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Road to 'rights of nature' summit passes Earth's midpoint

by Elise D. García

Eco Catholic

OTAVALO, ECUADOR — We traveled three hours by bus northeast from Quito, Ecuador, climbing winding roads up the highlands of the Andes Mountains, past craggy canyons, hillside farms and village settlements. Our destination was Otavalo, at the foot of the Imbabura volcano, where we joined nearly 50 leaders of the emergent 'rights of nature' movement for a four-day global summit.

For the participants, this was the last leg of a journey that began at various starting points located across the map: in Australia, India, the United Kingdom, South Africa, the United States, Switzerland, Spain, Canada, Romania, Argentina, Bolivia, and other parts of Ecuador.

En route to Otavalo we stopped at a roadside marker, noting 0 degrees latitude, 0 minutes, 0 seconds -- 'la mitad del mundo,' or the middle of the world. This seemingly far-flung venue could not have been better placed for an urgent conversation about the precarious state of the planet and our ill-considered relationship as humans to the very source of our being.

The summit marks the first meeting of the leaders of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature since 2010, when they founded the organization as a means to collaborate and advance various projects each led in their homeland. Those efforts focused on shifting legal, economic and social constructs that see the natural world simply as property for human use.

Among the leaders are Indian physicist Vandana Shiva; South African lawyer and author Cormac Cullinan; former Bolivian U.N. ambassador Pablo Solón; and from the U.S., Dominican Sr. Patricia Siemen, Tom Goldtooth, executive director of the Indigenous Environmental Network, and community rights attorney Thomas Linzey.

As old friends and newfound allies greeted one another at dinner, animated conversations made clear that the coming days would tell of exciting innovations, as well as formidable challenges. A sense of urgency underscored all.

As one participant put it, "If we do not adapt our laws to be in sync with the laws of nature, the laws of physics will soon take over."

[Adrian Dominican Sr. Elise D. García, is the former co-director of Santuario Sisterfarm, an ecology center in the Texas Hill Country dedicated to cultivating cultural and biological diversity. She is attending the rights of nature summit, which runs through Friday, and will be blogging updates throughout the week.]

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