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From issue: **Energy in the Americas** (Summer 2013)

■ **AQ FEATURE**

Will the Darién Gap Stop the Region's Electrical Integration?

by

Diana Villiers Negroponte



An impenetrable fog?: A man bathes in a river in the Darién province on the Colombia–Panama border.
Photo: Arnulfo Franco/AP

The last barrier to an integrated electricity grid in the region.

In April last year, the Colombian government announced its intention to pursue the creation of an interconnected electrical grid from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego. Naming the project “Connecting the Americas 2022” (“Connect 2022”), the Colombians had picked up the idea from Washington and included it in last year’s agenda at the Summit of the Americas.

The goal, as defined by the hemispheric governments that attended the summit, is to create an integrated electrical grid that can provide universal access to electricity through enhanced energy interconnections, power sector investments, renewable energy development, and cooperation. Should it succeed, the project will bring together regional electricity grids, including the Central American electrical grid, known by its Spanish acronym, SIEPAC (see Jeremy Martin’s article on the difficulty of completing SIPAC on page 102 of this issue), with South American networks. Completing it, though, requires passing through the Darién Gap.

A thin neck of impenetrable rain forest the size of Jamaica, linking Panama to Colombia and South America, the Darién Gap has long served as a buffer zone between the two neighbors. Stemming from historic concerns for its own geopolitical security, Panama has also sought to protect the rain forest and its Indigenous peoples against incursions.

The proposed power grid is not the only project that has been stalled by efforts to keep that buffer zone intact. Plans to complete the Pan-American Highway, which started in 1997 and involved closing the last unconstructed section of the 29,800-mile (470,960-kilometer) north-south road link in the hemisphere, have been held up in a similar way. Today, the northern section of the road stops just north of Darién province,

and only a few intrepid tourists enter the rain forest on dirt trails.

Could a hemispheric electrical connection plug the Darién Gap, if a highway can't? The answer is a cautious "maybe"...

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Zoe • 8 months ago

Darien is one of the few pristine areas that remain, an important home to immense biodiversity, naturally "progress" aims to replace it with roads and inefficient, unnecessary electricity grids.

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Ned Stone • 8 months ago

The sad state of mathematical literacy is shown here in the acceptance of 471 thousand kilometers as equivalent to 30 thousand miles. The former number would get you past the moon!

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ApolO ➔ Ned Stone • 8 months ago

haha I noticed that too, first the mathematics has never been something a Journalist can handle very well and this kind of flops happens every time though being a Jornalist and not knowing this kind of math/physics is pathetic.

Regarding the use of the comma that is hard for me sometimes as a Mexican(we are very americanized), in Spain and a lot of countries in Latin America the comma indicates the decimal and the point the thousands, I don't know where the author is from but this might be the case, but im not sure given the zeroes after the comma.

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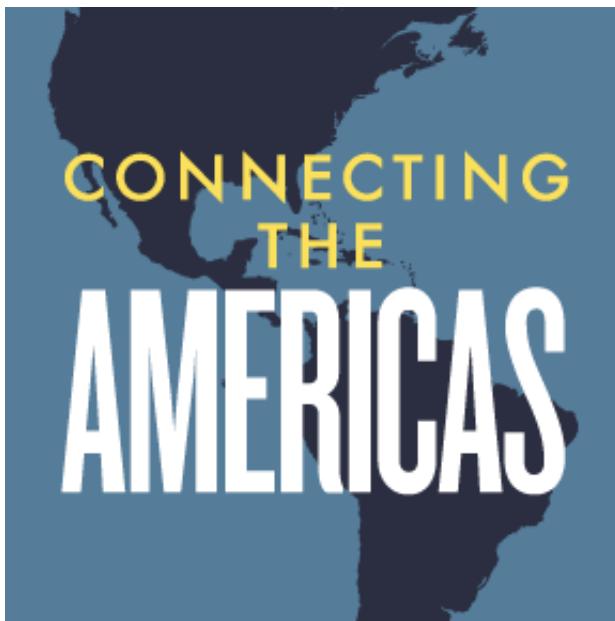
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