

**jaguar dreams:
indigenous cosmovision and the defense of life in the amazon**

**sueños del jaguar:
cosmovisión indígena y la defensa de la vida en la amazonía**

Susan MacBryde

Writer and Non-Governmental Organization Manager

Cuenca, EC

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7915-1449>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21878232>

Abstract: This article reflects on an outsider's encounter with Indigenous Amazonian worldviews and explores how intercultural engagement can deepen understanding of environmental justice and territorial defense. Drawing from eight years living in Ecuador and direct involvement with an environmental NGO supporting Indigenous and rural communities in the Amazon Basin, the author examines experiences of learning from Kichwa communities and witnessing their approaches to stewardship, collective planning, and sustainable futures. The report situates these experiences within the broader context of contemporary threats faced by Indigenous nations in Ecuador, particularly the expansion of extractive industries such as oil drilling and mineral mining. It highlights how Indigenous resistance movements have mobilized legal, political, and spiritual strategies to defend their territories and uphold constitutional protections for the rights of nature, despite limited international visibility. The study also introduces the author's literary project, a trilogy of novels inspired by extensive field experience and research into Amazonian Indigenous realities. Special attention is given to *Jaguar Dreams*, which follows a multi-generational Kichwa family confronting the arrival of oil extraction in their ancestral territory and seeking guidance through the spiritual dimensions of forest life. The sequel, *Flying River*, expands this narrative into legal and ecological struggles involving Indigenous communities, nonprofit allies, and transnational corporations. By combining memoir, cultural reflection, environmental advocacy, and fiction, the article seeks to broaden English-speaking audiences' understanding of Amazonian Indigenous cultures and their contributions to imagining more sustainable and relational futures.

Keywords: 1) Indigenous cosmovision; 2) Amazon rainforest; 3) Environmental justice; 4) Kichwa communities; 5) Territorial sovereignty.

Resumen: Este artículo reflexiona sobre el encuentro de una observadora externa con las cosmovisiones indígenas amazónicas y explora cómo el diálogo intercultural puede profundizar la comprensión de la justicia ambiental y la defensa territorial. A partir de ocho años de residencia en Ecuador y de su participación directa en una organización no gubernamental ambiental que apoya a comunidades indígenas y rurales de la cuenca amazónica, la autora examina experiencias de aprendizaje junto a comunidades *kichwa* y el

conocimiento adquirido sobre sus formas de cuidado del territorio, planificación colectiva y construcción de futuros sostenibles. El artículo sitúa estas experiencias dentro del contexto más amplio de las amenazas contemporáneas que enfrentan los pueblos indígenas en Ecuador, particularmente la expansión de industrias extractivas como la explotación petrolera y la minería. Asimismo, destaca cómo los movimientos de resistencia indígena han movilizado estrategias jurídicas, políticas y espirituales para defender sus territorios y exigir el cumplimiento de las garantías constitucionales sobre los derechos de la naturaleza, a pesar de su limitada visibilidad internacional. El estudio también presenta el proyecto literario de la autora: una trilogía de novelas inspirada en una extensa experiencia de campo y en investigaciones sobre las realidades indígenas amazónicas. Se presta especial atención a *Jaguar Dreams*, que narra la historia de una familia *kichwa* multigeneracional que enfrenta la llegada de la extracción petrolera a su territorio ancestral y busca orientación en las dimensiones espirituales de la vida del bosque. El siguiente, *Flying River*, amplía esta narrativa hacia luchas jurídicas y ecológicas que involucran comunidades indígenas, organizaciones aliadas y corporaciones transnacionales. Al combinar memoria, reflexión cultural, defensa ambiental y ficción, el artículo busca ampliar la comprensión del público angloparlante sobre las culturas indígenas amazónicas y sus contribuciones para imaginar futuros más sostenibles y relacionales.

Palabras clave: 1) Cosmovisión indígena; 2) Selva amazónica; 3) Justicia ambiental; 4) Comunidades *kichwa*; 5) Soberanía territorial.

The experience

The beady black heads of the *chontacuros* stared at me, blind as they were. Innocent-looking, swaddled in heart of *chonta* palm, and nestled in their *bijao* leaf, I was still not prepared to eat these plump white beetle larvae. My companions at the table poked at the creatures and courageously sampled this specialty offered by *Sacha*, our *Kichwa* host.

We were the pioneers of our newly established Andes-Amazon Conservancy, a US NGO based in Cuenca, Ecuador. We worked to provide resources and planning services to help Indigenous communities in the Amazon Basin achieve sustainable futures. We were visiting the *Kichwa* village of *Pacayaku*, reached by a lengthy but astounding canoe trip on the *Bobonaza* River east of the Amazon frontier.

