

Case Study: Juaro's Troubles

Canaima National Park is located in Bolivar State, within the Amazon region of southern Venezuela. In 1994, UNESCO designated the park a Natural World Heritage site and it is no wonder why. In the lush flora and fauna of the park live animal, insect, and plant species unique in the world. Within the park is Kerepakupai Merú, the highest waterfall in the world. Here too are imposing sandstone plateaus called 'tepuyes' and among these the majestic plateau of Auyantepui. At the top of the tepuyes, streams descend and grow as they interconnect along their winding route to the Caroní River. Water from the Caroni then flows into an immense artificial lake created at the Gurí hydroelectric power station where enormous turbines generate the electricity consumed by 70% of the country.



Canaima National Park, located in Bolivar state in southern Venezuela.

The Pemón, an Indigenous People noted for their friendly, hardworking, and sustainable lifestyle also live in the park. Like other Indigenous Peoples in the Amazon, the Pemón have a rich culture that honors the sacred nature of the land and all its creatures.

Juaro is a kind, intelligent, cheerful and curious 11 year-old Pemón boy. He lives in the Arabopo community located at the foot of the Venezuelan tepuyes, bordering the jungles of Brazil. Since ancestral times Juaro and his family have lived by hunting and growing agricultural crops such as cassava on the community fields, or 'conucos'. An added source of



An Indigenous community at the foot of the Auyantepui Plateau

income has been rocks carved by his mother and older sister. Extracted from riverbanks, rocks are carved into beautiful animal figures and landscapes that are sold to tourists on their way to the savannah ecoregion called the Gran Sabana.

Despite the beauty of this location and the security of his Pemón traditions, young Juaro is troubled. As long as he can remember, he has experienced the pain of his seeing his older brothers, cousins, and family friends moving away from the community to seek employment elsewhere. This is because changes have gradually occurred in the area that have degraded the land, water, and the livelihood of the Arabopo community.

Juaro remembers when strange people first came to the Arabopo area and began cutting down trees, destroying the soil, and polluting rivers near the conucos. These were people employed by companies illegally cutting down trees and digging mines in the Canaima National Park. The community leader (or 'cacique') went with several villagers to speak to these strangers, but the Pemón were met with firearms and threats. Who could they turn towards to report this activity? Who would listen to them, or even care? Could it be that the region's political authorities themselves were turning a blind eye to what was going on?

The truth was finally exposed in 2018 when satellite images showed the region's illegal mines and large areas of deforestation.



Closer Look

Open this [website](#), scroll down, and watch the video showing the illegal activities in Canaima National Park

Reports on these activities have been sent to UNESCO by non-profit environmental protection organizations, but the tragedy has remained unchanged. In some places where the Pemón once cultivated food, there are now large pits from which gold is extracted and taken far away. Those that work in the mines face daily risk due to the dangers of a job in mining and rely on an unpredictable salary, depending on how much gold they are able to extract.



Children working in mining areas in the southern part of Bolivar State.

For Juaro, all this is very personal. His 19 year-old brother, Orlando, left one day to work in the mines and returned a few months later, ill with fever, weakness, tremors, and lack of appetite. Before Orlando recovered, he returned to the mines out of necessity. No one has ever heard from him again.

One day Juaro went to school and found it closed. He returned the next day and it was still closed. He returned again several times until someone told him: the teachers had gone to the mines to work as cooks.

Today, Juaro still lives with his Pemón people at the foot of the tepuyes in the Arabopo community. But so much has changed. That vivacious, cheerful child no longer goes to school. So many of his family and friends have gone. So many of the trees, animals,

and rivers have been harmed. It is no wonder that young Jauro is troubled, just as so many more Indigenous Peoples are troubled in the Canaima National Park.

-  There are scientific and aesthetic reasons why Canaima National Park was designated a National World Heritage site. What are these? What should be the uses of a national park that is declared a National World Heritage site and within which live Indigenous Peoples?
-  What is the reason why some nations extract natural resources without protecting the people affected, while other nations are careful to protect people before allowing natural resources to be extracted?
-  How can we describe what happens to a community's cultural and spiritual values when traditional lands and creatures are degraded and destroyed? Do you know anyone who has experienced this first-hand?
-  Drone technology was used to expose the illegal activities in Canaima National Park. What other ways can technology be used to motivate environmental action?

Image sources:

Photo 1: <https://www.mapade.org/bolivar.html>

Photo 2: <http://www.ospreyexpeditions.com/venezuela/kamarata-valley-uruyen-kavac/>

Photo 3: <http://efectococuyo.com/principales/venezuela-has-minerales-pero-no-especialistas-para-desarrollar-el-arco-minero/>