

## **Project Update: July 2015**

### A herd of armadillos and the challenges of filming artisans

Earlier this year, our project manager Yully Rojas organised two workshops to teach artisans from our partner villages in the Ampiyacu to make some of our best-selling handicrafts. The first was a three-day gathering in the Bora village of Brillo Nuevo where veteran artisans showed 60 fellow artisans from six villages how they made popular models of hot pads and snake pattern belts. The results were very good with the exception of a group that worked with a last-minute substitute teacher who didn't know her model as well as expected.

I attended a 2-day training in the thatched roof maloca (meeting house) in Puca Urquillo Huitoto where four artisan teachers taught their peers from five villages how to make another batch of special crafts. Many women and children gathered around Siena on a large plastic sheet on the dirt floor to practice weaving an armadillo ornament. Others gathered around Ania and Angelina to begin making the more complicated shushupe and naca naca models of guitar straps. Many women said they learned a lot and acknowledged it was going to take a lot of practice to weave a high-quality strap. We were pleased that Luz Elena, an artisan from Neuvo Peru joined the workshop for the first time. She said, "I used to only know how to make bags and hammocks – now I can make a new kind of craft." It was disappointing that no artisans came from two nearby Yagua villages. We have been trying to engage artisans from these communities in the project for a few years now, but we are learning that initial enthusiasm to get involved doesn't always translate into long-term commitment.

There was a cluster of men sitting on a side bench of the maloca using crude awls to etch a paiche (a giant Amazon fish) and other wildlife figures onto dark brown calabash tree pods. When filled with beads, they become attractive hand rattles and Christmas tree ornaments. Guillermo from Puca Urquillo had been trying to sell his ornaments to Yully without success for over a year. He said, "I learned to make crafts 25 years ago when I was a teenager. This workshop was very important, though, because it gave me a chance to compare, practice and improve my work with others." Guillermo was very pleased that we bought almost all of the ornaments he made during the workshop.

At the conclusion of the workshop, each of the artisan groups expressed their thanks to the Rufford Fund and other groups for their support of artisan skill sharing.

While workshops are a potent way to promote artisan learning, we are also producing a DVD compilation of veteran artisans showing and explaining step-by-step how they make a variety of handicrafts for CACE. Videographer Tulio Davila has gone to Brillo Nuevo and Puca Urquillo to record artisans making a variety of woven belts, guitar straps, hot pads, hair barrettes, hat bands and water bottle carriers.

Tulio accomplished a lot during his first three week stint in the field, but the factors that slowed him down were a potent reminder that many things are beyond our control. He could not shoot

some craft models with black because high floods prevented artisan access to the fruit that is normally used to dye chambira this dark color. He couldn't work with a few key artisans who were distracted when the husband of one failed to return from a hunting trip in the forest, and the husband of another was accused of killing him. Fortunately the missing fellow wandered back to the village after 3 days – very hungry – but otherwise in good shape. One male artisan initially agreed to be filmed explaining how he weaves the popular “anaconda” model belts and guitar straps, but then hesitated because he only wanted to share his creation with other members of his family. After editing some material in the city, Tulio is now back in the village and has now filmed artisans explaining how they make more than

Part of this process is carefully and repeatedly explaining to our partners that we will only be able to sell a few of their crafts if we can't offer them in larger numbers with consistent high quality. Since none of them would be able to fill an order from a wholesale buyer by themselves, they have to be willing to share their knowledge with each other if they want to increase their income from making and selling crafts. Our promise to them is that these detailed training materials will not be shared with artisans beyond the 15 communities in the Ampiyacu federation. We look forward to producing the first draft of this instructional video by the end of August.

