Environmental Turmoil in Bolivia

ABSTRACT: In South America, the country of Bolivia has been going through environmental strife for the past decade, and the past few years it has become stronger than ever. The leader of the country, Evo Morales, the first Aymara president, started his term with citizens calling him the “world hero of Mother Earth,” for his environmental activism and his stance with his indigenous people. However, throughout the years of his presidency, he has started to implement regulations that have left Bolivians baffled. He shifted his political stances from pro-environment and protection of indigenous rights, to completely eliminating them from his policies and focusing solely on economic development. His recent regulations not only hurt the land and the reserves of his country, but they have also led to the brutality of many natives by his order. What will be discussed in detail are the environmentally hurtful policies Evo Morales has approved, as well as the affects and impacts these policies have on Bolivia.

In the country of Bolivia, the current president Evo Morales has been creating drastic and controversial changes regarding Bolivia’s environment. One of the main topics being discussed is the new law Morales passed to de-protect the Territorio Indigena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Secure (TIPNIS). The TIPNIS is an Amazonian national park and nature reserve that is a biodiversity hotspot and is home to 15% of all flora and fauna species in the country. Not only is the TIPNIS home to a plethora of plants and animals, but indigenous tribes as well. The Moxeno, Chimane, and Yurakare are some of the major indigenous groups that reside in the area. Evo
Morales proposed a highway be built through the TIPNIS all the way to Brazil, which happens to be funding the construction. The TIPNIS is double protected by Bolivian law and constitution, especially because this type of road has been proposed before in the late 1900’s. The stated reasoning for the highway, according to the president, is to grant easier access for indigenous people in terms of goods and services. However, based on the routes and end points the proposed highway would reach, the opposition believe that the highway will be used for transport for easier cocaine distribution.

Even though the premise of this paper is about Morales’ plan for the TIPNIS, it is not the only thing he has signed off on. His other controversial proposal deals with Mount Illimani. This mountain is the highest mountain in the Cordillera Real with an elevation of 21,122 feet, Mount Illimani lies near the cities of El Alto and La Paz in western Bolivia (Marquez, “Latin American Post”). In the last four years, rumors started about illegal mining on Illimani. When asked about it, Morales denied any mining on the mountain. Regardless, in 2017, private investigator Maria Andrea Marquez discovered that Morales has secretly brought Chinese miners into the country to start mining for gold in search of personal profit. Marquez found at least forty mining sites on the mountain, even though Illimani is legally protected as well. Mining on Mount Illimani will melt the snow, which could cause problems in the future for Bolivians in terms of fresh water supply. It will also bring about a lot of pollution, which will not only hurt those who reside close to the mountain, but it will also wash into the lakes with run off which will contaminate it with mercury. Lake Titicaca will be the main target of the pollution. In the last eight years, other decisions that Morales has signed off on include the building of dams, exploring petroleum resources, the hunting and killing of jaguars for their teeth, the approval for deforestation in mountain ranges that caused major flooding, and increasing hydrocarbon exploration in other
protected areas, such as Madidi National Park (Berton et al, “Mongabay”). Morales’ plan for his country, whether it is for selfish or unselfish reasons, is still up to discussion.

For the purpose and procedure of this paper, it is to bring awareness to incidents happening outside of the United States, especially in developing countries that do not normally come into discussion and may encourage readers to donate, sign petitions, or to just become more informed on incidents and events happening all over the world. Additionally, this paper will bring awareness to a corrupt and abusive government taking advantage of the uneducated citizens who voted for Morales and for his promise of environmental preservation, now turning against him. The research and information of this paper is to also bring awareness to the potential and detrimental impact these policies will have on the country as well as show that Bolivia may not be the richest country, but the traditions, values, and land is important to the people, indigenous or not. Bolivian citizens are doing anything they can to protect their home from Morales.

The impact (both environmental and economical since they are linked together in many ways) will be discussed, as well as the shift in Morales’ viewpoint and when that shift started. Knowledge about the current events going on in Bolivia is from news articles and personal communication through family from Bolivia. What started the interest in the particular topic began with the textbook Environment: The Science Behind the Stories, specifically chapter eleven about biodiversity.

Chapter 11 of Environment: The Science Behind the Stories focuses on biodiversity and extinction. Biological diversity or (better known as biodiversity) is defined as the variety of life in a particular habitat or ecosystem, and there are different levels such as species diversity, genetic diversity, and ecosystem diversity. Environmental scientists express that 1.8 million
species have been identified; however, still claim that they “still are profoundly ignorant of the number of species that exist” (Withgrott et al, 278), but estimate there to be somewhere between 4 and 10 million species on Earth. This unknown is due to many factors, one factor is that there are many parts of Earth yet to be discovered or explored, such as ocean depths.

The chapter also talks about extinction (the cease of existence to a particular species) and how it occurs naturally, as well as the fact that Earth has experienced five mass extinctions. However, scientists explain that human impact is causing biodiversity to be eliminated at a rapid pace, ultimate leading to the decline of population sizes, the decline of geographic ranges, or in extreme cases the extinction of many species. It has been stated that Earth is currently going through its sixth mass extinction, which is due to human causes, and if nothing is to be done about it, half of all species could be lost. Scientists state that “in the past few centuries alone, we have recorded hundreds of instances of species extinction caused by people,” (Withgott et al, 281). With the increasing loss of biodiversity, it is prominent to discuss the benefits it has. Such benefits include bringing about ecosystem services, help maintain the function of ecosystems, enhance food security, provide drugs and medicines, and boost economies from tourism and recreational activities.

