



PROFILE

Mariluz Canaquiri Murayari – Protecting Peru’s lifeline A Kukama leader, Mariluz Canaquiri Murayari is a lifelong river defender, and leading the movement to protect the Marañón River and the rights of her people

By Vishakha Gupta
(vishakhagupta21@
gmail.com), Independent
Researcher, New Delhi, India



Mariluz Canaquiri Murayari

**For the Kukama people,
the river is sacred; a
place where the spirits
and ancestors reside;
and they have taken
on the responsibility of
protecting it**

“The recognition made in this decision has critical value. It is yet another opportunity to keep fighting and claiming our rights. Our work is fundamental for Peru and the world: to protect our rivers, our territories, our own lives, all of humanity, and the living beings of Mother Nature”, says Mariluz Canaquiri Murayari, speaking on the historic decision granting legal personhood to the Marañón River in Peru and recognizing the Peruvian government and its Indigenous communities as the river’s guardians and representatives.

The Marañón is one of Peru’s most vital water sources and a key tributary of the Amazon. It flows through 10 regions of Peru, sustaining the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people. The river is also home to rare and endemic wildlife, including gray and pink dolphins, Amazonian manatees, giant river otters, black caimans, and giant South American river turtles, along with land species such as jaguars, capuchin monkeys, and spider monkeys.

Mariluz grew up on the banks of the Marañón in Shapajilla, where she witnessed her first oil spill as a child. Since 1997, more than 60 oil spills have occurred in the river, some with devastating impacts on local communities and wildlife.

In 2001, driven by the ongoing oil spills and the lack of leadership opportunities for women, Mariluz founded the Asociación de Mujeres Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana (“Hard-working Women’s Association” or HKK), a Kukama women’s association working to address social, economic,

and environmental challenges. The HKK represents 29 Amazonian Indigenous communities along the Marañón. For the Kukama people, the river is sacred; a place where the spirits and ancestors reside; and they have taken on the responsibility of protecting it.

In 2010, a catastrophic oil spill released thousands of gallons of crude oil into the river. In the aftermath of the Saramuro spill, Mariluz positioned HKK as a leading voice on environmental issues and became the spokesperson for her community. In 2014, when the government proposed a dredging project on the Marañón without consulting local communities, Mariluz and HKK partnered with the Legal Defense Institute, a Peruvian NGO, to challenge the project—and they won.

In September 2021, HKK, supported by the Legal Defense Institute, International Rivers, and Earth Law Center, filed a lawsuit seeking legal personhood for the Marañón River to protect it from oil spills and other destruction. Mariluz became the face of the campaign, drawing national and international attention to the cause and testifying in court.

In March 2024, the federal court ruled in favour of the Kukama people and the Marañón River. The historic decision recognized the river’s intrinsic value and its right to remain free of environmental contamination and to flow freely. The court found the Peruvian government, and its state-run oil company, Petroperú, in violation of these rights and ordered authorities to immediately address the oil spills and develop a protection plan for the river and its tributaries. The ruling provides an unprecedented level of legal protection for the river and formally includes the Kukama and other Indigenous groups as key stakeholders in its conservation.

Today, Mariluz and HKK are working to support the development of that river protection plan. ■