" or a "living spirit". When the state imposes its reality as the only valid one, it performs "epistemic violence," reducing radical alterity to simple "cultural belief." In his view, political ontology is the study of how these different worlds interact, clash, and maintain their existence in the face of dominant modernist structures: the "ontological conflicts" (Blaser 2013; Blaser, 2024).

The bioregional plan is a powerful tool to navigate the ontological conflict and to promote "Pluriversal Politics". Modernity is built on a dualism that separates nature from culture and the individual from the community. In contrast, Indigenous and Afro-descendant see "territoriality" as a form of "*sentipensar*" (sensing-thinking with the earth), emphasizing the importance of relationality (Escobar, 2014). The defense of territory is the defense of a specific ontology: a web of life where humans, spirits, and landscapes are mutually constitutive. The bioregional plan implements "political ontological turn" (Blaser, 2024) as a tool for decolonization, advocating for "autonomous design" and transition discourses that move away from globalized development toward the flourishing of multiple, interconnected worlds.

The shift is from one minoritarian perspective to a recognition of many worlds. The key point of discontinuity is the concept of "*Incomún*" (the Uncommon): the radical heterogeneity of modes of existence that cannot be synthesized into a single common world (Blaser, 2024). Political ontology, therefore, is not the study of politics within a world, but the study of the politics of world-making (*mundificación*): it focuses on how different "collectives" (human and non-human entities) enact divergent realities through their specific practices (Blaser, 2024, pp. 34-42).

Political ontology helps to frame the tension of modernity between emplacement (*emplazamiento*) and displacement (*desplazamiento*). Indigenous people create "*infraestructuras de afincamiento*" (infrastructure of settlement/belonging) to organize the material and semiotic arrangements that sustain a particular mode of life (Blaser, 2024, pp. 42-47).

Modernity is characterized by infrastructures that prioritize displacement by treating land and entities as commensurable, mobile resources. This is subsumed by the transformation of land into "investment," where relationships are mediated by monetary value rather than local obligations. Conversely, "emplaced collectives" (often Indigenous or local communities) operate through relationality, where the self is indivisible from a specific territory inhabited by ancestors, sentient landscapes, and non-human kin. "One-World World" is a machine that systematically destroys infrastructures of emplacement to make room for displacement. The global environmental crisis is, in this sense, a direct result of the universalization of displacement: the "Amazon at the edge" compared to the "Living Amazon". The Anthropocene becomes the "Anthropocene": a stage where different narratives compete to define "what is happening" to the planet (Blaser, 2024, pp. 78-92). The development narratives often fall into the trap of "*lo grande*" (the Big): the drive toward universal, large-scale solutions that ignore the "*Incomún*". To navigate a world of many worlds, without performing colonial violence, it is required to adopt the Cosmopolitics: the art of relating across radical difference without the requirement of a pre-existing common ground.

The bioregional plan makes possible to rebalance the political imagination away from the "Big" and toward "*lo pequeño*" (the Small) and the "*incomunar*". Actual trajectory in Amazon region (but in the global climate crisis) works through *Comunar* (Commoning), building ever-larger scales of unity of the universalizing drive of the One-World World. The bioregional plan works on the *Incomunar* (Uncommoning), the practice of "careful attention to divergences", prioritizing the maintenance of the pluriverse by ensuring that differences are not erased by the needs of the "Big". This is not a call for isolationism, but for "*lo pequeño viable*" (the viable small): local, relational projects of life that are robust enough to resist the "One-World" machine while remaining open to lateral alliances (Blaser, 2024, pp. 283-285).

Incomún is a call to witness the "end of the (One) World" not as an apocalypse, but as a necessary decolonization of reality. Focusing the "Uncommon" provides a framework for understanding that the survival of the planet depends on the survival of the diverse worlds that modern "reasonable politics" has sought to silence.

