

**Lesson 3** Book Excerpt**Climate Debt**

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On my first visit to the Northern Cheyenne reservation, the question of how to finance the kind of healthy economy anti-coal activists were fighting for came up often. At one point, Lynette Two Bulls, who runs an organization that teaches Cheyenne youth about their history, told me that she had heard about something exciting happening in Ecuador. She was talking about the call for the international community to compensate the country for not extracting the oil in the Yasuní rainforest, with the money raised going to social programs and a clean energy transition. It sounded like just what was needed on the reservation and she wanted to know: if Ecuador could be compensated for keeping its oil in the ground, then why couldn't the northern Cheyenne be compensated for being carbon keepers for their coal?

It was a very good question, and the parallels were striking. Yasuní National Park is an extraordinary swath of Ecuadorian rainforest, home to several Indigenous tribes and a surreal number of rare and exotic animals (it has nearly as many species of trees in 2.5 acres as are native to all of north America). And underneath that riot of life sits an estimated 850 million barrels of crude oil, worth about \$7 billion. Burning that oil—and logging the rainforest to get it—would add another 547 million tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. Of course the oil majors want in.

So in 2006, the environmental group Acción Ecológica (the same group that made an early alliance with the anti-oil movement in Nigeria) put forward a counterproposal: the Ecuadorian government should agree not to sell the oil, but it should be supported in this action by the international community, which would benefit collectively from the preservation of biodiversity and from keeping planet-warming gases out of our shared atmosphere. That would mean partially compensating Ecuador for what it would have earned from oil revenues had it opted to drill. As Esperanza Martínez, president of Acción Ecológica, explained, the “proposal establishes a precedent, arguing that countries should be rewarded for not exploiting their oil. . . . Funds gathered would be used for the [renewable] energy transition and could be seen as payments for the ecological debt from north to South, and they should be distributed democratically at the local and global levels.” Besides, she writes, surely “the most direct way to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide was to leave fossil fuels in the ground.” The Yasuní plan was based on the premise that Ecuador, like all developing countries, is owed a debt for the inherent injustice of climate change—the fact that wealthy countries had used up most of the atmospheric capacity for safely absorbing CO<sub>2</sub> before developing countries had a chance to industrialize. And since the entire world would reap the benefits of keeping that carbon in the ground (since it would help stabilize the global climate), it is unfair to expect Ecuador, as a poor country whose people had contributed little to the climate crisis, to shoulder the economic burden for giving up those potential petro dollars. Instead, that burden should be

shared between Ecuador and the highly industrialized countries most responsible for the buildup of atmospheric carbon. This is not charity, in other words: if wealthy countries do not want poorer ones to pull themselves out of poverty in the same dirty way that we did, the onus is on northern governments to help foot the bill.

This, of course, is the core of the argument for the existence of a “climate debt”—the same argument that Bolivia’s climate negotiator, Angélica Navarro Llanos, had laid out for me in Geneva in 2009, helping me to see how climate change could be the catalyst to attack inequality at its core, the basis for a “Marshall Plan for the earth.” The math behind the argument is simple enough. As discussed, climate change is the result of cumulative emissions: the carbon dioxide we emit stays in the atmosphere for approximately one to two centuries, with a portion remaining for a millennium or even more. And since the climate is changing as a result of two-hundred-odd years of such accumulated emissions, that means that the countries that have been powering their economies with fossil fuels since the industrial revolution have done far more to cause temperatures to rise than those that just got in on the globalization game in the last couple of decades. Developed countries, which represent less than 20 percent of the world’s population, have emitted almost 70 percent of all the greenhouse gas pollution that is now destabilizing the climate. (the United States alone, which comprises less than 5 percent of the global population, now contributes about 14 percent of all carbon emissions.)