



Karuvara

People of the river

Study Guide





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1. Welcome

This guide is designed for educators using the film "Karuara, People of the River" in their teaching. It provides further information about the film's subject matter and includes suggestions for discussions and activities with students, as well as contacts and links to research materials.

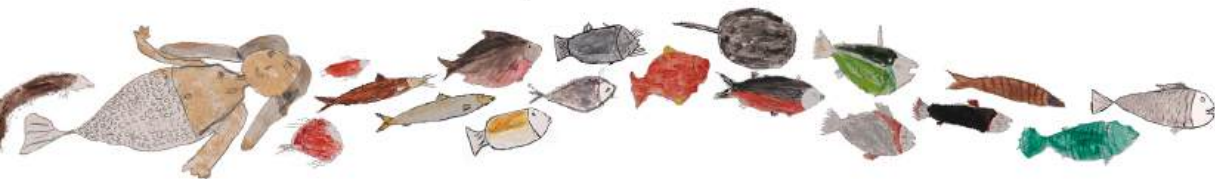
The issues raised by the film – including rights of nature, Indigenous self-determination and the dangers of uncontrolled extractive industries – are even more relevant today than when we began the project in 2014. But before diving into the main topics, I want to share a subject close to my heart: our participatory filmmaking process with Kukama Indigenous communities.

Our journey began a decade ago, when Leonardo Tello Imaina asked my partner Miguel and me to help him make a film about the spirit universe beneath his rivers. He had grown up listening to elders tell ancestral stories at night under the stars by firelight, but his children's generation is transfixed by electronic screens and watches Disney's Little Mermaid, Peppa Pig and other American fare. Leo is no stranger to modern technology; he's director of Radio Ucamara, an Indigenous media outlet on the banks of the Marañón River in Peru's northeastern Amazon region. He'd seen my earlier films about farming communities standing up to foreign mining companies and Miguel's paintings, inspired by nature, especially his beloved Andean mountains.



We agreed to make the film on the condition that Leonardo come onboard as a producer and script writer. Mari Luz Canaquiri, the film's inspiring protagonist, is also a co-producer. Every phase of production brought Indigenous artists, elders and journalists together with experienced filmmakers. The project began with film training for journalists at Radio Ucamara, who later captured the oil spill footage in the film and are now producing their own short films and music videos. Our collective also published a book of Kukama legends and stories about their connection with nature, illustrated by schoolchildren — a product of workshops organized with our Kukama partners. As the renowned media theorist Marshall McLuhan said, "the medium is the message." Karuara is a revolutionary movie in Latin America, where most films are made about Indigenous communities, and not by and with them.

The film was first screened in Kukama Indigenous communities and then released to the public in 2024. To date Karuara has won 12 awards, including the LASA award of merit in film, the UNESCO Dolomites award at the Bolzano film festival and the WACC-SIGNIS Human Rights award. Mari Luz was awarded the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for Latin America in 2025, considered the "Green Nobel" for environmental defenders.



But for me the greatest prize has been the trust and openness granted to us by members of the Kukama communities where we filmed. We spent several months each year living with Leonardo and Mari Luz and their families. Every day brought unforgettable adventures: swimming down the flooded mainstreet of Mari Luz's village surrounded by laughing school children; her 12-year-old daughter Juanita cleaning and gently removing my infected toenail as I screamed bloody murder, and our daily communal dip in the river at sunset.

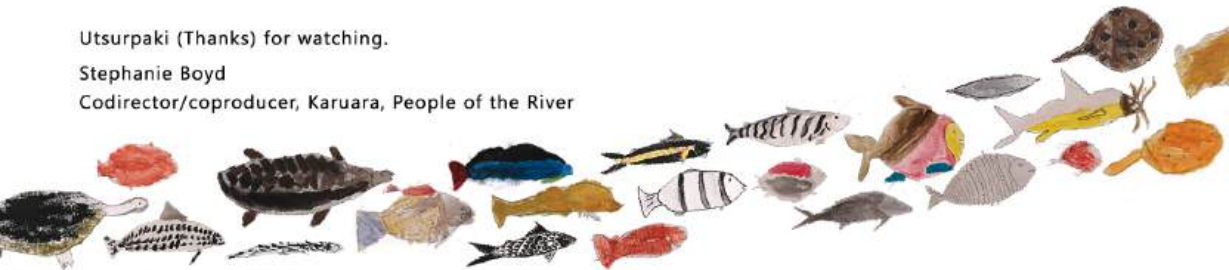
As the years passed, I began to explore my own connection with nature, especially rivers and lakes. Humans protect what we love and as the climate disaster envelops our planet, I believe our technology-obsessed society needs to fall back in love with nature, urgently.

