

Amazon Connections: Issue #9 (December 2014)

Newsletter of the

Center for Amazon Community Ecology

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info@amazonecology.org

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Overview



As 2014 comes to a close, we'd like to share some highlights of work in Peru this past year through updates posted on our GlobalGiving [project page](#). We are wrapping up our intensive study of copal resin at Jenaro Herrera and are beginning to work with four native communities to sustainably harvest it to make a unique essential oil. We have also used our new distiller and shredder to produce small quantities of essential oil from rosewood trees with families in Tamshiyacu. The rosewood seedlings that we planted at Brillo Nuevo in early 2013 with our partner [Camino Verde](#) are doing well, and we look forward to

harvesting leaves and branches from some of these in early 2016. On the handicraft front, we co-led a three-part series of workshops with the Field Museum to help artisans in Brillo Nuevo and Puca Urquillo develop their personal skills and cooperate to make and sell quality crafts from well-managed plant resources. We finished surveying chambira palms in artisan fields in Brillo Nuevo to estimate their abundance and recommend how many new palms should be planted to meet future demand for woven crafts.

We are building on this information and initial studies of dye plants to produce an illustrated manual and short videos to teach more artisans how to properly harvest, process and weave these plants into the best-selling models of crafts. We've ended the year with strong sales of Christmas tree ornaments of Amazon wildlife figures etched on calabash fruit pods, carved from balsa wood, and woven from chambira palm fiber. We appreciate recent support from the [Rufford Small Grants Foundation](#), [New England Biolabs Foundation](#), and many others who have contributed to our project. We look forward to launching our online store in early 2015. Thanks for any donation to support our work at: www.AmazonAlive.net.



Strengthening artisan skills and cooperation

(Edited from report on March 25, 2014)



CACE began working in early 2014 with the Science and Education department of [The Field Museum](#) of Chicago to implement "Quality of Life Plans" with native communities in the Ampiyacu River region. The core of this collaboration was co-leading a three-part series of workshops with artisans in Brillo Nuevo and Puca Urquillo. These experiential sessions helped them develop their personal skills and ability to work together to improve their natural resource management, craft-making and craft selling. The modules dealt with the following sets of themes: 1) Leadership, Organization and Planning. Activities included team play, identifying how artisans plant and process chambira palm for making handicrafts, and drafting plans for small groups to work together to meet craft production goals. 2) Trust, Communication and Control. Goals were to build trust among artisans in the group to promote clear communication so they can improve the management and supply of natural resources used in making crafts,

create their own mechanisms to control the quality of crafts, and establish transparency in financial management. 3) Decision Making and Sustainability. The goal of this workshop was to encourage artisans to consider trade-offs and consequences of decisions they make regarding the harvest of chambira and dye plants. They elaborated different strategies to create a sustainable supply of these raw materials needed to make and sell handicrafts. [Read more with all photos.](#)

A vision for rosewood oil production and recovering an endangered Amazon tree

(Edited from report on June 12, 2014)

Oscar Flores was a young boy when his father brought his family and half a dozen rosewood tree seedlings from the jungle up the Putamayo River near Colombia to a growing Bora native settlement on the Yaguasyacu River in Peru. Oscar fondly remembers growing up with the pleasant aroma of those trees that his dad planted in front of their new house. Sixty years later one lone rosewood tree had grown to maturity in the patch of forest that grew back after Oscar moved his own family several miles downriver

to the community of Brillo Nuevo. In the summer of 2012, Oscar led a CACE team back to this rosewood tree to collect some leaves and branches we could distill to make a trial batch of essential oil. CACE then collaborated with [Camino Verde](#) to bring 900 rosewood seedlings raised in a government nursery to Brillo Nuevo in early 2013.



Five families including Oscar's were selected in a village lottery to plant a share of these in a forest plot under the guidance of CV's director and reforestation expert Robin van Loon. Since then CACE has used part of its project funds provided by [GlobalGiving](#) donors and a grant from the [New England Biolabs Foundation](#) to monitor the progress of these seedlings every three months with local Bora men. Most of these owners including Oscar have been diligent stewards of their young rosewoods. One of them told our project manager Yully – "I am excited that these rosewood trees may generate some income for my family in a couple of years. It's great that I can now try to enrich the forest around here with these beautiful trees that will be valuable for my life and the lives of my children." We recently bought a stainless steel distiller and [Patriot](#) shredder to process copal oil and leaves of other aromatic plants like rosewood. The still was hand-made by [Heart Magic](#) in Oregon and after some bumps along

the way, the equipment finally got to Iquitos to conduct our first trials distilling copal resin and rosewood leaves.

[Read more and see all photos.](#)

[The art of weaving chambira palm fiber in the Peruvian Amazon](#)

(edited from report on Sept. 16, 2014)

The new kinds of crafts that our partner artisans have made from chambira fiber and other local plants in past years has included: belts, guitar straps, hat bands, bracelets, hair barrettes, bags, coin purses, cell phone carriers, holiday tree ornaments, and hot pads. As opportunities to sell more crafts increases, we have facilitated skill-sharing between artisans and worked with them to assess the abundance of chambira in their fields. This summer, our two Peruvian interns accompanied several artisans through every stage of the craft-making process so we could document and better understand how much time and materials were involved in harvesting the plants and making different types of finished handicrafts. An artisan first walks from her home to one of her "purmas" (fallow farm-field) where chambira palms have either grown through natural regeneration or were intentionally planted. She first cuts a medium age chambira leaf spear with a machete or pruning saw. She shakes it to unfurl the dozens of leaflets and then pulls them off of the central stem.



