

MEDIA ALERT
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Australian companies spearheading a dangerous and unpopular mining boom in global biodiversity hotspot– Ecuador.

The activities of several Australian mining giants and Austrade were raised in parliament this afternoon. BHP, Sol Gold, Fortescue, and Newcrest own more hectares of exploratory mining concessions in Ecuador than those of any other country. Many of these concessions overlap protected forests and indigenous territories, in breach of Ecuador's constitution and environmental laws.

Senator Lee Rhiannon today questioned Austrade about its role in promoting Australian mining companies to seek concessions in Ecuadorian protected forests and indigenous territories.

Ecuador has the world's highest biodiversity, despite being a tiny fraction of the world's land area. The threat of extinction for much of this biodiversity has dramatically increased since April 2016, with the Ecuadorian government opening approximately 2.9 million hectares of land for mining exploration, covering around 14% of the country. Most of the mining concessions are located in the Tropical Andes Biodiversity Hotspot, the most biodiverse of the 36 'hotspots' worldwide, and home to hundreds of threatened species of mammals, birds, amphibians, and plants.

These concessions were made illegally without the knowledge or approval of the people living on these lands, and they cover critical headwater ecosystems and indigenous territories. They also threaten over a third of Ecuador's protected forest reserves.

As of January 2018, 735,597ha of protected forests in Ecuador are under exploratory mining concessions, or more than 30% of the total land area protected by such reserves.

Similarly, among the largest landholding Indigenous groups, approximately 995,426ha are within mining concessions, or approximately 14% of Indigenous lands in Ecuador. Some groups, like the Awa are more highly affected, with nearly 70% of Awá lands and 50% of Shaur territories affected by mining concessions (or over 860,000 ha of Shaur Amazonian rainforests).

The concession process has also been plagued by corruption, ongoing human rights abuses including criminalization and silencing of dissent, and forced displacement of people whose homelands are jeopardized by mining projects. Corruption has occurred at the highest levels, with even the former Vice President Jorge Glas jailed for six years in December 2017 on corruption related charges.

The corruption occurred while Glas was Coordinating Director for the office of Strategic Sectors. His office was also responsible for promoting and negotiating new mining concessions. Despite his jailing, hundreds of mining concession contracts which his office oversaw are still valid today, including those granted to Australian mining companies.

At a referendum in February 2018, 67% of Ecuadorians voted overwhelmingly to roll back mining, particularly in forested areas. Despite this, mining concessions continue to be handed out.

Senator Lee Rhiannon will be asking questions at Friday's 1st June Senate Estimates Committee meeting, regarding many of these matters. Of particular interest will be;

- a) AUSTRADE's role in promoting the Australian mining industry's rush into Ecuador, and
- b) it's alleged role in discounting the environmental risks of operating in one of the world's most biodiverse countries,
- c) and underplaying the sovereign risks of operating in Ecuador's politically and culturally sensitive environment.

Australian mining companies in Ecuador as of Jan 2018

Companies	Hectares	Concessions
SolGold	733,978,00	178
BHP (Cerro Quebrado)	52,113,00	17
Fortescue	156,105,05	40
Newcrest	144,157,00	37
Sunstone	4,949	1
Goldminindex	54985	12
Total Area	1146287	285

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Sources:

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<https://ecuadorendangered.com/research/reports/RIC-Mapping-Report-v1.1-20180117-eng.pdf>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/14/odebrecht-scandal-ecuador-vice-president-given-six-years-jail>

Additional scientific reports, maps and other data:

<https://ecuadorendangered.com/research/>

<https://www.biorxiv.org/content/early/2018/01/22/251538>