So welcome to our portrait of the Marañón River, the people living along its banks and the magical spirit world below the surface.

Utsurpaki (Thanks) for watching.

Stephanie Boyd

Codirector/coproducer, Karuara, People of the River



2. Film Summary

The Marañón River is a more than just a body of water for the Kukama people in Peru's northeastern Amazon region; it's a living being with rights.

Beneath the surface lies a world of spirits led by the Karuara, which means "people of the water" in their Indigenous language. When a human disappears in the river, if their body is never found it means they've transformed into a Karuara — a water spirit — and live in underwater villages and cities. The Karuara visit their human loved ones in dreams, telling them not to grieve and showing them their new life in the river.

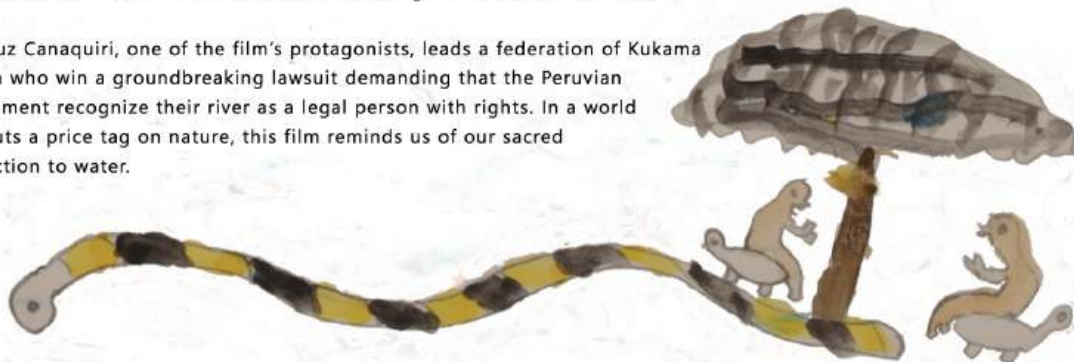
The Karuara's universe mirrors human society with an aquatic twist: river spirits lounge in hammocks made of boa constrictors, they smoke sardines and wear stingray hats and catfish shoes. Laughing Karuara children ride to school on giant turtles or play football with an inflated blowfish.



Behind their playfulness, the Karuara are powerful spirits. When humans fall ill, Indigenous shamans call on Karuara healers to cure their patients. Fisherman must ask the spirits for permission before fishing or risk going hungry. The Karuara are metaphysical ecologists; they maintain the delicate balance of life in the Amazon's waterways. For centuries the Kukama people have depended on their rivers and spirit protectors for survival.

But contamination from oil extraction and pipeline spills threatens this vibrant spiritual world and the Amazon's fragile ecosystem. Language and cultural traditions are also being forgotten, and the Kukama people face cultural genocide. While foreign companies earn millions from the Amazon's resources, Indigenous communities lack basic health care, high schools and clean water.

Mari Luz Canaquiri, one of the film's protagonists, leads a federation of Kukama women who win a groundbreaking lawsuit demanding that the Peruvian government recognize their river as a legal person with rights. In a world that puts a price tag on nature, this film reminds us of our sacred connection to water.



3. Where are we? (Map)

The film takes place in the Amazon rainforest in Peru's northeastern Loreto region. Most of the film is set in Kukama Indigenous communities on the banks of the Marañón River in the district of Parinari.

Marañón River: The Marañón River is one of Peru's most important sources of water. It flows for about 1,400 km from its source high in the Andes Mountains until it meets the Ucayali River to form the Amazon River just below the town of Nauta.

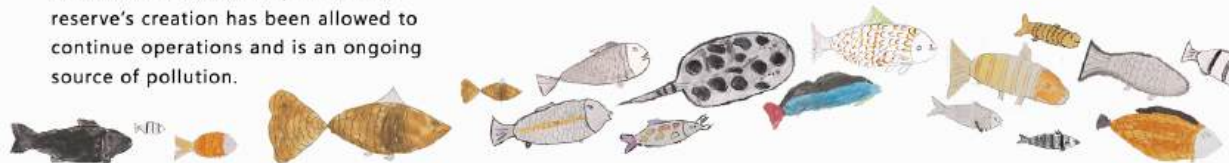


Nauta:

This bustling port on the Marañón River is located about 11 km upstream from the point where the Ucayali and Marañón meet to form the Amazon River. Nauta is the gateway to the Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve, where we shot the scenes with fisherman José Murayari Saquirai.



