



WITHOUT DRINKING WATER IN THE LARGEST WETLAND IN THE WORLD

From ancient times, the Yshir people have lived on the banks of the Paraguay River in the Pantanal area, considered the largest wetland in the world. However, in the XXI century, none of the six communities has potable water to drink. To quench their thirst in an area of extreme temperatures, they must drink raw water, or expose themselves to dangerous water treatment processes.



shnuwerta, the goddess of water, has cared for the Yshir Ybytosó for centuries. But this deity seems to be overwhelmed by pollution that, according to the Yshyro, comes from upstream, from the productive fields of Brazil and Bolivia without counting the waste left by the intense river traffic of the area. Care of the water, and of all the beings that inhabit it, is apparently no longer an easy task for the gods.

Despite this, five of the six communities of this ethnic group live on the banks of the river in the Alto Paraguay department, and continue to drink directly from there. “Some who work and can buy sulfate to treat their water. Each bottle costs 36,000 guaraníes (USD 5.2), but most have to drink raw water,” Nancy Vierci says, leader of Karcha Bahlut - Puerto 14 de Mayo. The original name means “great sacred snail”. There, 30 km from Bahía Negra, 38 families live, wash, drink, and bathe in the same river that is a source of subsistence through fishing.

With temperatures that often exceed 40 degrees, quenching thirst is not so easy either because there is no electrical power to allow the luxury of cooling the vital liquid a little before drinking it. “People drink dirty, hot water; of course, they get sick, but there is no other option,” he laments.

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FACTSHEET

CASE: Yshir Nation

LOCATION: Bahía Negra District, Alto Paraguay Department.

SUBJECT/HUMAN RIGHTS

AFFECTED: 3- Basic universal rights related to the environment / 3.1- Water: Access in quality, and quantity, uses, and pollution

JUDICIAL/GOVERNMENTAL

CASE STATUS: Civil society organizations have completed projects to seek funds for installation of sanitation, and water distribution systems.

NUMBER OF PEOPLE

AFFECTED: 795 families

BRIEF DESCRIPTION: The six communities of the Yshir Nation located in the Bahía Negra district lack adequate supply of drinking water.

A DANGEROUS TREATMENT

Pablo Barboza has been a contracted official of SENASA, Servicio Nacional de Saneamiento Ambiental [National Environmental Sanitation Service], for eight years, and he is in charge of assisting the communities technically with water installations to reach their homes. The taps work, but the water that comes out of them comes from the river without any type of treatment.

As you walk through the streets of Puerto Diana, you can see the tanks, or the huge cans of water from afar. Several of them have a one-kilo jar on top, it is sulfate whose measurement is two tablespoons for each 200-liter drum, and the measurement must be exact since it can otherwise cause diarrhea and dehydration.

“The most common situation is that families buy sulfate to treat their water, but in addition to the fact that the dose must be very fair, this only serves to clarify the water, a kind of filter that does not kill the germs it contains,” Pablo explains, but chlorine is needed for this, a luxury that almost no one can afford.

Andrés Ozuna, Secretary General of the Union of Indigenous Communities of the UCINY, Unión de Comunidades Indígenas de la Nación Yshir [Union of Indigenous Communities of the Yshir Nation], recognizes that water is one of the most urgent

needs of six communities that include Puerto Diana, Puerto 14 de Mayo (Karcha Bahlut), Puerto Esperanza (Ynishta), Puerto Pollo, Puerto Caballo, and Dos Estrellas. The latter, inhabited by 15 families, is a village of farmers who use water collected from the few rains that fall in the area.

Despite this, drinking water is not one of the organization's priorities at the moment: it focuses on the titling of conflicting lands such as Puerto Pollo, and Puerto Ramos two places where land titles have been in dispute for years.

Leticia Rosales, former councilor of Bahía Negra, was in charge of consolidation of the Water Council of the Río Negro Basin during 2020. It is a group made up of different sectors of civil society with the objective of managing the provision of water in the area, and with a plan payment capability plan for the payment of the provision from government institutions, or from international organizations. This year, they focused on diagnosing the situation. "We have all the documentation, and a work plan with a budget ready. We are now seeking funding to make this possible. The urban center of Bahía Negra is the only one that has a treatment plant, but it is so old that it requires about G. 500 million (USD 71,428) just for repairs; it will serve 250 users. On the other hand, for indigenous communities where there is no base, the average budget is G. 2,000 million (USD 285,000)," she explains.