My introduction to Amazonian cuisine was only the start of an intense cultural immersion unlike anything I'd experienced before, even after more than four years spent in the *US Peace Corps* in Jamaica and Armenia. I found our rainforest stay only mildly challenging, since we had running water, a shower head, and even a bucket-flush toilet. Our NGO's founder described how visiting Indigenous territories near Peru was a far harder transition for outsiders. I haven't yet ventured that far.

Pacayaku was entrancing. I sensed a vastly intuitive culture deeply connected to its pristine forest, its primeval origins still evident. Though my Spanish was limited, I found the men and women impressively articulate, with a dignity reflecting their interconnection with the visible and invisible beings of the forest. Now in my seventies, I also enjoyed playing grandmother to the always present children and being in their mothers' company.

Image 1 - *Kichwa* children from *Pacayaku* — Pastaza, Ecuador



Source: Author's private collection, 2025.

The Conservancy's intention was to support Indigenous-led development of GPS-driven digital mapping of Indigenous territories to define hunting, agricultural, fishing, and living areas to be sustained through community growth. These maps would be presented to what at the time was the *Ministry of Environment, Water and Ecological Transition*, now the *Ministry of Environment and Energy*. This renaming foreshadows the current government's intentions of increased oil and mineral extraction.

Our objective was to pressure the Ministry into abiding by Ecuador's Constitution, which guarantees the *Rights of Nature*, and its provision of land rights to the *Kichwa* nation and —eventually— four other nations. To do this, we spent several days studying and discussing *Paca Yaku's* existing and highly detailed *Life Plan* with seventy-three of its community members, while also presenting our own ideas. We needed to understand how to integrate our thinking with their collective planning, mindful of their centuries of environmental stewardship and sophisticated principles of self-governance.

The study

During my time as the NGO's board president and my eight years living in Ecuador, I've educated myself about Indigenous cultures, most notably the *Kichwa*, though remaining attentive to the histories and present realities of the *Waorani*, *Cofán*, *Sápara* and *Shuar* nations. I gained essential insight into their life-sustaining practices, gender relations, multi-national governance, and spiritual belief systems, with special interest in their cosmovision and its foundation of duality and reciprocity in the interconnection of the physical and spiritual worlds.

I was also keenly aware of Indigenous resistance to outside threats, witnessing sometimes violent protests in Cuenca, the city where I live, and massive tire-burning roadblocks on the main highway that halted commercial business for days at a time. These threats come from the Ecuadorian government, Western imperialism, and the intrusion of international oil and mining corporations.

Through researching journal articles, case histories, and pertinent fiction, my understanding of Indigenous culture and the threats it faces continued to grow. I especially appreciated the writings of the *Women Defenders of the Amazon Rainforest Against Extractivism* —Indigenous women who have become the strongest resisters— entering politics and pressing their concerns and solutions as far as the *United Nations*, including its *Conferences of the Parties*.

Image 2 - Sacha of Pacayaku, Ecuador



Source: Author's private collection, 2025.

I studied legal battles, particularly the 2012 ruling for the *Kichwa* women of *Sarayaku* in the *Pastaza* province and the 2019 ruling for the *Waorani* women in the *Orellana* province. This study taught me how critical

it is to combine and implement ancient practices alongside modern innovations to heal our world. It instilled in me a humble admiration for our planet's ability to sustain healthy and inspired life. Hopefully we can aid this healing by dismantling the consequences of Western thirst for capital accumulation.

This study also revealed to me the cruelty with which countries around the world dismiss the concerns and needs of Indigenous nations. Despite celebrated legal successes, many communities have suffered from a lack of binding government provisions for supposedly guaranteed land rights. This suffering has included harassment, violent threats and actions, and legal and financial backlash, including frozen bank accounts. Worldwide, state terrorism has resulted in the murder of thousands of environmental defenders.

The writing

These experiences invited me to share knowledge with others less familiar with the tremendous harm being wrought upon Indigenous nations and the biodiversity of their ancestral lands. Ask many a North American where Ecuador is located and often the answer is Africa —in their mind the continent of mud huts and endless wild, exotic spaces. Once, when I mentioned to a fellow US American the danger of deforestation returning the Amazon Basin to a desert, they scoffed, insisting,

—“*Oh, there'll be plenty of rainforest left.*”

—*Hmm. It seemed to me the English-speaking world could benefit from some education.*

And so began my plunge into fiction writing, after a thirty-year career in public relations and strategic development for US nonprofits. I've found most accounts of threats to Indigenous nations and biodiversity published in environmental media and academic literature. I decided a fictional account might be the most accessible and compelling approach for most readers.

Jaguar Dreams

Jaguar dreams are critical to Indigenous mythology. Sacred and magical, a jaguar entering a dream guides the dreamer between visible and invisible worlds to assist spiritual quests and grant clairvoyance into the range of time. Jaguars navigate the forest helping the dreamer maneuver life's challenges. Its contrasting colors balance dark and light forces to protect the dreamer. Jaguars can signify peril, difficult to escape —a black jaguar means the dreamer has passed through the dark and light will come (MACBRYDE manuscript).

