

Project Update – August 2012

I recently returned from a summer trip to Peru and can now report on some of the progress and challenges of our project and our partner native communities in the Ampiyacu region of the northern Peruvian Amazon.

1. Handicrafts: Bora artisans in the community of Brillo Nuevo continue to hone their skills making the most popular models and developing new designs of chambira fiber belts, hot pads and guitar straps. Women artisans from the Huitoto side of Puca Urquillo are steadily improving their skill carving wildlife figures on Christmas tree ornaments made from calabash fruit pods and are experimenting with a doll-sized ornament in the form of a native woven using different traditional tools made with a calabash pod, llanchama bark and chambira fiber. We have bought different styles of woven hand bags made by Bora and Huitoto women to try out in fall craft fairs. Ocaina artisans from Nueva Esperanza are working with us to develop a new line of woven chambira coin purses and cell phone holders. Yagua artisans from San José de Piri who have struggled making hot pads are making samples of very small woven chambira hammocks for dolls for us to test market.
2. Artisan certificates and awards: This summer we presented certificates called “Recognition of Native Artisan” to 21 women from Brillo Nuevo to acknowledge their participation in our handicraft projects and successful sale of their crafts. Special awards were given to eight of them for their special role in creating new popular designs, consistent high quality, spirit of cooperation with fellow artisans, and top sales. The process was initiated with support from the artisans but initially generated some jealous feelings. After discussing the issue with the artisans, they agreed that they wanted to continue the practice since it was a good way to stimulate pride, quality and creativity in their craft making.
3. Artisan hardships and travel hazards: In the past month, two of the artisans we worked with faced major challenges. One woman from Nueva Esperanza lost her house to a fire – an ever present threat in places where homes are built from wood and palm thatch with cooking fires inside the home. Her husband luckily escaped with only medium burns. Our main artisan contact from San José de Piri lost all her most valuable possessions including the full supply of handicrafts made by her and her fellow artisans to a robber who invaded her home. While every other village in the region is some distance away from main society, this village immediately adjoins the town of Pebas where crime is more common. While the spring brought huge floods to the villages, late summer has led to unusually low water. Yully Rojas reported that her large lancha (ferry) ran aground three times en route from Iquitos to Pebas and traveling to the villages in motor canoes is extra hazardous because of the higher risk of running into exposed trunks and tree limbs.
4. Community social rebate: CACE has an agreement with its partner communities to reinvest 20% of the craft sales from that village to support its health, education and/or conservation needs. The Bora community of Brillo Nuevo decided to use part of its available rebate funds to build a community pharmacy and provide an initial stock of medicines that would be sold slightly above cost to village residents. Funds were used to buy building materials and expenses for two men to cut the lumber. A

committee from the village is donating its labour to build the structure. It should be ready to open in September.

5. Chambira palm inventory: This July, we finalised development of our method for conducting inventories of the artisan's purmas (secondary forest plots) where they obtain most of the chambira palm leaves they use to make their own handicrafts and sell to artisans in other communities lacking this resource. Project manager Yully Rojas conducted inventories of two artisan purmas in August. Our goal is to survey about 20 plots to understand the range of chambira palm abundance in this area.
6. Greater demand for pole saws: Several artisans have been regularly using the six pole saws available to them through the Local Project Coordinator. Many others, however, would like to use them so CACE agreed to buy another 12 saws so each pair of artisans (usually a mother and daughter or two sisters) could have their own. We will organise a workshop to train artisans how to use and maintain these saws.
7. Possible new partner community: We made a brief visit to the Yagua community of Santa Lucia de Pro in late June and found that their artisans make a wide range of quality crafts – some quite unique in relation to their neighbours. They seemed interested in meeting with us further to discuss establishment a formal partnership within our handicraft project.
8. Aromatic plant distillations: In June we collected 3-5 kg of leaves and small branches from one rosewood, one canela moena (a relative of rosewood in the family Lauraceae), and one species of copal tree (a type shown to have high quality resin). We set up our copper distillation unit in the village and distilled these materials using firewood as our fuel source for the first time to extract the essential oil from these aromatic plants. Results of the rosewood distillation were the best. The aroma was very pleasing, although the yield was modest. Yield from the other two trees was disappointingly low. We intend to try the suggestion of an experienced rosewood distiller from the town of Tamshiyacu to use higher heat to improve our yield in future distillations.
9. Rosewood tree reforestation: The community of Brillo Nuevo was very enthusiastic about working with CACE and the NGO Camino Verde to plant about 1000 rosewood tree seedlings in four family plots when these plants being grown in a nursery at Jenaro Herrera can be put into the ground in early 2013. These trees should grow large enough to sustain a modest leaf and branch harvest for essential oil production in three to four years. CACE is now exploring specific channels for marketing this oil that once led to the devastation of the tree from harvesting the whole tree.
10. Cooperative agreements: CACE will present its proposal to renew its agreement with FECONA (the Federation of Native Communities of the Ampiyacu) to work with select communities in the Ampiyacu region for another 3 years at this group's annual congress in September 2012. CACE received verbal agreement from the community of Brillo Nuevo to continue its handicraft and essential oil projects for another year and will formalise this and similar agreements with other partner communities after the FECONA congress.
11. Detailed trip accounts: CACE Executive Director Campbell Plowden wrote 12 articles (illustrated with lots of photos) about his recent six week trip to Peru that are posted on his blog: Campbell's Amazon Journal. These can be seen at:

<http://amazonecology.wordpress.com/category/campbells-amazon-journal/page/2/>.

