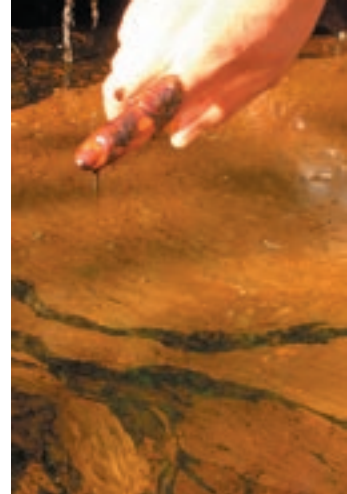


# WATER

Number 5  
in a Church World Service series  
on water

## A river in their veins:<sup>\*</sup> indigenous people along the Pilcomayo



“The river is dying  
little by little  
because of  
all the things  
they do with it.”

Weenhayek fisherman

It is winter in Bolivia and the Pilcomayo River is teeming with fish. The sábalo—a member of the salmon family—have come upriver from the swamps to reproduce.

<sup>\*</sup>Un río en sus venas (Spanish)

**Members of a Weenhayek community in Villamontez fish the Pilcomayo**  
**Top right: oil spill from ruptured wells in Guaraní territory of the Pilcomayo basin**

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all photos in this publication are by  
Raf Stassen of CER-DET



From April through September every year Rena Cortez and her Weenhayek indigenous community in Capirendita set up camp along the Pilcomayo to harvest its bounty. It's a communal activity, explains Cortez. She leads the women of the 22 communities around the town of Villamontes, where some 1,300 metric tons of fish is iced and sent on to Santa Cruz and La Paz. Sábalo constitutes 70 percent of all the fish sold in Bolivia's two largest cities.

The nets the Weenhayek cast from their boats are large, requiring 20 to 30 people to pull. Even the children join in. “We women depend on fishing,” says Cortez. “When the catch is big enough, we have money for the family and for school supplies.”

But year by year the catch of sábalo, golden dorado and surubíe is shrinking. The main reason is mining, according to Guido Cortez of CER-DET, an organization in Tarija, the Bolivian district along the border with Argentina and Paraguay. CER-DET works closely with the Weenhayek, Guaraní, Taipete and other indigenous people in the area.

“Mining of tin, silver, lead and other minerals is booming in Potosi since February 2006 because of higher

mineral prices in the international market,” says Cortez. “Over 30 mining companies work in the Potosi area, spilling waste into the Pilcomayo.”

CER-DET and four other non-governmental organizations—some rooted in the church in the region—are working with Church World Service on a four-year program to defend and promote the rights of some 65,000 native peoples in the American Gran Chaco. The 621,371 square miles of the mostly arid Chaco (“hunting land” in Quecha) spans parts of Argentina and Paraguay as well as Bolivia. After the Amazon, it is the largest forest area remaining in South America.

And the river runs through it after rising in the foothills of the Andes cordillera, anchoring the livelihoods of its people. “You touch the river and you touch indigenous people,” says CWS Regional Coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean Martin Coria.

In October 2005 a major leak at the Laguna Pampa dyke holding mine tailings released 10,000 tons of sediment and liquid waste in a tributary of the Pilcomayo. During a visit to the area last August CER-DET found that another two dykes were about to burst. The organiza-

**Left: Guaraní woman at Salado Grande in the Itika Guasu territory**  
**Below left: silver mine tailings in Potosi**  
**Next page: Weenhayek fisherman in the Pilcomayo**



### The WATER FOR ALL campaign: what CWS is doing

- **ENABLING** access to, and provision of, potable water through local and global partnerships.
- **SUPPORTING** community-based water projects and building local community capacity to inform national water and sanitation policies.
- **PROVIDING** a collective ecumenical voice in global public debate on water and sanitation issues.
- **ADVOCATING** for access to, and provision of, water as critical to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.
- **BUILDING** grassroots support for Senate resolutions and House bills that support universal access to water worldwide.

tion fears an environmental disaster on the same scale as the breaching of the Porco Dam 10 years ago. The breach spilt 360,000 tons of zinc, lead and silver tailings and impacted fish reproduction and farming as far as 300 miles downriver.