The discourse surrounding the Amazon Sacred Headwaters Initiative represents a critical intersection between indigenous epistemologies and global systemic crises. The synthesis of "wild thinking" (the ancestral knowledge systems of indigenous peoples) with contemporary scientific and geopolitical frameworks provides a robust response to the anthropogenic challenges facing the biosphere. This approach acknowledges that the traditional paradigms governing global systems are currently interacting with unprecedented ecological and social shifts, necessitating a fundamental realignment of how civilization perceives and interacts with the natural world. The bioregional plan embraces the challenge of our time. Moving beyond the desire to "save the world" (as a single entity) and instead commit to the cosmopolitical tolerance: allowing the pluriverse to emerge as a cause worth defending, transforming political ontology from a theoretical exercise into a vital ethical and strategic guide for the 21st century.

6. The indigenous institutionality and the uncontacted people

The Bioregional Plan for the Sacred Headwaters proposes a governance paradigm that transcends the artificial boundaries of nation-states. The border between Ecuador and Peru is characterized as an imaginary line that fragments ancestral territories and disrupts ecological connectivity; these administrative divisions have historically hindered unified indigenous territorial management. Bioregionalism seeks to realign governance with the natural logic of the river basins, treating the 350.000 km² of the effective area (and the other 270.000 km² of influence area with more 5 million of inhabitants, see map) as a singular, interconnected socio-ecological unit.

Despite sharing a continues Amazon region Peru and Ecuador reveals significant legislative and political asymmetries. In Ecuador, the indigenous movement is characterized by a high degree of cohesion and an organizational structure, with the national federation possessing the political capacity to influence state policy significantly. Furthermore, Ecuadorian law recognizes large, continuous indigenous territories, which facilitates the implementation of bioregional strategies. Conversely, the Peruvian legal framework recognizes only fragmented communities, small, isolated units that do not account for the total territoriality required for traditional livelihoods and biological reproduction. This fragmentation is compounded by the geographic distance between the Amazonian north and the coastal capital of Lima, which complicates the advocacy for indigenous rights and territorial recognition.

A fundamental ethical pillar of the plan is the protection of Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation (PIACI). These groups (Pappalardo et al., 2013; De Marchi et al., 2017), such as those in the Yasuní (Ecuador) and the Napo-Tigre region (Peru), represent the ultimate expression of territorial autodetermination.

The scientific and moral imperative is that these groups do not need to be "integrated" into the Bioregional Plan, instead, the plan's role is to safeguard their isolation. By legally recognizing "Intangible Zones" (such as the Napo-Tigre reserve in Peru or the ZITT in Ecuador), the plan ensures that these populations can maintain their ancestral relationship with the forest without external interference. The recognition in 2022 (after 19 years of advocacy) by the Peruvian state of the existence of isolated peoples in the Napo-Tigre region represents a milestone in this territorial defense.

In 2024 the Mixed Court of Nauta (and its subsequent affirmation by the Superior Court of Justice of Loreto) recognized the Marañón River as a "Subject of Rights" with inherent legal personhood, including the rights to exist, flow, and be free from pollution. The lawsuit was promoted by Kukama Indigenous Women's Federation (Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana).

This achievement illustrates an "ontological conflict" where the Kukama worldview, viewing the river as a living, ancestral entity, confronted a state legal system traditionally predicated on nature as an inert resource. The ruling disrupts this modernist "One-World World" by integrating the precautionary principle and Inter-American human rights jurisprudence into an ecocentric framework. By appointing Indigenous organizations as legal guardians, the sentence validates the concept of the Pluriverse, formalizing a relational ontology where the river's health is inseparable from the sociocultural survival of its people.

The bioregional plan is participating at the biome arising of a new "indigenous institutionality" in the Amazon representing a paradigmatic shift in contemporary governance, moving from a model of state-led assimilation to one of ontological self-determination (Phillips, 2024; Brum, 2021; Banuiwa et al., 2023).

Using the Blaser framework (2024), this can be understood as the construction of political infrastructures that prioritize "emplacement" (*afincamiento*), the relational way of inhabiting territory over the modernist drive for "displacement" and resource extraction. By implementing autonomous plans, legal protocols, and leadership roles within the State, Indigenous peoples are redefining the boundaries between the State and the Pluriverse.

