

TRADE-AMERICAS:  
How Much Is the Biodiversity of the Andes Worth?

Abraham Lama\* - Tierramérica

Washington's refusal to recognise the right of Andean countries to demand compensation for the commercial use of their biological resources is standing in the way of negotiations for free trade between the United States, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, agree observers.

LIMA, Feb 1 (IPS) - As they gear up for the seventh round of talks in February, Washington is insisting that the trade treaty uphold the patents registered by U.S. companies, which are developing biotech products based on the ancestral knowledge of Andean peoples about the pharmacological, nutritional and industrial properties of the local plant life.

The U.S. proposal is included in the chapter on intellectual property of the draft treaty, establishing free access to claiming patents on plants and animals, which would be designated as "inventions".

Disagreement on this issue is one of the main stumbling blocks in the treaty negotiations, which continue Feb. 7-11 in their seventh round, in the northern Colombian city of Cartagena.

The demand of the three Andean nations that the pact recognise the economic value of their great biodiversity is the first such claim that Washington has faced in free trade discussions.

In the sixth round of talks, held in the southwestern U.S. city of Tucson, no progress was made towards reaching an understanding on this issue, and according to Peruvian experts there is little reason to hope that the matter will be resolved in February in favour of Andean interests.

However, Peru's deputy foreign trade minister, Pablo de la Flor, said on Jan. 17 that "perhaps we can advance in the negotiations, because U.S. spokespersons have said they understand our interest in the biodiversity issue."

His cautious optimism is not shared by Reynaldo Trinidad, editor of AgroNoticias magazine, who told Tierramérica, "The U.S. negotiators will probably say some words about formal recognition of the importance of biodiversity, but won't give in on what is important: economic compensation for the countries that have shared the wealth of their biodiversity."

José Luis Silva, president of the Peruvian Institute of Natural Products, agrees with Trinidad. "In the seventh round of negotiations, the United States will maintain its option to patent as property of its companies the knowledge and the plants and animals from Andean territory, to which they have made some genetic changes, and without paying us a cent."

"The United States didn't sign the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity of Rio de Janeiro, promoted by the United Nations. Now, the free trade talks demand sanctions against piracy of intellectual property, but at the same time defends the presumed right of transnationals not to pay compensation for traditional knowledge about the properties of flora and fauna found in our countries," said Silva.

University professor Antonio Brack Egg, former U.N. development advisor and one of the leading ecological researchers in Peru, said that because of the "inherent genetic resources existing in Peru, biodiversity should be its source of strategic revenue in the 21st century."

In his opinion, because of its extraordinary variety of ecosystems, plants and animals, Peru is one of the top five "mega-diverse" countries in the world, and its territory includes part of the Amazon forest, which serves as a regulator of the Earth's climate.

Peru is also one of the world's leaders in plants with beneficial properties that are known and used by the population (4,500 species), the first in acclimated native species (182), and is considered one of the biggest "warehouses" of known genetic resources.

The country's cultural diversity is also very broad, with 14 language "families" and at least 44 different indigenous groups, whose ancestors for at least the past 10,000 years have selected, domesticated and adapted an extensive range of plant and animal species.

"The ancestral knowledge of the aboriginal population has produced such valuable products as quinine, which saved the world from malaria, and in terms of food, the potato, which in the 19th century saved much of Europe from starvation," said Brack.

"In the past few years, other products from the Peruvian people's pharmacopoeia have been exploited by foreign laboratories: cat's claw (*Uncaria tomentosa*), which boost immunity, 'yacón' (*Smallanthus sonchifolius*), whose sugar can be used by diabetics, 'sangre de grado' (*Croton lechleri*) and several products of high nutritional value as food supplements, like the 'maca' (*Lepidium peruvianum*) and 'camu camu' (*Mycrciaria dubia*)," said the expert.

"Peru is a great reservoir of genetic material and of traditional knowledge about the uses of its biodiversity, and has the right to demand preferential treatment" in trade agreements, Brack said.

(\* Abraham Lama is a Tierramérica contributor. Originally published Jan. 29 by Latin American newspapers that are part of the Tierramérica network. Tierramérica is a specialised news service produced by IPS with the backing of the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Environment Programme.)

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