Pacaya-Samiria National Reserve is the second-largest protected natural area in Peru, spanning over 2,080,000 hectares of tropical rainforest. Known for its biodiversity, it shelters more than 1,000 species of animals, including pink dolphins, spider monkeys and giant South American turtles, and 965 species of wild plants. It's also home to hundreds of bird species, like colorful macaws. The reserve's management is a source of conflict for many Kukama people who were forced to relocate when it was created and/or expanded. An oil concession that existed prior to the reserve's creation has been allowed to continue operations and is an ongoing source of pollution.



Iquitos is the largest city in Peru's Amazon region, with an estimated population of around half a million people. It is a major port on the Amazon River and hub for tourism and local trade.

Iquitos is the world's largest city that cannot be reached by road (not including islands), and is only accessible by river or air.





4. The issues: what's at stake?

The Amazon region is the world's largest source of biodiversity and the lungs of our planet. It produces 20% of the planet's fresh water and is crucial in mitigating the effects of climate change. The forest acts as a carbon sink absorbing and storing vast amounts of carbon and generating a significant portion of the world's oxygen through photosynthesis. But this fragile ecosystem is under severe threat from numerous activities including oil extraction, logging, mining and proposed hydroelectric dams. The Amazon's destruction is not just a local problem — it will be a global catastrophe.



The river is a living being

For many Indigenous people like the Kukama, their rivers are living beings with rights that must be recognized and protected. The Marañón River is the source of food, water, and transportation for the Kukama people; it is also the center of their spiritual universe. After watching their river suffer contamination over decades, especially from systemic oil spills, a federation of Kukama women led by Mari Luz Canaquiri decided to defend their river in court.

In 2021, Huaynakana Kamatahaura Kana filed a legal action in a Peruvian court to have their river recognized as a legal person. The petition accused various government entities of violating the fundamental rights of the river, including Petroperú, the state-run oil company, the Ministry of the Environment, and the Ministry of Energy and Mining.



Asociación Quisca, our non-profit film collective, submitted short videos and an illustrated book of Kukama stories detailing their relationship to nature as evidence in the case. Throughout the process, we worked closely with the women and their lawyers at the Instituto de Defensa Legal (Legal Defense Institute - IDL), a Peruvian non-profit, providing media advocacy and campaign support. This included producing video spots and media kits, providing training and equipment for the women, and organizing press and public awareness conferences and events. We released the Karuara film during the hearing process and held screenings near the court to generate public support. So the film and process of making it became part of the struggle to protect the Marañón River.



HEYINKARA KARUARA KARANA, CON EL APOYO DE ORGANIZACIONES NACIONALES E INTERNACIONALES, HA PRESENTADO UNA NOTICIA DEMANDA SOLICITANDO AL GOBIERNO PERUANO RECONOCER LOS DERECHOS DEL RÍO MARAÑÓN COMO UN RÍO VIVO. ADICIONALMENTE, LOS ABOGADOS Y ACADÉMICOS CANARIENSES HAN PRESENTADO UN DOCUMENTO QUE RESPALDA LA DEMANDA.



MARI LUZ CHACABARRO
PERUANA
ABOGADA EN LAICA
ABOGADO EN LAICA



ISIDRO MORÁN
PERUANO
ABOGADO EN LAICA
ABOGADO EN LAICA



YHO SEN-POMPE
GUIN
ABOGADO EN LAICA
ABOGADO EN LAICA



JUAN CARLOS RUIZ
MELIBA
ABOGADO EN LAICA
ABOGADO EN LAICA



ISIDRO BUITA
ABOGADO EN LAICA
ABOGADO EN LAICA



MARIELA QUIPE
ABOGADO EN LAICA
ABOGADO EN LAICA



CONSTANZA PRIETO
PERUANA
ABOGADO EN LAICA
ABOGADO EN LAICA



CHIRRI
ABOGADO EN LAICA
ABOGADO EN LAICA



NERY ACOSTA
ABOGADO EN LAICA
ABOGADO EN LAICA



VIÉNES
7 DE OCTUBRE



11:00 AM



CON EL APOYO DE:



A photograph of a person in a canoe on a river at sunset. The person is in the foreground, paddling. The background shows a calm river and a forested shoreline under a hazy sky. On the left side of the image, there is a green logo of a snake with its head at the bottom, and the text "El Río Marañón es un RÍO VIVO" written in white, stylized letters.