In the village, I marveled at the foot dexterity of Dolores as she secured the base of one leaflet at a time between two toes and then used her fingers to snap the top of the leaflet and then peel the fibers away from it. She next boiled the fibers in her house and then cleaned and washed them from her dugout canoe in the river and finally draped the strands of over a clothes line to dry for two days. She came by a couple of times during this time to comb out the stray fluffy pieces. When the chambira is sun dry, artisans collect other plants to dye the fiber into as many colors as needed for the craft they plan to make. These parts may include the leaves, fruits, roots, seeds, or bark of a dozen plants that may be available during different times of the year. The dye plant parts are usually mashed or grinded and then put into a pot with a batch of chambira to boil for five to ten minutes. The colored chambira is then hung in her house in the shade to dry. Twining comes next by rubbing them up and down their thigh to twist them into long strong threads of the proper thickness. The final stage is to weave the fibers into any craft the artisan wishes to make.

[Read more about chambira conversion to crafts and see all photos.](#)

[Learning to work together in the right way](#)

(excerpt from report on Oct. 10, 2014)

When I write an update about our project, I normally share a brief story about a person or a topic that highlights some recent success. GlobalGiving has inspired me, however, to enter its Fail Forward contest with a story about a few big challenges and failures we have faced working with our native artisan partners in Peru. This report won 3rd place in this contest and a \$400 prize.

A year after encouraging our artisan partners in Brillo Nuevo to form their own quality control committee, it seemed that this and other ideas had failed because I had assumed that the artisans had a high level of trust with each other. One artisan who had inspired her colleagues to work together had left the village with her husband. Her aunt had offered her fellow artisans what she thought were helpful suggestions about ways they could improve their weaving techniques but resigned from the quality control committee after being harshly told by an artisan in a different family to mind her own business. When we gave out the certificates and prizes for the first time, the evening was marked by awkward silence and no supportive cheers. The only thing we did that improved the mood was passing around large bottles of bubblegum flavor soda. After the gathering, one top-honored artisan told me that she and her sisters were going to stop making crafts for us because their success had generated too many hurtful expressions of jealousy.



It finally became apparent that the lines of tension between the artisans reflected similar divisions of families that attended two churches and routinely argued in community assemblies. Encounters between one woman who was almost always laughing and another who was steadfastly calm could erupt into intense verbal clashes if they started discussing differences over land rights in their adjoining fields going back a generation. I met with several artisan leaders from “both sides” and feared for a time that both groups would stop working with us. I then met with most of the artisans again the day before I left the village and apologized that our initiatives seemed to be causing more harm than good. The artisans agreed

that the committee hadn’t worked, but they really wanted to keep receiving the certificates and prizes for achievements like craft sales. One artisan said, “I don’t like it when Sra. Yully doesn’t accept one of my crafts that I have worked hard on, but getting this feedback has really helped me improve my craftmaking.” Most of the artisans nodded in agreement. [See the full story and photos.](#)

[The evolution of Amazon Christmas tree ornaments](#)

(excerpt from report on Dec. 15, 2014)

We encouraged both Bora and Huitoto artisans in Puca Urquillo to try making ornaments in 2011 as a new line of crafts distinct from woven items being made by our original partners in Brillo Nuevo. After one Christmas season, the results were clear. We had quickly sold all of the tutuma rattle ornaments etched with jaguars, toucans, and other jungle critters. The woven chambira ornaments were well made, but would not add an interesting touch to a holiday tree. When I next met with the women artisans in Puca Urquillo, I



expected they would be happy to hear that one of our first products was very successful and that we wanted to order a lot more etched tutuma ornaments for the following Christmas. I was not prepared for a prolonged awkward silence. Elsa finally spoke up – “we know how to weave, but only a few men know how to carve the tutumas. My husband made all of the ones you got from me last year.”

Over the next year, about eight Huitoto women tried to make the more popular tutuma ornaments. When I returned to their village, they gathered in a circle in the group leader’s home with a pile of their first efforts in front of them. I sat in the center and inspected every ornament from every artisan in turn. A few tutumas were good, but many had a crudely etched figure of a bird with the background scraped away. Some looked nice but contained too few seeds to make a good sound. I praised all of the artisans for their efforts, bought the best ones, asked them to fix ones that could be improved, and explained why some were not good enough to sell. [See full story and photos.](#)

[Building relationships with GlobalGiving – a crowd source platform with smarts and hearts](#)

Campbell’s Amazon Journal article – May 5, 2014



GlobalGiving has proven to be an increasingly effective partner and channel for support for CACE’s work in Peru. Read [Building relationships with GlobalGiving – a crowd source platform with smarts and hearts](#) to learn how CACE has increased its fundraising, outreach, and partnerships through this unique online fundraising organization.

Please support CACE’s work with a donation to our project on GlobalGiving at: www.AmazonAlive.net. Yearly or monthly recurring donations of only \$10 per month or more are especially appreciated to fund ongoing work with our partners.

All articles written by Campbell Plowden. Photographs by Campbell Plowden, Yully Rojas Reategui and Andrew Schwarz