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Saving Yasuni: Can a revolutionary plan protect the rainforest from commercial exploitation?

Ecuador's Yasuni National Park is not only one of the world's most biodiverse places. It is also home to up to five billion barrels of oil.

Stanley Johnson | Sunday 10 March 2013 01:00 |

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Then we have to take a helicopter up the Napo river to reach Añangu, in the heart of Yasuni, the extraordinary national park that is among the most biodiverse places on the planet.

If all had gone to plan, we would have been in our seats long before the president and his party arrived. As it is, as we hover over the endless jungle, I can see that the president's own helicopter, a tough-looking military model, is already parked in a clearing in the forest, and the show has started.

Ana Alban, Ecuador's former environment minister, now her country's ambassador in London, had explained before we left England: "Now that the election campaign has started, the vice-president, Lenin Moreno, becomes president for the duration of the campaign. He is planning to make a televised address to the nation from the Amazon region in the last week of the campaign and we hope to meet him there. This will be his last national broadcast before he retires. He is not standing for re-election."

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Apart from the ambassador, my fellow guest on the trip this morning is Genoveva Casanova, director of Spain's Casa de Alba Foundation and honorary ambassador for the UN High Commission on Refugees.

Alban urges us both to hurry, so we duck under the still-whirring rotors and make our way to the front of the crowd, where seats have been reserved for us. The president has obviously been well-briefed, because he pauses in his fluent oration long enough to greet each of us by name as we take our seats. The cameraman has clearly been briefed, too, because he zooms in on us as our names are mentioned and, when we look up, we can see our own faces on a giant screen. We can also glimpse behind us the serried ranks of Quechua people who have come in from Añangu and the surrounding area for what, for them, must be the event of a lifetime.

Lenin Moreno, the man sitting just a few feet from me with a microphone in his hand and a warm smile on his face, is one of the most remarkable men in South American politics. Born in 1953, he was pursuing a successful career as a businessman in Quito when, in 1998, he was the victim of a car-jacking. Shot in the back and confined to a wheelchair ever since, he came to terms with his disability and took up a political career, being inaugurated as vice-president in 2006. Much of his energies have been devoted to improving the lives of the disabled in Ecuador and, boy, did they need improving. At the time of his shooting, it was rare to see people in wheelchairs in public. In rural areas, those with severe handicaps were treated as outcasts, sometimes confined to sheds and chicken coops.

But Moreno has actively changed all that. Wheelchair ramps have sprung up across Ecuador. People with severe disabilities now receive \$300 monthly stipends from the government. And Moreno has helped draw up a law that compels Ecuadorian companies to set aside at least 4 per cent of jobs for people with disabilities. He recently pledged that the government would reach out to all disabled people who needed help. That, he said, amounted to a revolution.

Last year, Moreno was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work. More than two-and-a-half million signatures were collected endorsing him, and 180 countries signalled their support. In the event, the prize was



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