El Río
Marañón
es un
RÍO
VIVO

The campaign slogan: "The River is a Living

Our movement quickly became international. Canadian lawyers and academics from three universities filed an amicus curiae brief in the Peruvian court to support the lawsuit. This legal document describes the growing importance of Indigenous law in Canadian environmental policies. Two additional amicus briefs were filed, one by a coalition of international organizations including the US-based Earth Law Center and International Rivers and the other by the University of Essex in the UK.

After a lengthy legal battle, a Peruvian court emitted a historic sentence acknowledging the legal rights of the Marañón River in 2024. This ruling marked the first time a Peruvian court has recognized the rights of nature, and has inspired similar actions, like the successful campaign by a network of Quechua and Aymara women in Peru's Altiplano to secure rights for Lake Titicaca. In April 2025, the regional government of Puno recognized the lake as a legal person. On September 20, the official government gazette, El Peruano, published the ordinance, making it policy.



Located between Peru and Bolivia at 3,810 m above sea level, Lake Titicaca is the world's highest navigable freshwater lake. It is a designated Ramsar site (wetland of international importance) and home to a great diversity of flora and fauna, most notably large populations of water birds. Titicaca is famous for its "floating islands" made of totora reed by Indigenous Uro communities. The lake faces numerous threats, including contamination from mining and agrochemicals, overfishing and climate change.

Both the Marañón and Titicaca cases underscore the importance of community-led initiatives, especially by Indigenous women's organizations, in the growing rights of nature movement.

A global movement: rights of nature

In the face of the climate disaster, communities around the world are demanding – and winning – legal protection for nature. This marks an important shift in legal frameworks; instead of being considered an object or a resource to be exploited, nature is recognized as a “subject of rights” that must be respected and protected for future generations. The idea is not new – today’s rights of nature movement is deeply rooted in Indigenous worldviews that see humans as part of a reciprocal, interdependent relationship with the environment.



"Ecocentric" law is an emerging body of law for protecting and restoring nature. It shifts the legal focus from human-centric (anthropocentric) to ecosystem-centric, with the goal of protecting the planet's ecosystems and species.

Ecuador was the first country to codify the rights of nature in its constitution in 2008, followed by Bolivia in 2010. In 2022, Panama passed a Rights of Nature law, following up the next year with a law protecting sea turtles and their habitats.

Other countries, including Colombia and New Zealand, have also enacted national laws, such as the recognition of the Atrato River in Colombia and the Whanganui River in New Zealand. In Canada the Innu Council of Ekuanitshit and the Minganie Regional Country Municipality recognized the legal personhood of Quebec's Magpie River or Mutehekau Shipu in 2021.



5. What do myths hold?

Reprinted from the book "Karuara, People of the River," by Leonardo Tello Imaña

A book of mythological stories about beings from this world – birds, fish and plants – that other cultures consider to be flora or fauna, but not people? Beings that are 'people' for the Kukama and many other indigenous nations? What kind of book is this?

In today's world, can a myth contain the strength and wisdom to help us defend the Amazon's rivers and forest and all her 'people'?

During the past 25 years, I have seen how the economic power of the government and corporations has seduced and divided people on the Marañon River every time we have attempted to defend our spaces. The process of 'whitening,' intentionally devised by those in power and implemented through schools, has led us to reject our ancestral wisdom, which is now considered to be simply the 'beliefs' of uncivilized Indians. 'Idiosyncrasy,' 'cosmovisions' and 'cosmology' are labels that have been given to these beliefs. To think patiently and intelligently about a myth, as the Kukama do, should lead us to discover indigenous peoples, understand their historical processes, and admire and respect their culture. They preserve information that is important for the lives of all of us.



When missionaries arrived in the Amazon jungle, new myths evolved that spoke of these encounters and 'misencounters.' During the rubber era, other myths appeared, such as The Black Tiger and The Pink Dolphin, which recounted cruel punishments meted out to workers, sexual violence against women by rubber barons, and indigenous resistance. Myths remain a form of communication for indigenous people in the Amazon; they must be heard and read with care, because the Kukama use them to reveal truths that are not spoken directly, or which have been intentionally concealed.

