2020

May

THE AMAZON COMMONWEALTH: A NEW PARTNER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE PERUVIAN AMAZON

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On April 24 Peru's government announced its formal recognition of the Amazon Commonwealth. The move caps a near decade-long process initiated by the six jurisdictions that together oversee the world's second-largest expanse of Amazon rainforest to align themselves behind a sustainable growth agenda. The announcement comes at a critical moment for Peru's Amazon region, one of the nation's poorest and one that is contending with continued threats from deforestation and the looming impacts of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Below, Gustavo Suarez de Freitas discusses how the Amazon Commonwealth came to be and what this moment represents for one of the world's most important biodiversity hotspots. Suarez de Freitas leads EII's programs in Peru.

Peru is home to the world's second largest expanse of Amazon rainforest, which covers almost 60% of the country and ranges from low-lying *varzea* wetlands to towering mountain forests that rise more than 3,000 meters above sea level.

Rich in biodiversity, Peru's Amazon provides ecosystem services that are of continental and global importance. Several of the main rivers in the Amazon Basin originate in or pass through this region, which between its forests and surrounding peatlands constitutes one of the world's largest carbon reservoirs. The area is also home to more than 60 distinct Indigenous Peoples who are themselves possessors of knowledge beneficial to humanity.

And much of this forest is in danger.

Deforestation in the Peruvian Amazon advances hand in hand with the expansion of agriculture and livestock, permanently destroying valuable forests without generating long term wealth or stability. Instead, it reinforces rural poverty.

Natural resources, meanwhile, are over-exploited, often illegally, degrading forests and impoverishing fisheries and wildlife populations. Illegal mining and drug trafficking are thriving in some of the most underdeveloped parts of the country. And as the coronavirus tears through the region, those inequities are being laid bare. Loreto, the largest region of Peru and a notable Amazonian landmark, is one of the hardest-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting over 1,000 cases to date.

Faced with these conditions, governments of the Peruvian Amazon are seeking ways to increase collaboration, to draw support and to present a unified vision for the wider region, one that is focused on sustainable development. It is an idea that began some ten years ago with the Amazon Interregional Council (CIAM) and that has has evolved into the Amazon Commonwealth.

The creation of the Amazon Commonwealth will strengthen and enrich ongoing collaborations begun under CIAM across all six Amazon regions, which include Amazonas, San Martín, Loreto, Ucayali, Huánuco and Madre de Dios. This new legal status means the Commonwealth can receive and manage public funds allocated by the central government, as well as from donors and corporations. CIAM did not have this authority, and so it is an important step and one that will allow for sustainable development projects to be initiated and carried out on a broader, Amazon-wide scale.

It is important to highlight that the six member regions of the commonwealth have all committed to reducing deforestation. As members of the Governors Climate and Forests (GCF) Task Force, all are signatories to the Rio Branco Declaration, while most are also part of the Under 2 Coalition. At the same time, with support from EII and other organizations and funding by the Norwegian government, each of the six regional governments has been actively preparing regional low-emission development strategies.

The Amazon Commonwealth therefore represents an important opportunity to move closer to an Amazonian jurisdictional strategy that more effectively manages the threat of continued deforestation.

Peru has historically maintained a strong central government. Devolving authority to the regions is relatively recent and so institutional infrastructure remains weak. This is even more evident in the Amazon, a region that until recently received little attention from the central government except to extract hydrocarbons… or facilitate colonization.

The challenge for regional governments of the Amazon is, therefore, substantial. They have a limited economic pool from which to draw. And with what funds they have, they must ensure the conservation of a critical piece of their own natural heritage, a landscape that provides ecosystem services to the region, the country and the world.

The governments of the Peruvian Amazon are aware of this responsibility, and they understand that the only way to achieve this task is through inclusive low-emission development that benefits all, including the region’s many Indigenous communities. Such development must be based on the maintenance of standing forests, the recovery of degraded forests and an increase in agricultural productivity and efficiency, drawing on science and traditional knowledge, and taking advantage of market opportunities for zero deforestation products.

The Amazon Commonwealth can play an important role in this process, and EII is committed to helping local governments realize their shared goal of a sustainable and more affluent Amazon region.