Till the Porco Dam disaster, indigenous people refused to believe what was happening, CER-DET's Cortez says. In the last few years it's dawning on them that pollution will affect their fishing income. "They know that if they can't sell fish, their families will starve."

"Until a year ago, we thought we would fish forever," said Freddie Cortez. Captain of the Capirendita community, Rena's brother acknowledges that payments from oil companies have helped the Weenhayek to move from mud houses to brick homes. Oil money has also given them electricity, a community center, a health center and a school. But oil, gas and mining pollution is killing the river.

Guaraní areas of the Chaco in Tarija contain 80 percent of Bolivian gas reserves. Underground explosions by multinational companies exploring the fields may have changed subterranean water courses, according to CER-DET's Cortez. Over 100 old oil and gas wells are left untreated. Some have ruptured and spilt oil into the Pilcomayo.

The indigenous community has not been silent about the situation. As part of their demand for recognition of their territorial rights, the Guaraní in Tarija, Chuquisaca and Santa Cruz made a human chain around the Margarita natural gas field near the Pilcomayo in May 2004. They protested exploratory digs by the Spanish-Argentine Repsol-YPF and its subsidiaries. Their protest followed the successful Aymara campaign to halt the Pacific Liquid Natural Gas consortium's plans to export the energy resource to Mexico and the US a year earlier.

In July the same year, another Guaraní community told the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations that a Repsol subsidiary was planning to drill on communally-owned land. In 2005, Bolivia elected its first indigenous president. A year later Evo Morales na-

tionalized Bolivia's gas fields, South America's second largest.

But CER-DET and its partners are still waiting for the government to audit the environmental impact of oil spills on the Pilcomayo. Part of the problem, according to Cortez, is that the companies contaminating the river control the audit. "And the government is concerned about social conflict, not pollution of the river."

Dutch and Canadian studies have documented that the Pilcomayo's fish contain high levels of lead, mercury, arsenic, mercury and cadmium. A 2004 study by Dutch scholar Alfons Smolders showed toxic levels of these elements in the hair of indigenous people. The same water is consumed by farmers and their cattle and used



by the wild animals and plants on which many indigenous peoples still subsist.

The mining industry denies all this, according to CER-DET's Cortez. Some 4000 families in Potosi depend on the mines. They say NGOs make an issue of contamination to get more funding.

"We think some of the owners of these mines live in La Paz, not Potosi," said Cortez, "and don't face the problems of people living near the Pilcomayo." He points out that some of the factory owners also control the local press, while the country's minister of mining used to be a member of the Potosi mining cooperative. Many mining laws were enacted by former president Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada. He founded Compañía Minera del Sur, now the largest private mining company in Bolivia.

Top: the Pilcomayo River in Itika Guasu  
Bottom: fishing the Pilcomayo at Villamontes

The Pilcomayo has other problems. Its salt content is rising. Erosion from overgrazing and deforestation in the eastern slopes of the Andes dumps 37 to 73 pounds of sediment in every cubic foot of water. Not only does this hinder fish moving up the Pilcomayo from the La Estrella swamps in Argentina's Formosa Province, but the "wild river" jumps its banks downstream and floods the area, shifting its course as much as three miles. Worse, it's getting shorter by some three miles every year. In 10 years the Pilcomayo is expected to stop short at the Bolivian border.

Faced with a unique ecosystem—the Chaco has 403 bird and 150 mammal species—on the verge of collapse, the governments of Bolivia, Argentina and Paraguay are drawing up a Master Plan for the Pilcomayo's recovery. The European Union is contributing more than half of the project's \$27 million budget. The plan, to take effect in 2008, will recover watershed and promote sustainable development till 2025.

But the planners will be unable to deal with the pollution of the Pilcomayo, according to CER-DET's Cortez. He says indigenous communities are mobilizing at national and international levels to influence policy on the Pilcomayo. CER-DET-led learning trips to Potosi and areas downriver have shown the Weenhayek that their livelihoods are at stake.

"Ten years ago indigenous people in Bolivia were concerned only about their local village and two miles around it," says Cortez. "As we link them up to communities in Argentina and Bolivia, they are seeing that the river



is a complex system. They know they can't just throw their garbage in the river and forget about the impact on other indigenous groups."