Many stories about the Kukama people are held in their myths. But the Kukama have also submerged their stories in the river, not to hide them, but to make us understand that the river is full of life. The river contains the lives of the Kukama and their history. This does not mean the river 'owns' or 'possesses' life; rather, it refers to an intimate, interwoven relationship with all the 'people' who inhabit the river. If someone falls into the river and the body is never recovered, we say that the person now lives inside the river.

About the author:

Leonardo Tello Imaina is one of the producers and screenwriters of the film "Karuara, People of the River." He has been a journalist for more than two decades and is the director of Radio Ucamara, an Indigenous media outlet on the banks of the Marañón River. His father is Kukama and his mother is an Achuar, a group of Indigenous people living in the Amazon rainforest near the border between northern Peru and Ecuador.



6. Study: activities and discussion for students

A closer look at our water:

Research where your water comes from, tracing it backward from the tap to the ultimate source. What sources of pollution contaminate the water where you live? What methods are used to clean your drinking water? Hints: Request the annual report from your water utility detailing what's in your tap water. Contact your local health department or environmental agency for annual reports on local water quality. Compare results for bacteria, lead, copper, nitrates, pesticides, etc., against the legal limits.

Visit your local body of water

Organize a class field trip to your local river, lake, pond, ocean or stream. Make a survey of the living things that make their home in or around the body of water. Identify sources of pollution or contamination and discuss ways to prevent or mitigate the threats. Collect and analyze water samples.



Partnerships: Nonprofit groups like "Swim, Drink, Fish" in Canada run community-based water monitoring. They focus primarily on monitoring sewage pollution, which affects where people can swim and harvest shellfish. <https://www.swimdrinkfish.ca/water-monitoring> Look for similar groups to partner with in your community.

Follow-up Action:

Organize a clean-up of the waterfront area with students. Even a simple garbage pick-up can help raise awareness in the community and get others involved. Notify local media and post on social media. For extra impact, make an inventory of the trash and publicize it.

Submit your findings on water quality and sources of pollution to local media and politicians. Ask politicians to meet with your class or youth group and explain what they're doing to protect the community's water sources.



Unleash your creativity

Materials: craft paper or poster board, paint and brushes (watercolor, acrylic or tempura), colored pencils or crayons, scissors and glue.

Step 1: Individual work

What living beings come to mind when you think of a river? They can be any type of being, including: fish, birds, mammals, reptiles, plants, insects, mythical creatures, spirits, etc.

Ask students to draw and paint these elements on sheets of craft paper, one per sheet. If students are enthusiastic, they can use several sheets.

Once they're finished, have them cut out the figures.



Step 2: Group work

Now that we have our living beings in our hands, it's time to create our river. Gather all the elements together – you can use a wall or the floor or a large surface of craft papers. Arrange the figures so they form the shape of a curving river, a great stream of life.

The animated whirlpool of river creatures at the beginning and ending of the Karuara film was created in this manner, out of individual drawings made by Kukama Indigenous children and youth in art workshops.

These artistic activities allow everyone to think more deeply and philosophically about all the elements that make up a body of water. A river, lake or stream is the sum of these living elements.



Connecting generations

Invite one or more elders to come into the classroom and share their stories about your local body of water. These may be tales from their youth or myths and legends, including creation stories. Record audio or video of the stories and have students transcribe them.

Later, ask students to create illustrations to accompany the stories and design a newsletter or magazine with the stories and illustrations. This is what we did in Kukamas communities, bringing together elders and students. At the end we designed and published an illustrated book, "Karuara, People of the River," with the elders' stories and the students' illustrations.

This activity is meant to connect generations and preserve and transmit local history.



Nature goes to court

Hold a mock trial about a rights of nature case in your area. Have students take on roles based on your legal system: judge, jury (if applicable), plaintiffs, defendants and lawyers. Students will need to research, prepare and argue their case. Ideally the legal teams will work in groups to coordinate their cases. Perhaps the professor or teacher can be the judge.

Our shared history

Research the history and legends about the body of water closest to your community. What cultures lived there before modern times, and what was their relationship with water and the natural world?

Ask elders in your family or community to reflect on their relationships with nature. How have things changed since their childhood? Did they use medicinal plants? Fish, hunt or cultivate plants or flowers? What physical changes have taken place and how does this reflect changing societal values? Do they remember myths, legends or stories told to them by elders when they were children? Ask them for permission to record their testimonies and make short videos or podcasts using available technology. Cell phones and free editing apps like iMovie and InShot are simple and easy programs for beginners. Or write up their stories and illustrate them with your own artwork, photos or image collages. Be creative.



