MAAP #207: Removing Illegal Mining from Sacred Tepui in Yapacana National Park (Venezuelan Amazon)

Last year, in collaboration with the organization SOS Orinooco, we published an urgent report about **illegal mining on top of a sacred tepui** in the heart of **Yapacana National Park in Venezuela** (MAAP #169).

Tepuis are stunning table-top mountains found in northern South America. They are considered sacred by indigenous groups of the region; in fact, the word tepui means “house of the gods” in a local indigenous language. Tepuis also have high levels of endemism (unique species) since they are not connected to other ranges.

In that report, we documented **425 illegal mining data points** (consisting of mining camps and machinery) on top of the tepui, indicating an organized and large-scale operation on top of this critically important biogeographical site.

Given the importance of this finding, the **Washington Post** published a high-profile article on the subject (see right), further exposing the severity of the illegal mining on the tepui.

In response, the Venezuelan government conducted a **military operation** (led by the Operational Strategic Commander of the Armed Forces) against the illegal mining activity on the tepui in December 2022.

Here, we show a series of **very high-resolution satellite images** taken during the raid (December 2022) versus one year later (January 2024).

The images reveal that all illegal mining camps and equipment on top of the tepui have been effectively **dismantled**. That is, we went from 425 visible illegal mining camps and heavy equipment in December 2022 to zero in January 2024.

This removal of illegal mining activity from the tepui marks an important victory for Amazon conservation in Venezuela. However, as also detailed below, we show **illegal mining continues in surrounding areas** within and outside the Yapacana National Park.

Illegal Mining on the Tepui
Before vs After the Government Operation

The **Figure 1** (see below) shows an aerial view of the tepui as of December 2022, surrounded by the lowland rainforest of Yapacana National. The white indicates the illegal mining activity occurring on the tepui and in the park (not including the whispy clouds passing the tepui).

Insets A-D indicate the locations of the four zooms, where we show a series of **very high-resolution satellite images** taken during the raid (December 2022) versus one year later (January 2024). Note that in each image, there is clear evidence of mining camps in December 2022 (left image) vs. no remaining mining camps in January 2024 (right image).

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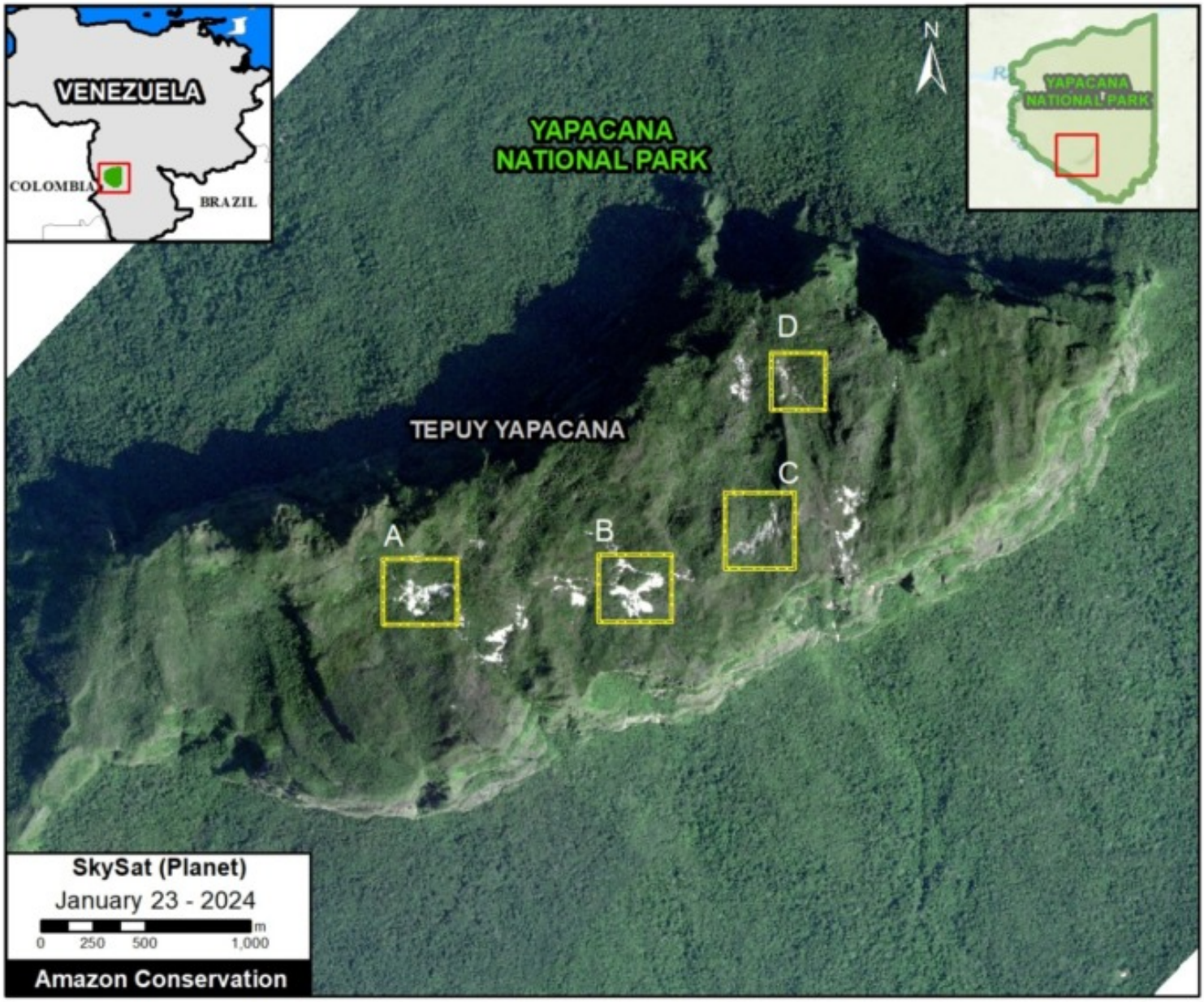