Now indigenous communities from the three countries have come together to form committees for the defense of the river. With support from Church World Service and local organizations like CER-DET, they are joining forces through the *Ayllu*, the Andean indigenous local government model based on kinship groups, and at regional and international levels.

These links and networks in the Chaco enabled by Church World Service are vital. "The situation is so complex, it's impossible to do anything from one position," says Cortez.



# Climate Change in the Caribbean

After Hurricane Katrina ripped through the Gulf Coast two years ago, the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago gave Church World Service half a million dollars to provide relief and recovery assistance to storm survivors.

The expression of support came from an island country that has never suffered a direct hit by a major hurricane, although Hurricane Ivan was a close call. The Republic's neighbors have not been so fortunate. Ivan inflicted catastrophic damage to Grenada, and heavy damage to Jamaica, Grand Cayman, and the western tip of Cuba. It killed 64 people and caused \$3 billion in damage.

In 1495, Christopher Columbus recorded his brush with a hurricane off Hispaniola. Since then, hurricanes and cyclones have been frequently recorded in the Caribbean.

In the same year that Ivan struck, the combined effect of Hurricanes Frances and Jeanne caused more than \$550 million in damage to the Bahamas, representing more than 10 percent of its GDP. Antigua and Barbuda suffered six hurricanes between 1995 and 2000.



photo: William Farrington

**Executive Director and CEO of Church World Service John McCullough accepts a \$500,000 donation in October 2006 from Trinidad & Tobago's ambassador Marina Varley**

There is growing evidence of the link between climate change and hurricanes. Coming out of a 1994 UN Conference in Barbados, Caribbean nations prioritized climate change and sea-level rise for urgent regional action. With funding from the Canadian International Development Agency, 12 participating Caribbean countries are mainstreaming plans to adapt to climate change.

According to Dr. Ulric Trotz of the Climate Change Center in Belize, small island and low-lying coastal states emit less than one percent of greenhouse gases responsible for global climate change. But they are among the most vulnerable, facing rising sea levels, the intrusion of salt water into freshwater aquifers, coastal flooding and erosion, coral bleaching and an increase in vector-borne diseases.

With no control over global climate change, Trotz says the Caribbean's survival lies in adaptation, particularly to the rise in sea levels in coastal areas.

In 2005 the Caribbean Climate Change Centre was set up as the official repository and clearing house for regional climate change data. It provides policy advice and guidelines on climate change to the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) member states. The Centre is recognized by international agencies as the focal point for climate change issues in the region.

Climate change is also affecting tourism, an industry which employs almost a million people and provides a large chunk of the region's GDP.

"With the hurricane season getting longer and storms getting more frequent," notes Wendel Parham of the Caribbean Agriculture and Research Development Institute, "many tourists may elect to go somewhere perceived to be safer."

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- CONTACT your elected officials and join the CWS Speak Out network to receive legislative alerts: [www.churchworldservice.org/Educ\\_Advo/index.html](http://www.churchworldservice.org/Educ_Advo/index.html)
- CONSIDER and CELEBRATE the importance of water using CWS educational and worship resources on water: [www.churchworldservice.org/Educ\\_Advo/water/index.html](http://www.churchworldservice.org/Educ_Advo/water/index.html)
- CONTRIBUTE to the work of Church World Service by calling your CWS Regional Office toll-free at 888-297-2767. Around the world, CWS is helping local communities meet their water and sanitation needs in self-reliant and sustainable ways that represent positive alternatives to water privatization: [www.churchworldservice.org/Development/water.html](http://www.churchworldservice.org/Development/water.html)
- CONSERVE water by repairing all leaky fixtures and turning off the water in sinks, baths and showers when you are not using them.
- CAMPAIGN with others to advocate for the implementation of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals that include reducing by half the number of people without clean water and adequate sanitation by the year 2015: [www.millenniumcampaign.org](http://www.millenniumcampaign.org)



**Top: fishing the Pilcomayo in Villamontes**  
**Bottom: Quecha children beside the Pilcomayo in La Mendoza, department of Chuquisaca**



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