A macroscopic manifestation of this new institutionality is found in Brazil with the third Lula presidency (2022-2026) changing the political landscape, encapsulated in the movement "*Aldear a Política*" (villaging Politics) (Santos et al., 2023; Vilani et al., 2023; Bourne, 2024). This strategy involves the occupation of formal state spaces by Indigenous leaders, most notably through the creation of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, led by Sônia Guajajara, and the presidency of FUNAI (Foundation of Indigenous Peoples) by Joênia Wapichana, the first Brazilian indigenous lawyer and indigenous member of the parliament in 2018-2022. Unlike traditional political participation, "*aldear a política*" is a subversion of the "One-World World" logic; it aims to govern from an Indigenous vision that views the Amazon not as a "natural resource" but as a sentient, vital entity whose rights are inseparable from human rights.

The foundation of this institutionality is the securing of Indigenous land. Land demarcation constitutes the "infrastructure of settlement" necessary for any "*Incomún*" (Uncommon) reality to persist. Secure land rights act as a legal and physical shield, preventing the "epistemic violence" that occurs when territories are treated as empty spaces for capital. In the Brazilian Amazon, the fight for land specifically the rejection of the "*Marco Temporal*" (Time Limit) thesis is a fight for the very possibility of Indigenous institutionality. Without a demarcated territory, the legal personhood of nature and the collective rights of its guardians remain abstract (Azevedo, 2025). By institutionalizing these Life Projects, Indigenous organizations transform their ancestral knowledge into a "viable small" infrastructure that disrupts the extractivist logic of the "One-World World" through direct participation in the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples.

This new institutionality represents a "Cosmopolitics" where the Amazonian peoples are not merely "consulted" but serve as the primary legal and environmental authorities. By institutionalizing the "Living Amazon" vision through entitlement and enforcement of indigenous territories, governmental leaderships, just juridical landscapes, they are creating a global precedent for how to govern a world where many worlds fit.

In this comparative perspective the bioregional plan of *Cuencas Sagradas* can represent an innovation tool in the quest for a formalized indigenous institutionality in Ecuador and Peru.

6. Challenges and perspectives: ancestral futures to navigate turbulent political ecological landscapes

The future (and the present) of the bioregional plan should dialogue in the political ecological landscape of higher turbulence within the multiple global exacerbating crisis: authoritarian populism, persistent extractivism (Rodrigues, Larrea, 2022), climatic, food and biodiversity emergence.

These exacerbations can be interpreted within the framework of the coloniality of power in its five dimensions (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2000): control of the economy and the construction of processes of impoverishment; control of authority and the erosion of processes of democratization; control of nature and natural resources and the advancement of metabolic fracture; control of gender and sexuality in the coloniality of patriarchy and the exploitation of bodies; control of subjectivity and knowledge, the devaluation of ancestral knowledge, and contemporary data grabbing.

The plan is and extraordinary policy experiment of indigenous territorial management from below, at the same time it is a fragile "life project".

Some elements of this fragility can be outlined. One is related to the (bio)regional vision: this vision still contemporary new and ancestral. Starting from the ancestral dimension the indigenous groups for millennia lived along and around the rivers with continuity and integration broken by the new nations (Ecuador and Peru) creating a cleavage in the territorial continuity. In the last two centuries the countries implemented centralized decision making, and in the last two decades with, a major role of local and regional governments, a new layer of centralized (locally) policies is implemented. However local and regional government of Ecuador and Peru are not implementing coordinated regional policies in the Amazon region. More in general initiatives of regional development, very common in Europe with transnational projects (as INTERREG), are not common practices among the States of Amazon region (De Marchi et. al., 2017). So, the initiative is opening something completely new for the region, advancing with the patience of the indigenous networks, individual contributions and the financing of international donors (ASHI 2023; 2024; 2025). However, this region is part two states, 6 provinces of Ecuador, two departments of Peru and many municipalities, implementing competing policies with clientelistic political logic, without a regional or biome framework. *Cuencas sagradas* could represent a platform for regional cooperation but till now the interest and dialogue still weak.