Figure 1. Former active mining sites on top of tepui in Yapacana National Park. Data: Planet/Skysat, ACA/MAAP.

Yapacana Tepui, Zoom A.

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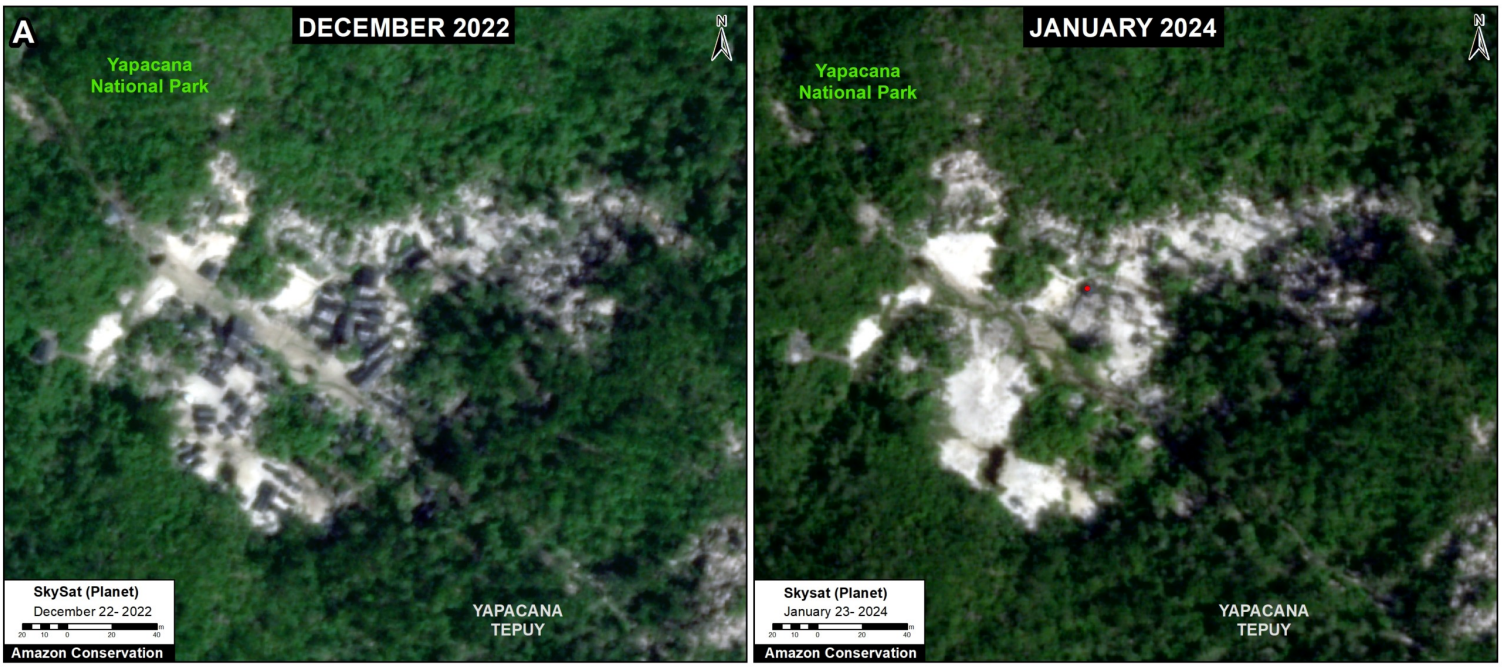