The chapter on biodiversity stood out because it really pertained to what is happening in Bolivia with the proposed highway. The TIPNIS is a biodiversity hotspot in South America, with hundreds of species endemic to the continent alone. As stated earlier, Bolivian law requires permission from indigenous people when it comes to changes or construction to their land and home. Natives to the TIPNIS are furious about the nature reserve being split in half by a highway, but were met with criticism by the government and their desires were untimely ignored or met with violence that will be discussed further in a later paragraph. Not only will the
highway disturb an integral part of the country, it will also cause habitat fragmentation, decline or extinction of endemic species, and decline of many indigenous groups.

For the instance that is going on between Evo Morales and the changes he currently is or is wanting to implement, politics and environmental agendas are linked together, as shown in an article called *Capitalizing on the Public Discourse in Bolivia- Evo Morales and Twenty-first Century Capitalism* written by Rebecca Hollender. Winning the 2005 Bolivian election, Evo Morales was seen as a saving grace for many people, indigenous or not, for a better future and for the Movement for Socialism (MAS). In the first five years, Morales’ presidency was viewed as a success in terms of economic and traditional development, such as passing a constitution to protect the rights of Mother Earth and the passing of the Unity Pact, which is a unified law that supports indigenous and peasant social movements along with other things that gained the support of his people.

However, after a while, a shift in MAS was noticed. Morales opened the country up to transnational corporations, mega-infrastructure, illicit drugs, mining, and many other things. Hollender states that “these activities have resulted in serious environmental, social, and economic consequences,” (Hollender, 51). Morales grew in power as a leader due to his indigenous decent and charisma, and he used that to his advantage. Starting his legacy in the Coca Growers Federations of Cochabamba, he, “promised improvements to material and non-material well-being without replicating the unsustainable and destructive pathways to industrialization taken by the North” (Hollener, 52), and even criticized North America for the detrimental impact they have put on the environment. It was revealed that MAS’s policy record revealed that Morales has opened up national parks for fossil fuel exploration, eliminated many land reforms for private interests, and approved mining, and many other things without the
consent of the locals. While those are the major shifts in Morales’ policy-making, some smaller ones include trafficking, money laundering, drug refinement, and many claims that they will legalize genetically modified organisms. Before, in Morales’ second legislation, MAS tried to keep their controversy processes in secret, but in more recent years, they do not try to hide its tactics, and even use scare methods to keep the citizens from standing up against them.

Another major part of Morales’ agenda that contributes to the environmental turmoil is the disturbance of another area: The Alto Beni. The Alto Beni is an Andean region located in La Paz, is rich in biodiversity, although some parts are degraded due to the recent stress on agriculture. Even though this region has been disturbed, another environmental region has caught Morales’ attention and what it contains. Lorenzo Pelligrini and Marco Arismendi discuss their research and go into detail about this topic in their article *Consultation, Compensation and Extraction in Bolivia after the “Left Turn”: The Case of Oil Exploration in the North of La Paz Department*. In 2007, an emphasis on oil has begun in the country, and the oil industry has been scoping out a flourishing area for hydrocarbon extraction; the Madidi National Park and the Pilon Lajas Reserve. Not only are these nature reserves are supposed to be protected by law, but they are also “overlap with indigenous territories of Mosetene, Chimane, and Leco” native groups, (Pelligrini et al, 110). Again, as stated before, Bolivian law requires consultation and consideration of the indigenous people; however, the government and private investment corporations have serious conflict with this, seeing it as a roadblock to “move forward” in their country’s development, even if it means upsetting and decimating sacred native land. Due to this, government and corporations have taken to “proceed first with consultation of organizations representing non-indigenous people” because they claim it will be a smoother and easier process than talking to the indigenous people. (Pelligrini, 110).
Because Bolivia is home to many indigenous groups and their traditional lifestyles and culture require them to exist in harmony with nature and to respect the earth and all it provides for them, Morales’ economic agenda has and will continue to affect them greatly. In the article written by Nancy Postero titled *From Indigeneity to Economic Liberation*, Postero goes into more detail in the shift of the Bolivian president and what it means for the native people. When the second controversy debate about the proposed highway for the TIPNIS came to public knowledge, indigenous residents of the nature reserve walked for three hundred plus miles in a march to protect their home, and were met with backlash. Postero stated that “the government began a powerful campaign painting the TIPNIS protesters as backward savages” (Postero, 139). Over five hundred officers intercepted them and started tying them up, beating them, assaulting them, and arresting them. Over a hundred were injured and a number of natives were reported dead or missing. This was not the only time that the government or law enforcement performed public displays of abuse toward the people who oppose Morales.

In a recent interview, local Guarani Justa Cabrera who opposes the proposed highway and MAS government, called Evo Morales out saying he “had become a ‘capataz,’ an overseer for the transnational corporations, linking him to the evils of past forced labor systems that had enslaved her people,” (Postero, 149). Three years later, Morales bribed Cabrera and her husband to support his government by promising a housing project for over a hundred new homes for her village. This angered many Guarani saying this was how Morales worked, bribing his people to stay on his side as well as dividing natives against each other, and that these methods are how he plans to accomplish the desired highway through the TIPNIS.

With research presented above, it is clear that when talking about environmental changes, economics comes in conversation almost every time and the desire to obtain a triple bottom line;
social, economic, and environmental sustainability. As it is in the case of Bolivia, economics trumping the environment plays a huge role in determining the fate of the developing country: unperturbed that officials are destroying not only sacred land, but their own culture and traditions. The question that still remains is, what can be done to save the land that should not be touched because of the legal protections that Bolivian law had set in place. It has yet to be determined what proper action should or could be taken, and whether or not non-natives can do anything at all. The top solution that is present so far is to first sign petitions to support the land and the indigenous life of Bolivia. The second is to bring more awareness to the happenings of the country, and eventually any other country going through a similar uproar.
Reference List


