

Contesting Copper:

Documentary Film, Research, and Mining in Ecuador's Intag Region

by David Kneas, MEd 2005

I spent much of the summer of 2004 in Ecuador's Intag region, a remote cloud forest area on the northwest slope of the Ecuadorian Andes. Bishimetals, a subsidiary of the Mitsubishi Corporation, arrived in the region in 1994, wanting to exploit a copper deposit beneath the mountain range that forms a natural border between Intag and a large national park. Mitsubishi left the region in 1997, however, after the local population burned the company's camps to the ground in opposition to mining. No other company set foot in Intag until May 2004, when a small mining company called Ascendant Exploration acquired the subsoil mineral concession from the Ministry of Energy and Mines and began seeking local consent to undertake further exploration of the copper deposit. Under the guise of protecting its personnel against "eco-terrorists" – the state initially labeled the camp's burning an act of terrorism – Ascendant has employed a bodyguard who accompanies Ascendant personnel while they are in the region and often has a pistol visible.

In conjunction with research on the World Bank's role in Ecuador's national mining program, I filmed public meetings between Intag residents and representatives of Ascendant, as well as local encounters with public officials.

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The goal of this essay is to reflect on the role of documentary film, and research that incorporates film, in contests over natural resources where unequal relations of power structure the social and political arenas in which those contests take place. Film is a medium of representation; as such it can be used in both symbolic and material ways to affect the dimensions of resource conflict. Incorporating film into research, then, influences not only the dynamics of the local situation, but also the nature of the research project itself.

Representation and Conflict

Struggles over material resources are simultaneously discursive contests over meaning, identity, and representation, involving different actors across various scales, from the local to the global.¹ Be it the Ecuadorian state measuring and mapping a copper deposit or a researcher or local activist filming a mining company's public rhetoric, the ability to record and represent is powerful. Whether re-playing a meeting or event to a local audience, or providing video footage for wider national and international media, the capacity to record and represent influences how, and under what terms, arguments for and against mining are made and contested. The incorporation of documentary film into research, allied with those in Intag who oppose mining, attempts to check, balance, and foil some of the discursive arguments and tools employed by the entities that support mining. These institutions and actors include the Ecuadorian national government, which has declared mining a national priority; the World

Intag residents carry anti-mining posters to region-wide meeting on mining in the town of Garica Moreno, July 17, 2004.
Photograph by Carlos Zorilla.



Bank, which initiated Ecuador's national mining program; Ascendant Exploration, which has a heavy stake in Intag; and some of Intag's powerful pro-mining large landowners and political brokers.

The bodyguard and the gun are, in large measure, discursive symbols directed at the entire Intag region. The gun aims to quiet the voices of resistance – in a sense, to limit the ability of the local population to challenge or re-frame the nationalist discourse put forth by Ascendant Exploration and its local and national allies. At one public meeting I filmed, Cesar Villacis, a former military general and Ascendant's community relations director and political liaison, argued that opposition to mining stemmed from foreign environmental interlocutors. By depicting opposition as foreign-based, such rhetoric delegitimizes local resistance and, at the same time, represents Villacis and Ascendant as defenders of Intag's right to "development and progress." Portraying mining as merely a means towards the end of national development gives Ascendant and the national government the upper hand in the discursive contest about what mining is and who mining will benefit. In this contest of meaning, the gun and the bodyguard, as well as a military

general placed in charge of community relations, attempt to limit the ability of the opposition to present counter-arguments that might undermine Ascendant's mining narrative.

The use of documentary film operates at various levels in this context. At one level, it aims to lessen the immediate power and presence of the gun, maintaining and opening the political space through which the population can re-frame and receive arguments about mining. At another level, it creates a medium where local actors can disseminate those counter-arguments through wider discourses and institutions (such as environmental and human rights discourses and corresponding organizations) that oppose mining in Intag. For example, in response to Villacis' comments at the public meeting, a local leader also spoke, directing his comments both to the local audience and to outside observers. He affirmed that mining in Intag was indeed a question of national rights, stating that the communities who resisted mining were upholding their national and human rights to live in a healthy environment. Local organizers assured that every public meeting was filmed and made the video footage available for sympathetic national media, national human rights organizations, and lawyers who were helping to develop