Yapacana Tepui, Zoom B.

Yapacana Tepui, Zoom C.

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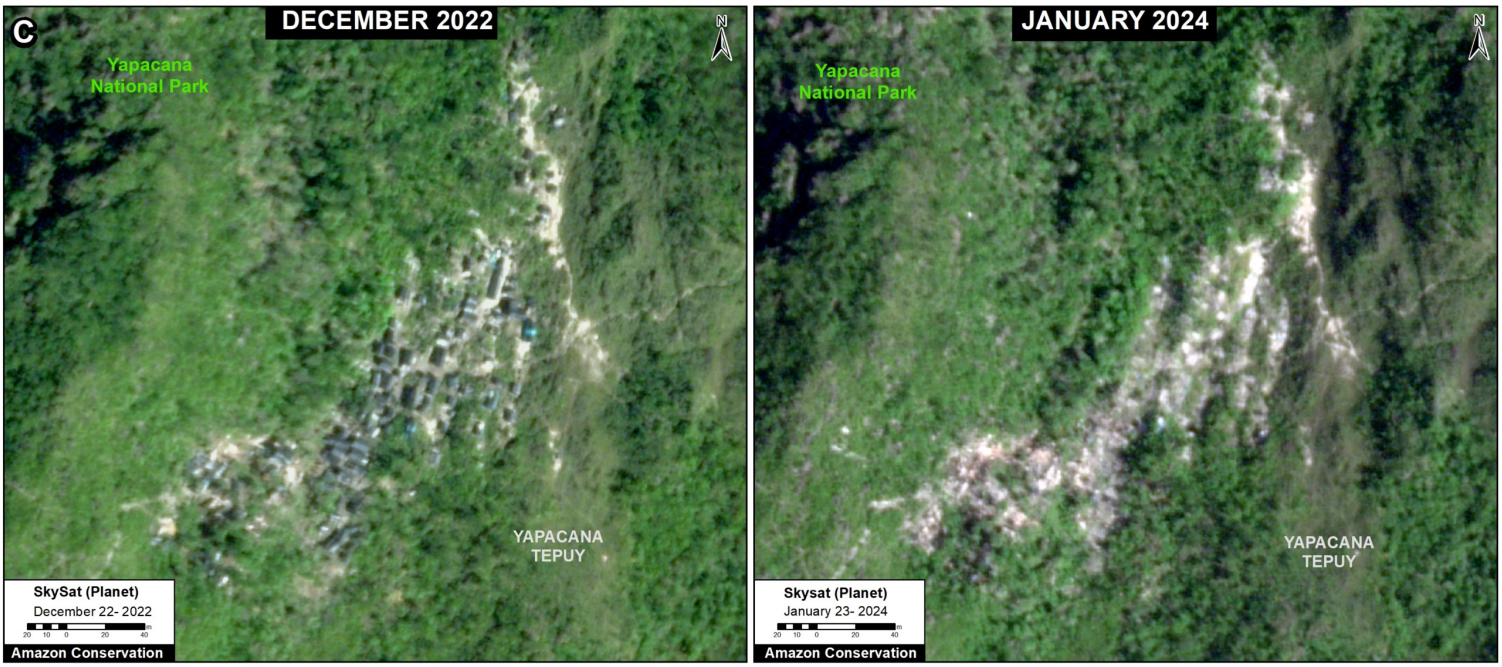
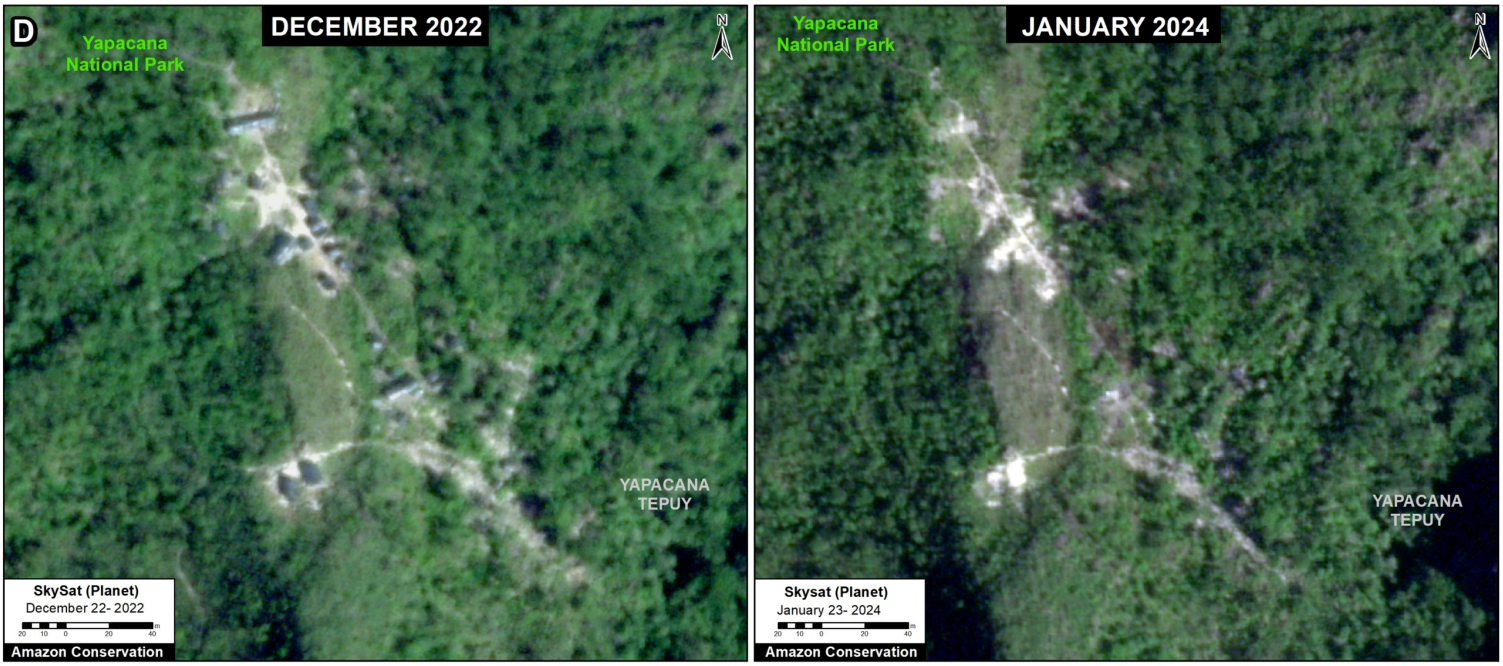