Take Action:

SIGN the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Rivers <https://www.rightsofrivers.org/>

SIGN the petition demanding that the UN create an International Tribunal for Climate Justice and the Rights of Nature. <https://www.rightsofnaturetribunal.org/petitions/international-tribunal-for-climate-justice-and-nature/>

JOIN GARN and SUBMIT a case to the International Rights of Nature Tribunal:

<https://www.rightsofnaturetribunal.org/>

The Tribunal was created by the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature, GARN (<https://www.garn.org/>) so that people around the world can speak on behalf of nature and submit cases of rights violations. GARN is a global network of groups and people dedicated to advancing the rights of nature. There are regional and thematic working groups, including youth groups and spaces for academics.



7. Contacts & resources

Karuara, People of the River: with campaign videos, film info and excerpts from an illustrated book of Kukama legends and stories. www.karuara.com

Karuara blog: subscribe for free and journey with us through Peru's Amazon region
<https://karuara.substack.com/>

Radio Ucamara YouTube channel: Documentaries, music videos, reports, spots and more from this Indigenous media outlet on the banks of the Marañón River.
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCkSfG0xv4mAHKv-be3_0Qag

Instituto de Defense Legal (Institute for Legal Defense): The legal aid NGO that is working on rights of nature cases in Peru and argued the Marañón case. <https://www.idl.org.pe/>

Vicaría del Agua: A pastoral area of the Vicariate Apostolic of Iquitos that defends the right to safe water as the most fundamental of all human rights, and raises awareness about the importance of aquatic ecosystems for all life in Amazonia, as well as the significance of water in Christian spiritualities and Amazonian Indigenous cosmovisions.
<https://vicariatodeiquitos.org/%C2%BFqu%C3%A9-es-vicar%C3%ADa-del-agua%3F>



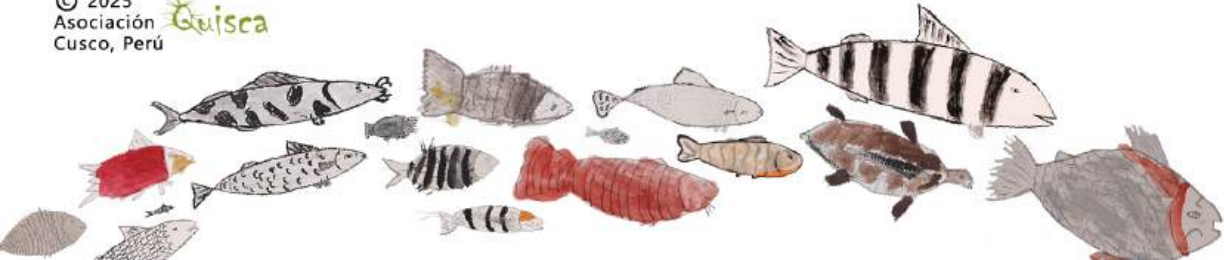
International Rivers: a global organization that protects rivers and defends the rights of communities that depend on them. They presented an amicus brief in the Marañón case <https://www.internationalrivers.org/>

Earth Law Center: a nonprofit organization based in the United States that works to advance ecocentric laws, policies, and governance for the well-being of the Earth community. They presented an amicus brief in the Marañón case. <https://www.earthlawcenter.org/>

Justice and Corporate Accountability Project (JCAP): A volunteer-driven transnational, collaborative, community-based legal clinic. JCAP assists in holding corporations and states to account by offering legal knowledge to communities that are negatively affected by natural resource extraction. JCAP presented an amicus brief in the Marañón case. <https://justice-project.org/>

OIDN: The International Observatory on Nature's Rights is a non-profit organization founded in 2018, whose mission is to promote the rights of nature in Quebec, Canada, and internationally. They were instrumental in winning legal recognition of the Magpie River in Quebec. <https://observatoirenature.org/observatorio/en/home/>

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Asociación **Quisca**
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PROYECTO GANADOR DE ESTÍMULOS
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DES MÉTALLIS



Fondo Emilia



Desarrollo
y Paz
CARITAS CANADÁ

The United Church of Canada
L'Église Unie du Canada



El Obisado de
Lima



Vicaría del Agua
VICARIATO ARISTOTELIO DE IGLESIA

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WMM A WOMEN MAKE MOVIES