Intag residents hear from Ascendant in the town of Penaherrera, July 10, 2004. *Photograph by Carlos Zorilla.*

a legal case against Ascendant and the Ministry of Energy and Mines.²

With a video camera in hand, then, I was deemed useful to anti-mining organizers and, therefore, was involved in local organizing against mining. By the end of the summer, in many ways, I felt the bodyguard and I were counterparts. He was an outsider who shadowed the mining company as an (officially) objective observer. He never spoke at public meetings, the gun a greater agent than he. I, too, was an outsider, (officially) objective, who accompanied anti-mining leaders the same way he shadowed company representatives. I never spoke either, my video camera a greater agent than I.

Video as a Research Tool

With my video camera, I had power to represent and convey the communities' conflict in a manner that was perhaps different from the social scientist's standard power of the pen. Film can not only reach a much wider audience outside of Ecuador, but also provides a medium more conducive to local and national distribution.³ I screened a video clip from my summer research at an academic conference last fall, at a speaking engagement I arranged at Yale

with one of Intag's environmental leaders, and allowed it to be accessed via the internet. This footage is also being used by Intag organizers to help network with other national and international organizations.

Being useful for local organizers helped me overcome one principle obstacle for social scientists in the field: access. I was included in meetings and discussions I might otherwise have been excluded from had I only been equipped with a pen, paper, and thesis topic; my interests and intentions in the region were easily understood. And though I had lived in the region for a few years and had already produced a film about the resistance to mining, incorporating video into my field research helped me gain rapport with people more quickly. Instead of asking to accompany organizers to planning sessions or public events, local organizers asked me to join them, often calling me while I was in the city to inform me of an immediate or up-coming event that they wanted me to film. Instead of just observing the organizing process against mining, I was participating in that organizing.

Greater public presence and purpose had tradeoffs, however, as it reduced access and rapport with the mining company and those who supported mining in the region. In this contest

of representation, the meaning of my research project, as well as my own identity, became identified with the resistance community and anti-mining discourse. Though I was able to speak with Ascendant personnel and mining officials during the entire summer, the more I became seen as part of the local organizing, my ability to gain information and insight from interviews and conversations with mining proponents lessened greatly. I was never able to develop rapport and trust with mining representatives or officials; I could never hope to be privy to mining's "hidden transcript" (Scott 1990).

While I had originally intended for the bulk of my Master's thesis to deal with the World Bank and Ecuador's national mining program, the video footage has proven to be a rich source of material for analysis of the discursive contest over mining in Intag and Ecuador. With an exact record of public meetings and statements made by company personnel, I have been able to more effectively deconstruct Ascendant's mining and environmental discourse; with visual footage of public meetings I am able to reflect upon tone, rhetoric, expressions, and the overall "structure of feeling" (Williams 1977). In combination with formal interviews and ethnographic field notes, documentary film has proven to be a valuable research method.

In the context of this discussion on the relations of power that structure resource contests, I would be remiss if I did not observe that depending on outside researchers to film events in Intag is problematic. Recognizing this, local organizers have been working to acquire the equipment and skills so that the local population can use the power of film independent of outsiders. While there are a few video cameras in the region already, we hope to develop a long-term program whereby the population opposed to mining has not only the capacity to record, but also the tools to edit and distribute documentary film. A documentary film program controlled by the local population would

allow documentary video to have an everyday presence, in addition to planned formal gatherings and public events. While it took burning a mining camp for Mitsubishi to leave the region, organizers in Intag hope that majority opposition to mining and sound arguments against the rationale to open the region to large-scale mining will be sufficient. The incorporation of documentary film into local organizing and independent research not only helps secure the political space through which the population can express opposition to mining, but also disseminates and connects their arguments through wider discourses that question the logic of mining in the Intag region.

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Endnotes

¹ Based on the work of Michel Foucault, I view discourse as the array of knowledge, language, and political arguments that give meaning and legitimacy to certain modes of thought, social practices, and institutions, while rejecting or de-legitimizing others (Foucault 1972).