The plan developed by Rosales is to find financing, either state, or an international organization capable of paying for the installation of the distribution systems. Maintenance, as she explains, can be obtained by charging monthly payments to users with prices that are in line with the average income of the area, which is low.

"Most people do not have a fixed salary; they live off cash. The pay is ridiculous, ranging from G. 400,000 to G. 800,000 in times of great movement. That is not enough to subsist with how high the cost of living is here," Nancy Vierci explains. The situation is worrisome because these amounts are equivalent to USD 60, and USD 120 when the minimum wage in Paraguay is USD 331 (G. 2,112,562).

Rosales regrets the historical disinterest towards these populations. "We live on the banks of the river; there is raw material; what is noticeable is that there has never been any real interest in providing water to indigenous communities. Previously, we all drank directly from the river, even those of us who live in the urban center of Bahía Negra, but now we can't. People have problems with kidney stones, grit, and other digestive ailments as a result of this water, in addition to the typical problem of diarrhea, especially in times of downspout, fires, or upstream spraying," he says.

There are 180 families in Puerto Diana, approximately 50% of them have facilities to supply river water in their homes. Another

PROJECTS THAT GIVE HOPE





170 families live in Puerto Esperanza, more than 80 of them also have plumbing installed, and in 14 de Mayo, around 20 houses have facilities. "We calculate that the savings with this is important, but the resources for the construction of the treatment plants must be completed, and there must be certainty that they function," according to Rosales.

But the Water Council is not the only one with an advanced plan. The organization PCI, Pro Comunidades del Chaco [Pro Communities of the Chaco], is another of the civil society organizations involved in the search for a concrete solution in the face of state inaction. Thanks to their management, they have obtained the support of the SENASA, Servicio Nacional de Saneamiento Ambiental [National Service of Environmental Sanitation], and

have an advanced project that aims to provide treatment plants to 18 indigenous communities in the Alto Paraguay department.

This advanced project would be financed by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) with a fund of USD 1,200,000 for six construction sites according to Derlis Martínez from the PCI.

For César Barboza, Bahía Negra's councilor-leader of Puerto Diana, our main priority is children. "Schoolchildren cannot drink polluted water, it gives them diarrhea and makes them sick. They have to be healthy and strong to learn," he says.

On July 28, 2010, through Resolution 64/292, the United Nations General Assembly explicitly recognized the human right to water and sanitation, reaffirming that clean drinking water, and sanitation are essential for the realization of all human rights.

In May 2020, a request for the provision of water purification supplies for the 795 Yshir families of Alto Paraguay was submitted to the National Government. The total requested was 397.5 kilos of sulfate, and 795 liters of bleach. These supplies were intended to alleviate hygiene and care needs during the covid-19 pandemic. While serious recommendations from the State for extreme care, constant hand washing, and cleaning were heard all over the country, the Yshiro awaited their supplies to comply with sanitary protocols. However, out of apparent apathy none ever arrived.

“We respected what the Government said for some time, but we are poor people who live day to day; people have to go fishing; we must sell our products, and we did not have clean water to wash ourselves all the time. We continue our life until now, and fortunately, there have been no serious illnesses,” César Barboza says.

Leticia Rosales believes that it is fortunate that the virus has not seriously spread in the area so far, since no biosecurity measures are applied, not even with the use of masks. For Nancy Vierci, it is a constant concern: “We don’t have hospitals here; they don’t even do tests for us to know if there are positive cases or not. Many people may have had the virus, and did not even know it,” she says.

ABANDONED IN A PANDEMIC





A QUESTION OF SURVIVAL

Chief Bruno Barras, Yshir Ybytosó Nation leader, says that it is essential that the Government supports indigenous communities in the fulfillment of this human right. “Years ago, it was not necessary; the Yshyro drank directly from the river because the water was pure. Eshnuwertá protected the riverbed, and all the beings that inhabited it, but times have changed, and the pollution caused by white men has consequences on the health of our people. There are still many people who cannot access treated water. Our culture must be preserved, and our people are a heritage that the Government has to watch over,” he concludes.