

Energy transition and resource extractivism in the Americas

25-26 June 2025

Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Join us for the event "Energy Transition & Resource Extractivism in The Americas" organised by the ASI Research Cluster Biodiversity and Natural Resources and the VU Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology!

The pursuit of natural resources in the Americas is as old as the age of conquest. From the gold-hungry myths of El Dorado to today's race for lithium and rare earth minerals, extraction has shaped economies, governance, institutions, and national destinies across the continent. It has built cities, collapsed empires, created wealth, and fueled exploitation. That resources shape societies is clear, but how they do so, and to whose benefit, remains deeply contested.

That is precisely what we will delve into during this workshop. Resource extraction wears many faces in South American countries, from Ecuador and Colombia to Suriname and Guyana. Today's so-called "green" extractivism claims to chart a moral high ground, promising environmental salvation and a cleansed conscience through electric vehicles, solar panels, and battery storage. At the same time, fantasies of petro-capitalism remain enticing, albeit to different audiences. The reality on the ground is rarely simple: resource wealth can mean opportunity, but it can also deepen fault lines. On the ground, realities are complex: resource wealth can create opportunity but also deepen divisions, especially in the context of the postcolonial Guianas. If resources must serve the 'common good,' who defines what that means in multi-ethnic states with layered histories? And can elites, local or foreign, be trusted to steward these gains responsibly?

This two-day conference brings together scholars, Indigenous leaders, and professionals from across sectors to examine how resource extraction continues to shape power and identity in South America. We ask: What really changes in the age of energy transition, what doesn't, and what should?

Register via this page <https://vu.nl/en/events/2025/energy-transition-and-resource-extractivism-in-the-americas>. We look forward to your presence!

See the full programme below.

Programme

25 June 2025

9:00 Opening

9:30 Session 1: Green extractivism. Extraction from black to green?

Leonidas Oikonomakis, VU Amsterdam: "When a wind-turbine flaps its wings in China. Green transition and balsa extractivism in the Amazonia Ecuatoriana."

Simon Lobach, Geneva Graduate Institute: "Aluminium from the Amazonia. A socio-environmental history."

Pablo Ampuero Ruiz, VU Amsterdam: "New Energy for Old Dependencies? Geoeconomic Dependencies between Lithium Extraction in South America and China's Ecological Civilisation."

Discussants: Cristóbal Bonelli & Duane Edwards

11:15 *Coffee break*

11:45 Session 2: Hiding in plain sight: gold and oil in the Guianas

Duane Edwards, University of Guyana: "Resource extraction and ethnic particularism: A critical review of five years of oil extraction in Guyana."

Eva Koemar, VU Amsterdam: "Promises without time – the crisis of long-term governance in a petrostate in the making"

Marjo de Theije, VU Amsterdam: "Can Suriname's mining transition offer a way out of the institutional, political, and social trap?"

Discussants: Winston Ramautarsing & Simon Lobach

13:30 *Lunch*

14:30 Session 3: Extraction, environmental hazards, and climate change

Susana Carmona, Maastricht University: "Transitioning from coal mining in Colombia: Corporate strategies and resistance in an extractivist economy"

Danai-Maria Kontou, VU Amsterdam: "Modelling Doom? Unpacking Uncertainty, Narrative, and Extractivism Politics in Climate-Risk Scenarios—Insights from the Guianas"

Carolina Valladares: "Lessons learned from fossil fuels extractivism to avoid building new sacrifice zones for the sake of energy transition"

Discussants: Leonidas Oikonomakis

16:15 Closing discussion

26 June 2025

10:00 Session 4: Recent students' work on resource extraction in the Americas

Igor Rosenberg, VU Amsterdam: "Local Experiences of a Contested Industry: Lithium Extraction in Argentina"

Luna Schwirtz, VU Amsterdam: "Trust in our abilities. On expectations about the oil boom in Suriname"

Nando van Kersbergen, VU Amsterdam: "Decarbonization and social structure: The closure of the San Nicolas oil refinery and its residents"

Mirko Van Pampus, CEDLA/University of Amsterdam: "Corporate Social Investment in Chilean Lithium Mining. Conflict, Cooperation and Citizenship on the Salar de Atacama."

Discussant: Dimitris Dalakoglou

12:00 **Lorenzo Poli, Visual Artist and Architect:** *The Geoglyphs of the Anthropocene in the Americas*

13:00 *Lunch*

14:00 Film: *Los Descendientes del Jaguar/ The Children of the Jaguar* (see detailed information below)

Director: Eriberto Gualinga.

Q&A with Berta Gualinga

15:30 *Break*

16:00 Round table about extracting for energy in the Americas,

Keynote statements by Berta Gualinga, Philip Liverpool, Winston Ramautarsing, Carolina Valladares

Moderation by Eva van Roekel

17:30 *Reception*

Film Los Descendientes del Jaguar/ The Children of the Jaguar

Director: Eriberto Gualinga

Producers: Eriberto Gualinga, Mariano Machain, David Whitburn

Length: 28 minutes

In a case that has attracted significant attention in academic circles, a few years ago, the government of Ecuador authorised a petroleum company to undertake oil drilling activities on land belonging to the Sarayaku Indigenous Community. The Sarayaku were not consulted prior to the decision, and they have been fighting it ever since. Los Descendientes del Jaguar/The Children of the Jaguar chronicles the tale of a small group of indigenous peoples who, in the face of formidable opposition from both an oil company and their own government, courageously defend their unique way of life and the rainforest they inhabit. A decade-long legal battle has motivated them to leave their jungle habitat and nation of origin in pursuit of a precedent-setting ruling that could influence not only their future but also that of the planet. The film 'The Children of the Jaguar' is a collaborative production between the Indigenous Community of Sarayaku, located in the Ecuadorian Amazon, and Amnesty International. The film presents the Runa people of Sarayaku as they set off on a journey that will have a profound impact on their future.

The documentary has been directed by Eriberto Gualinga, a documentary-maker of Kichwa origin from the indigenous community of Sarayaku. The film was awarded at the National Geographic's All Roads Film Festival in 2012.

Organizing Committee:

Eva Koemar, Leonidas Oikonomakis, Marjo de Theije
Neele van den Bongardt, Medha Guru

Confirmed participants:

Dr. Pablo Ampuero Ruiz, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU Amsterdam
Dr. Cristobal Bonelli, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam
Dr. Susana Carmona Castillo, Faculty of Science and Engineering, University College Maastricht
Prof. Dimitris Dalakoglou, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU Amsterdam
Dr. Duane Edwards, University of Guyana, Georgetown, Guyana
Ms. Berta Gualinga, Sarayaku Indigenous leader, Ecuador
Nander van Kersbergen, student Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU Amsterdam
Eva Koemar, Msc, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU Amsterdam
Dr. Danaï-Maria Kontou, Postdoctoral Researcher, Faculty of Science, VU Amsterdam
Ir. Philip Liverpool, Energy Executive, Den Haag
Dr. Simon Lobach, Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer at Geneva Graduate Institute, Switzerland
Dr. Leonidas Oikonomakis, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU Amsterdam
Lorenzo Poli, Visual Artist and Architect
Mirko van Pampus, MA, CEDLA / University of Amsterdam
Ir. Winston Ramautarsing, Vereniging Economisten Suriname, Paramaribo, Suriname
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Igor von Rosenberg, student Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU Amsterdam
Luna Schwirtz, student Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU Amsterdam
Prof. Marjo de Theije, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, VU Amsterdam
Dr. Carolina Valladares, Environmental justice researcher, project officer, Amsterdam

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