Another issue is related with the persistency of extractivist paradigm of the "Amazon at the Edge" pursued by the central governments: over a layer of conflicts generated by fossil fuel extraction another layer of mine operations

is advancing (Lang et al., 2023; Rodriguez y Larrea, 2022; Alvarado, 2025; Ortiz, 2025). Moreover indigenous initiatives not only are ignored, but also persecuted: the Noboa presidency (in Ecuador) has intensified the authoritarian drift linked to the resumption of extractivist policies and indigenous protests. In September 2025, through the Financial and Economic Analysis Unit (UAFE), the presidency ordered the complete freezing of the bank accounts of the Pachamama Foundation and other important indigenous organizations (including CONAIE and Alianza Ceibo), citing alleged "proven enrichment" and the use of international funds to foment protests against the government. In November, the anti-corruption judge unblocked the accounts, declaring the government's actions illegitimate (SERVINDI, 2025; HRW, 2025). These approaches are monitored by Human Rights Watch and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), and are part of a strategy aimed at limiting protests, particularly after the president lost the referendum he had proposed in November 2025 to remove references to the rights of nature from the constitution.

These elements of fragility cannot be easily solved, they require again a supplement of resistance and actions in a turbulent and difficult landscape, activating the social force of hope (Esteva, 2024).

The concept of *Futuro Ancestral* (Ancestral Future), articulated by the indigenous philosopher Ailton Krenak (2022), represents a critical intervention in contemporary crisis and in the debates regarding the Anthropocene, ecology, and decolonial philosophy. Rather than viewing the future as a linear destination to be reached through technological progress, Krenak proposes a circular temporality where the wisdom of the past and the demands of the present coexist to ensure the continuity of life.

Central is the rejection of the Western "arrow of time." In the globalized industrial model, the future is often framed as a space for extraction and expansion, fuelled by the myth of infinite growth. This linear trajectory has led humanity toward a "collision course" with the planet's biological limits (Krenak, 2022).

By contrast, the Ancestral Future suggests that the "civilizing" project of the West is actually a process of desertification, not just of the land, but of the human imagination. The future is not something "ahead" of us, but something "under" us: it is the Earth itself, which carries the memory of all who came before.

From a sociological and ecological standpoint, *Futuro Ancestral* is a cosmopolitical framework. It dissolves the artificial boundary between "Nature" and "Culture": rivers and Mountains are not "resources", they are ancestors and relatives; humanity is not the master of the ecosystem but a specialized part of a sentient whole (Krenak, 2022).

The "Ancestral" element refers to a living heritage that informs how we inhabit the present. By acknowledging the agency of non-human entities, we shift from an extraction-based economy to a relation-based existence.

Futuro ancestral reflects on "delaying the end of the world." This is not a pessimistic surrender but a strategic practice of resilience. Indigenous peoples have survived various "ends of the world" (colonization, genocide, environmental destruction) because their future is rooted in the ancestral capacity to dream and tell stories that sustain life (Krenak, 2022).

In a scientific context, this aligns with Earth System Science and sustainability studies that emphasize the need for "traditional ecological knowledge" (TEK). *Futuro Ancestral* highlights as the solutions for the climate crisis are not solely technological; they are ontological. They require a shift in how we perceive our place in the timeline of the universe.

Ancestral Future is an invitation to inhabit the Earth with "poetic grace" rather than "mechanistic consumption." It asserts that for there to be a tomorrow, we must reclaim the ancestral technologies of belonging: community, storytelling, and reverence for the biosphere. The future is only possible if it is fed by the roots of the past.

Funding declaration:

This article is part of the research activities of the Jean Monnet Center of Excellence on Just Fossil Fuel Transition, by the support of Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union, call for proposals ERASMUS-JMO-2024-HEI-TCH-RSCH; Project number: 101175896.

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