Nature’s Rights: Exploring Ecuadorian Environmental Attitudes
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Abstract
On September 28, 2008, Ecuador approved a new constitution by a sizeable margin in a national referendum. The document acknowledges the fundamental rights of nature, making Ecuador the first nation in the world to do so. It may represent the beginning of a paradigm shift in the way humans approach the environment. The mainstream explanation for the granting of rights to nature is that Ecuador was purely motivated by economics—meaning the Ecuadorian government was supposedly using the rights of nature as a façade in order to gain back economic control from environmentally destructive foreign corporations. But bestowing fundamental rights on nature is much more than an economic answer to an economic problem. By studying historical, ecological, sociological, and ethnographic sources, I trace a more complete picture of the trajectory for nature’s rights, emphasizing its origins within Ecuador’s unique history and cultural attitudes toward nature. Fully exploring the trajectory of attitudes and events that led to the inclusion of nature’s rights, emphasizing its origins within Ecuador’s constitution helps us understand the potential for this paradigm shift to occur globally. I argue that cultural and environmental attitudes are a crucial factor in recognizing nature’s rights, and that communities can be motivated to make decisions based on more than economic gain or individual gratification. In countries whose environmental values are less salient or vibrant than Ecuador’s, and effort must be made by activists, citizens, and policymakers alike to unearth them.