Yapacana Tepui, Zoom D.



Mining Continues in Yapacana National Park

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Figure 2. Active mines in and around Yapacana National Park. Data: Planet/NICFI, ACA/MAAP.

While above we credit the Venezuelan government for removing illegal mining activity from the top of the tepui, in this section we note that illegal mining is still occurring in multiple sites within and around Yapacana National Park (see **Figure 2**).

Below we show a series of satellite images of illegal mining camps and equipment in several of these continuing active sites: Cacique, Cerro Moyo, and Yagua.

Cacique

The Cacique site, located in the southern sector of Yapacana National Park close to the tepui, we recently observed what appears to be a cluster mining camps.

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Figure 3. Zoom of Cacique mining site, within Yapacana National Park. Data: Planet/Skysat, ACA/MAAP.

Cerro Moyo

At the Cerro Moyo site, located in the northwest sector of Yapacana National Park, we see both mining camps and equipment.

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Figure 4. Zoom of Cerro Moyo mining site, within Yapacana National Park. Data: Planet/Skysat, ACA/MAAP.

Yagua

Note the Yagua site is located just outside the southeast sector of Yapacana National Park, but is also illegal (all mining within Amazonas province is prohibited by law). At this site we see abundant mining equipment.

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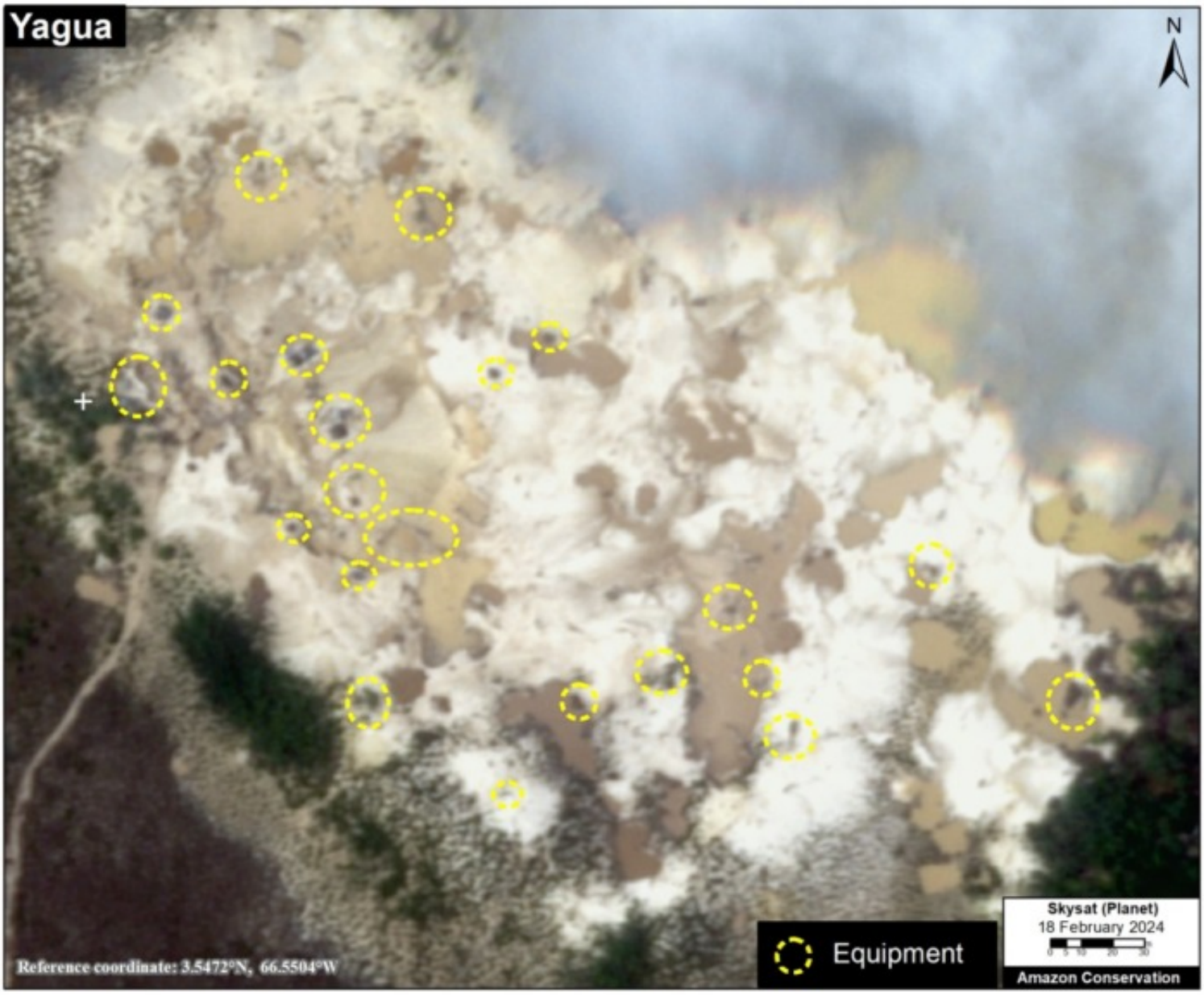

Figure 5. Zoom of Yagua mining site, outside of Yapacana National Park. Data: Planet/Skysat, ACA/MAAP.

Acknowledgements

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Citation

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