

Abby Lodge
Oil Pollution in Ecuador

In the 1960's the American oil company Chevron operating under the Texaco brand, entered into a contract with Ecuador's government to extract oil from the basin of the Amazon rainforest. Over the course of the next 26 years Chevron extracted billions of gallons of crude oil that generated huge revenues for the company. In the process this large oil company committed one of the worst acts of environmental abuse in history.

To understand how Chevron caused things to go so horribly wrong in Ecuador, here is a look at what steps are normally taken to protect the environment when drilling for oil. Oil extraction typically begins when a well is drilled and pits are created for the temporary storage of oil waste. The pits are lined with industrial tarp which acts as a highly resistant membrane with puncture and tear resistance designed for heavy weight liquid and extreme temperatures. The tarp prevents oil waste toxins from seeping into the ground. While extracting crude oil, the drilling muds, toxic oil waste and chemical lubricants are stored in the lined pits. In the separation station, crude oil is refined and the remaining toxic water, what is known in the industry as produced water, is reinjected into the ground. When the drilling is complete, the oil sludge is disposed of and the pit is refilled, restoring the site to its natural state. This is the process Chevron and other oil companies generally followed when extracting oil in the US.

Much of the industry had used these drilling and waste disposal practices for years before Chevron entered Ecuador. In fact, in 1962, the American Petroleum Institute published a manual describing the proper reinjection of produced water into the ground. The manual stated, among other things, that extreme care must be exercised in the handling and disposal of produced water and warning of possible seepage into nearby surface water sources or onto lands used for farming and grazing. Texaco itself had even patented a new technique for reinjection which addressed the problem of pollutants seeping into groundwater because Chevron knew that to not do so would cause considerable pollution problems and in the United States they followed these standards, but not in Ecuador.

Here is what Chevron did in the Ecuadorian Amazon, one of the most fragile and biodiverse ecosystems: Chevron chose not to re-inject toxic produced water into the ground, instead the company installed pipes to drain the toxic waste water into rivers and stream. Chevron chose not to line its waste pits the way it had done in the United States, allowing the toxins to seep into the soils and contaminate groundwater often relied on by local inhabitants for their drinking water. And rather than properly dispose of the toxic sludge in the unlined pits, Chevron chose to leave them there. The company installed pipes to transport the sludge and contaminated rainwater into nearby stream. Rather than capture the toxic natural gas during extraction Chevron burned off the gases, a process known as flaring – producing huge flames and releasing dioxins into the environment.

This blatant pollution and destruction took place right in the backyards of the indigenous peoples of Ecuador. The damage done by Chevron is evident and widespread with hundreds of wells and toxic pits spread out over an area 1,500 square miles – roughly the size of the US state of Rhode Island. Chevron's own top legal official and Ecuador estimated the company dumped more than 16 billion gallons of toxic waste into the Amazon. Independent studies estimated more

than 18 billion gallons of toxic waste were dumped. All of this while the indigenous peoples of Ecuador continued to use rivers and streams for their drinking water bathing and fishing. Chevron officials even have the audacity to tell concerned village elders that the oil in the water was full of vitamins and minerals – this couldn't be further from the truth.

Petroleum hydrocarbons found in the soils and water in Ecuador are known to cause a vast array of diseases and ailments including liver damage, nervous system damage, spontaneous miscarriages, cancer and even death. Laboratory studies have confirmed extremely high levels of toxins in the soils in Ecuador's Amazon, some as high as ten thousand times over the maximum tolerances allowed by regulatory authorities in the United States. In several independent health evaluations, including one conducted in the village of San Carlos, cancer rates were up to 30 times higher than normal and the incidence of childhood leukemia was found to have reached alarming levels. One analysis of health and population data found that more than 9,000 people in the area of Chevron's operations are going to contract cancer in the coming decades.

The public health catastrophe resulting from Chevron's environmental destruction easily could have been avoided if Chevron had lined the pits and reinjected toxic wastewater as required by the law and industry standards. Why then did Chevron choose to use substandard operational practices in the delicate rainforest environment of Ecuador? Because what Texaco and Chevron have always cared about most in Ecuador is protecting their profits even at the expense of the indigenous groups and delicate ecosystem and they thought they would never get caught. Its contract with Ecuador's government required Chevron to use modern technology and operate with care towards the environment beyond Chevron's moral and ethical obligations to extract oil in a safe manner it was legally bound to do so.

Shockingly Chevron all but admitted that it was harming the environment by directing its employees to hide evidence of oil spills and instructing them to destroy any records of existing spills after decades of environmental destruction what essentially amounts to the wholesale decimation of indigenous peoples of Ecuador. Chevron struck a deal with Ecuador's government to spend 40 million dollars to cosmetically treat a small fraction of its 916 waste pits by covering them with dirt without removing the toxins which to this day continue to contaminate soils and groundwater. The amount spent was less than 1% of the cost of a comprehensive cleanup according to estimates.