

Amazon Connections: Issue #8 (December 2013)

Newsletter of the

Center for Amazon Community Ecology

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Copal resin research and potential new market



CACE began investigating the ecology and sustainable harvest of resin from copal (Burseraceae) trees and developing ways to distill and market its essential oil in 2006. We measured how much resin could be collected from 30 species of copal trees at a field station at Jenaro Herrera, harvested resin lumps from some and have analyzed digital photos to monitor the growth of over 1000 resin lumps made by weevils which stimulate their formation to judge how many years the trees (and weevils) should rest between harvests.

We extended our copal surveys and experimental harvests to the Bora village of Brillo Nuevo in the Ampiyacu region in 2009. We have now begun our second year of monitoring resin lump recovery and are using the process to train young Bora men how to use forestry and documentation tools. This year we hope to analyze resin composition and resin weevil DNA to learn which species of copal and weevils produce the most and best resin and develop a management plan with the community and authorities for its harvest.

While the copal species from the Ampiyacu best suited to making a fine fragrance seems relatively rare, one essential oil buyer has told us that oil distilled from the more abundant species may be valuable in aromatherapy. Samples are being tested now. Jenaro Herrera has a few copal species whose oil may be attractive in perfume, so we plan to meet with a nearby native community to see if they are interested in cooperating with us to assess the abundance and potential value of their copal trees since we could not harvest resin for commercial purposes in the government reserve where the research has been based.



Our five gallon copper alembique pot has been good for our experimental distillations of small batches of resin and leaves, but we need to buy a larger stainless steel distiller to do process more plant material and increase oil yield with our community level project. We will also need a grinder to chip branches into little pieces that can be efficiently distilled. [See full story and photos.](#) [Donate to this project on GlobalGiving.](#)

Dye plant enhancement and education under way



Higher levels of flooding in recent years have inundated many plants that artisans grow in their backyard gardens to dye chambira fiber for making handicrafts. As reported in our last newsletter, CACE energized one group of Brillo Nuevo artisans to create a [communal dye plant garden](#) in a higher patch of land so they could collect these plants even if high floods return. We also assisted the artisan Lucila Flores to build an elevated planter box to grow guisador – a type of ginger whose roots are ground up to dye chambira fiber yellow. It was great to see this low-budget effort come together with scrap lumber and nails and a saw patched together with wire. If it succeeds, I imagine other artisans will readily build one of their own. [See full story and photos.](#)

Beyond increasing their abundance, we also wish to enhance understanding about these dye plants for the artisans and the public. CACE will cooperate with the Field Museum of Chicago to produce a photo field guide to dye plants and a manual of dye plant use for the artisans – particularly newer ones who may not have had an experienced mentor. This month, a Peruvian forestry student from a university in Iquitos began documenting the processes and amounts that three artisans used to prepare chambira with five common dye plants. The manual will include illustrations of the plants being prepared by Amazon Field Volunteer artist Amrit Moore (see her blog [Artist in the Amazon](#)).



Rosewood reforestation and oil production in the Ucayali



CACE and its ally [Camino Verde](#) expect to produce essential oil from rosewood trees that we planted in the Bora village of Brillo Nuevo in a couple of years (see progress on CACE project). This summer I visited a project in the upper Ucayali region that is already distilling rosewood oil to learn from their experience. The key person in this venture is Limber Gongora, a permaculturalist from Pucallpa who founded the [Rainforest Ecosystems Center](#) (RECOVER) to rehabilitate degraded forest and train native and other low-income students how to manage forest land. RECOVER's reforestation efforts

included planting 4,000 seedlings of the endangered rosewood tree which they eventually hope to sustainably harvest. I saw that many seedlings of this tree that often grows in the shade needed protection from harsh sun to avoid stress. In the meantime, Gongora is consulting with the Lush cosmetics company to chip some downed rosewood trees in a former logging concession and distill them into oil. They had produced their first barrel and were seeking permits to export the oil to Lush in the U.K. [See full story and photos.](#)

Giving back to our partner communities



CACE buys handicrafts from Amazon artisans to help them create a sustainable source of income, and we return 20% of our craft sales to our partner communities to support their health, education and conservation needs. This year the Bora native village of Brillo Nuevo used part of its social rebate to build a community pharmacy and is now stocking it with medicines ([see story and photos](#)).

The campesino village of Chino on the Tahuayo River used one portion of its rebate from basket sales to build a two-stall bathroom and will use newer returns to make the toilets flush ([see story and photos](#)). This summer, we delivered some basic surgical supplies donated by the Mount Nittany Regional Health Center to the Jenaro Herrera health clinic and bought new instruments for its maternity ward with funds from CACE sales of ornaments and earrings ([see story and photos](#)).



Fountain of frogs in Chino



Most of the artisans from Chino make beautiful chambira baskets (see photos), but one of them, Yermeth Torres, also had a special talent for weaving colorful and expressive frogs from two inches long to life-size bull frogs. Before making my trip to Chino this summer, I had asked her to make fifty frogs for the holiday season. When I arrived in the village, I discovered that my order had generated some confusion and resentment. The artisans had divvied up the order so when I made my way around the artisans' tables, I saw a great range of amphibian diversity. A few artisans were very disappointed that their first frogs were too floppy, but others had created new features (like webbed feet) that gave their models even more character. I left with a bag full of green, orange, yellow and magenta beauties. [See full story.](#) [See more photos of artisans and frogs.](#)

“Mishquipanga” and “Thank you” videos on YouTube



CACE has produced two new videos that are posted on our Amazon Ecology channel on YouTube. [“Mishquipanga \(*Renealmia alpina*\) - a dye plant from the Peruvian”](#) is a two-minute piece narrated by Bora native artisan Ines Chichaco that focuses on the colorful herb used to dye chambira purple when used by itself. Soaking the fiber for a second time in clay-rich mud turns the fiber a dark navy blue. [“Energizing Native Communities in Peru”](#) is a one-minute kaleidoscopic overview of CACE's work with native communities set to a traditional Bora song as a thank you to project supporters. Also check out [“Artisans of the Ampiyacu – Native handicrafts in the Peruvian Amazon”](#) - a rich visual and music video that shows how native artisans transform palm fiber, roots, fruits and leaves into woven and carved handicrafts.

Support CACE's work on GlobalGiving

Please support CACE's work with a donation to our project on GlobalGiving at: www.AmazonAlive.net. Recurring donations of only \$10 per month or more are especially appreciated to fund our essential oil and handicraft development with our native partners.