I based my first novel —*Jaguar Dreams*¹— on the fictional community of *Nunayaku*, meaning “soul water” in *Kichwa*. Their territory is positioned in the still-intact part of the rainforest where oil blocks have been leased by the government, but little to no extraction has yet occurred —only exploration of deep underground oil reserves.

This pristine landscape is where, on a peaceful day, seismic waves rock the ground. The villagers then discover a new road slicing the rainforest between *Kichwa* and *Sápara* territories. It rushes toward the villages, threatening the land and its people —roads being the first and most deadly act of destruction.

Wildlife and human life become restricted. Illegal logging creates a herringbone pattern of smaller offshoot roads. *Jaguar Dreams*’ road is a tendril of expanding operations by international corporate giants poised to suck what the *Kichwa* call “black gold” from the Earth.

Image 3 — *Jaguar Dreams* title page — Illustration by Antonio Bermeo



Source: Author’s private collection, 2025.

¹ *Jaguar Dreams* is unpublished on Amazon, waiting for its new, updated edition. My hope is establishing a publisher for the trilogy this year.

The delivery of oil drilling equipment deepens the peril. Oil spills, rampant disease, starving wildlife, sick and dying villagers —all are imminent. Their spiritual life is equally threatened by the intrusion of Western greed and its notions of progress. Through consensus building, the *Kichwa* must decide whether to confront the oil drillers or retreat further into the jungle, as they did to escape the Spanish colonizers, the Rubber Barons, and the Covid pandemic. Silence creeps under the canopy signaling the demise of both their ancient culture and a primary life source for the planet.

The heart of the *Kichwa* village is one family. The mother is *Sacha*, who emerges as a leader in this patriarchal community. Leading the conflict means facing challenges set by her shamanic father, her two grown sons, and villagers quarreling over passive resistance *versus* violent confrontation.

The journey takes the community from brutal, on-the-ground conflict, through the actions of corrupt officials, and into the Ecuadorian courts. On the way, they wonder if forest retreat might be easiest. To decide, villagers listen for messages from the spirit beings of the living forest. Messages they trust —messages they know the world must hear.

Outside the forest are friends and deadly foes: US and Chinese oil companies, corrupt Ecuadorian government officials, well-meaning US expatriates, two environmental activists fleeing arrest, a wise prostitute, and whip-wielding women defenders of the rainforest.

The sequel to *Jaguar Dreams* is *Flying River*. It follows the *Kichwa* and *Sápára* communities through legal proceedings against the US and Chinese oil companies. These events mirror present-day struggles by Indigenous, often women-led groups. In *Flying River*, they are aided by the nonprofit organization and an Ecuadorian environmental rights lawyer. The oil extractors must meet their adversaries in the *Pastaza* Provincial Court, ultimately in Ecuador's Constitutional Court, and on the ground in brutal confrontation. What transpires is a warning from *Pachamama* to the frail civilization living on her thin mantle: cease destruction or cease to exist — humanity's choice.

The last, still-untitled novel in the trilogy will be a prequel covering the *Kichwa* family's ancestry from its origins among the *Quijos* of the Andean Highlands, who fought both the Incan and Spanish conquests. Many ultimately escaped to the banks of the *Napo* River in northern Ecuador and spread to the southern banks of the *Curaray* River, where *Nunayaku* is located.

The descendant of one of the main characters, the warrior *Marcelo*, is *Jumandi*, the real-life warrior who fought the Spanish in 1578. Despite his heroism in leading the resistance, *Jumandi* was captured by the Spanish, tortured, and murdered. *Marcelo*, inspired by his mother *Sacha*, leads the modern-day resistance against imperial expansion, desperately trying to honor his people, their land, its wildlife, and the spirit beings of the living forest. Success will allow continued “good living”— *Sumak Kawsay*.

My research into the family's ancestry made me think of modern archaeologists discovering the likelihood of early civilizations such as that of *Göbekli Tepe* in Turkey —Neolithic hunters and gatherers pre-pottery and pre-agriculture. Some now even speculate the existence of very advanced civilizations thousands of years earlier. Humanity has persisted beyond multiple traumas.

Hopefully, with more awareness and use of Indigenous environmental stewardship, we can avoid an apocalypse. If we fail, I wish for Indigenous survivors using ancient skills and their cosmic connections to begin anew — perhaps evolving a more peaceful world.

About the Author

Susan MacBryde is a writer and former nonprofit leader who has spent the past eight years living in Ecuador. With more than three decades of experience supporting nonprofit organizations in the United States through fundraising and organizational development, she later served as board president of an environmental NGO working alongside Indigenous and rural communities in the Amazon Basin. Her experiences engaging with *Kichwa* communities and learning from Indigenous approaches to land stewardship and sustainability inspired her current literary work. She is presently developing a trilogy of novels centered on Amazonian Indigenous cultures, environmental justice, and the defense of territorial autonomy.