

## About the Cover

# Cover Essay: Gleaming Power of the Andes, Sapped

Peter Daszak and Sara E. Howard

*EcoHealth Alliance, 460 West 34th St., 17th Floor, New York, NY 10001*

The featured artist in this issue of *EcoHealth* is Roberto Mamani Mamani, the well-known Bolivian artist who fuses indigenous imagery with brief references to colonial invasion and modern Bolivian culture. His use of flowing mountainscapes and vibrant colors is straight from the Aymara imagery that his grandmother taught him, the roots from which he finds power.

Mamani Mamani revels in this power of the Andes. In life, he concludes each email or letter with a plea for us to feel this power. He dresses as, and identifies with, his indigenous origins. In his art, he depicts vivid buttresses of Andean rock, which dominate his work and push human influence to the side. He paints women in indigenous dress soaking up the Andean sun that broils the sky to the point of apocalypse. In our cover picture, he sculpts thick wedges of glacial ice on Illimani, the peak that dominates the La Paz skyline: slopes of snow that seem to reach out magnetically and lock the sun in embrace.

Mamani Mamani is a purist in his art. He sees the Andean Altiplano as a landscape where nature dominates people. How else could something so dramatic exist? In “Madre Illimani,” he depicts his favorite mountain with impressionistic accuracy so that it provides a curious counterpoint to the dominating image of the sun. The view is one that he sees every day, yet the hazy sprawl of La Paz, city of a million and the highest capital in the world, is striking in its absence here. In Mamani Mamani’s mind, the city becomes just a few brightly colored houses nestled in the bosom of the landscape. On a winter’s day, as the smoke settles thick over the city, it’s possible to stand on the edge of town, look across at Illimani, and see La Paz just as it’s painted here. In a certain light, as the sun glints over

the moonscape mountains, the snowcaps rise and float eerily above the land, soaring like Illimani’s namesake golden eagle. A trick of perspective mingles haze and rock to magnify the mountain’s importance. It turns La Paz into a thin smear—a modern insult to Andean purity.

Here is where reality and vision part ways. Just like the rest of South America, La Paz is on a long-term growth spurt as most Bolivians seek the comforts of 21st century life. Planes connect land-locked Bolivia to a growing network of countries. Traditional and modern life merge in a complex cultural dynamic. The result is a modern compromise, one where just as Mamani Mamani sends emails in Aymara and flies his pictures to galleries around the world, the first indigenous President of Bolivia is elected. In postmodern Bolivia, the Indian roots that Mamani Mamani proudly espouses are a national gift to be treasured, where once they were eschewed or outright oppressed.

Similar compromises dominate the land. We may view the Andes as a majestic wilderness outside our own influence, but in the Andean lowlands we’ve crafted a new landscape of deforestation and agricultural change. With shifting populations and agricultural pressure, we’ve created our own niches, nestling like a boil in this bosom. These niches bring wealth just as they bring poverty; health just as they bring disease (see Polop, 2010 in this issue of *EcoHealth*). Even in the high Andes, far beyond the treeline, our influence saps the gleaming power that nurtures Mamani Mamani. Anthropogenic climate change clips the wings of the Illimani glaciers. It creates new corridors along which invasive plants and animals creep, joining one valley with the next, even sharing disease over the cusp (Seimon et al. 2007). Our wilderness myth crumbles, even as we seek

solace in our art. This is a battle between the power of the Andes and relentless anthropogenic change.

Mamani Mamani's view of this confrontation differs from ours. He sees an indigenous Andean identity that isn't yet completely assimilated, biologically or culturally; it has just changed. Mamani Mamani fights back with his art. He portrays the far more ancient and fundamental battle between the sexes. He uses traditional Aymaran imagery: the shocking yellow of the male sun, and the resolute mass of the female mountains. Does he have a message for our more urgent environmental crisis, in the way this battle inevitably plays out?

The woman sits, baby bundled snugly at her back. Her outstretched arms embrace the expanse of the sloping Andes, even as she herself seems one with—seems to emerge from—the very foundations of the earth.

The sun sets.

## THE ARTIST

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Roberto Aguilar Mamani Mamani was born on December 6, 1962, to parents of Quechua and Aymara descent. His parents had been forbidden to marry, but their love led them to run away from their homes in Tiahuanaco, Bolivia. They settled in Cochabamba, where Mamani Mamani was born.

While still a young boy, Mamani Mamani was sent back to Tiahuanaco to live with his grandparents. His grandmother taught him about Aymara history, culture, and custom. Mamani Mamani developed a passion for drawing and sketching the land and people around him. His grandmother nurtured his love for creating art, and Aymara traditions infused his style and perspective.

Mamani Mamani studied agronomy and law at the University of San Andrés in La Paz, Bolivia. Art remained his first passion, and when he could not afford canvases or

paper as a student, he drew and painted on newspapers. After struggling to find a balance between his indigenous identity and the western politics of university education, Mamani chose to put art and culture at the center of his life. He continued to paint with the vibrant colors and symbolic patterns that reflect the folklore of Andean culture: for example, yellow suns and pointed mountains are male; blue moons and rounded mountains are female; and horses, brought to the Americas by Spaniards, symbolize the colonization and oppression of his people.

In 1991, Mamani won first prize in Bolivia's most prestigious art competition, the Salon Pedro Domingo Murillo. Since then, his art has been featured in more than 50 exhibitions. Mamani's work has received both national and international awards, is currently shown in three permanent galleries, and is included in private collections across the globe.

## COVER ART

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“Madre Illimani con Intis, Awichas y Niños” (2010) by Roberto Mamani Mamani, pastels, 20 × 28 in.

## REFERENCES

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