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Effects of Oil on Human Health

In Northeast Ecuador, oil spills have extensively contaminated the landscape, damaging both the environment and the health of the people living in the area. This region of Ecuador is home to a vast rainforest, which contains complex ecosystems and a multitude of residents, including eight groups of indigenous people. This area has been significantly altered, even prior to the start of extraction in 1972, with the construction of a network of roads through the Amazon. Severe leakage of about 16.8 million gallons of crude oil leaked out of the trans-Andes pipeline (across the country to the coast). There were also many unlined pits which were used as storage units for oil waste that succumbed to toxic seepage and overflow. For five decades this pollution has persisted with no measures being taken to clean up the situation.

Everyday life of the indigenous people has been strongly influenced by the oil waste left behind by petroleum operations. Oil waste, known as formation or produced water, contains unusable petroleum byproducts mixed with water from beneath the bedrock. These contaminants leached into the Amazon Basin's headwaters, which serve as the water supply for many communities. People have reported a decrease in aquatic life and an increase in death of livestock that drink this water. In addition, these are the very water sources used by the locals for drinking, cooking and bathing. Many people, the majority being children, have gotten horrible rashes and sores on their skin from bathing in water that is severely contaminated by oil.

A study was conducted to compare the cancer rates of people living near the oil pits to the people who live far from the oil pits. The research showed that the people who live in closer proximity to the contamination had higher levels of stomach, rectum, skin, soft tissue, kidney, cervix, and lymph nodes cancer. The same researchers also noted that there was a correlation between childhood leukemia and living near the oil pits.

Miscarriage rates were also found to be much more prominent in oil-contaminated areas as another study revealed a risk for spontaneous abortion 2.34 times higher among communities situated near oil contamination. Another study conducted in 1993 by a community health workers association found increased morbidity, spontaneous abortion, dermatitis, skin mycosis, malnutrition, and mortality rates in human residents of the area. All of these studies combined start to reveal a relationship between contact with oil contamination and various ailments.

I don't even know where to begin to reflect because I am just so angry at the fact that most, if not all, of this could have been avoided if Chevron/Texaco did their job and just cleaned up their mess or installed proper pipelines like they would have done if this was in the United States. But that makes even less sense to me, because they knew they were going into the Amazonian rainforest, they should have been thinking about taking even *more* precautions than if they were in the United States. I can't imagine that most of the indigenous people really even use any oil (or derivatives of oil) and I am sure they did not benefit greatly off of having the oil taken from their land, yet they are the ones that suffer most in this situation.