² Local organizers have been in contact with an Ecuadoran national TV program similar to *60 Minutes* and used footage of the interchange I described above to try and persuade the producers to do a complete story on Intag. It is worth noting that contests over representation are not limited to media, but also occur through mediums like national and international law. At the same public meeting, Villacis accused the popular, anti-mining county mayor of plotting to kill him. A copy of my footage was made available to the Mayor in preparation for a possible lawsuit against Villacis.

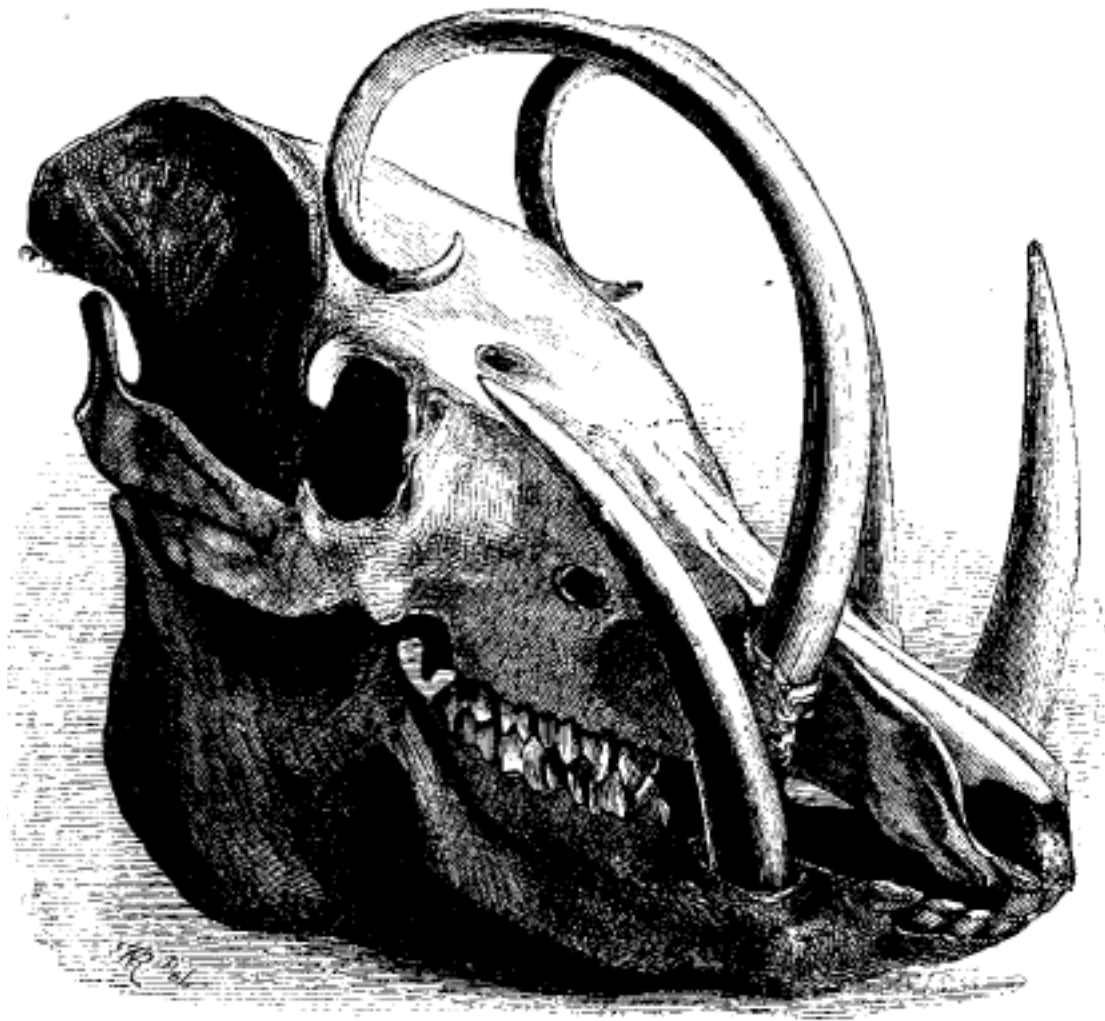
³ A previous film that I helped to produce has been used widely in Intag as part of organizing campaigns against mining.

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