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Dr. Patricia Beddows

“Palm Conservation in the Peruvian Amazon” Final URG Report

For my entire life I have talked about doing research in the Amazon rainforest. With this grant funding, I was able to spend two months in Peru successfully completing an independent ethnobotany study. Through this experience, I learned the importance of being firm about meeting the goals of a study while approaching the experience in a flexible way that adapts to unexpected circumstances.

Although the original research question and methodology remained the same for the entirety of my project, I had to change locations in order to complete the project. For four months this spring, I worked with the resources of the Field Museum of Natural History to prepare for my trip to the Ampiyacu basin of the Amazon River. Since April, we were told that all of the necessary preparations for my arrival were completed and the community was just waiting for me to arrive to begin the research. One week into my time in Peru, on the day I was supposed to travel by boat from Iquitos for 17 hours to begin my field work, I received a phone call that they no longer wanted another foreign researcher working in their community. Before I could enter into the community, another person had to travel to present my project the following week and they would then decide if I could enter the village or not. They postponed making that decision for almost two weeks. During this time, I continued meeting with the Programa de Conservación, Gestión y Uso Sostenible de la Diversidad Biológica de Loreto (PROCREL) which is the conservation branch of the regional government about other possible locations for my project. Through their organization, I was able to find a new set of communities along the Tahuayo River that were suited to this project.

With no final decision from Ampiyacu and no promise that a final decision would be made in a timely way, I received official permission from the URG Office and from my colleagues at the Field Museum to move the location of my project. The assistant I had hired in Iquitos through the Field Museum’s contacts accompanied for all of these planning meetings and would be with me throughout the time in the field. My first trip into the communities for preliminary research to test the methodology began at the end of the third week and lasted for five days. During this trip, we stayed in Esperanza and completed interviews with all 7 artisans in Esperanza and practiced the field studies in three forest plots. Throughout this excursion, we stayed with Esperanza’s Community Coordinator for La Cooperativa Esperanza del Bosque – an artisan’s cooperative with governmental support for exporting products made from chambira fiber to be sold in the United States.

After the five day field excursion, my assistant and I returned to the field for a week to meet with other NGOs working on chambira research, gather supplies for our following month-long stint among the three communities in the study, and to refine the methodology for the interviews and forest studies. With methodological improvements, the following month in the field proved to be extremely successful as we completed 31 interviews and 27 forest studies among the communities of Esperanza, El Chino, and Santa Cruz. In addition, we spent one weekend attending the Comité de Gestión in San Juan de Yanayacu, which is a regional conservation planning meeting with all of the communities in the Tamshiyacu-Tahuayo basin, PROCREL, and the NGOs working in the region. Attending this meeting acquainted me with
two other thesis students studying in the area and enabled me to gather contacts and information about future directions with conservation research and management.

Learning to live bathing and washing clothes in rivers, traveling by canoe, eating whole fish cooked over a fire, and the rest of the adaptations to daily life provided a rich anthropological experience that was as personally valuable as the success of the research project itself. Through those small moments that filled my days, I became more confident and comfortable with adapting to constantly changing living situations, improved my Spanish-speaking skills significantly, and made lifelong friends that shared their lives with me during my homestays in Iquitos and the three communities. This summer was by no means an exclusively comfortable and fun experience, but in that it was the most worthwhile experience of my life thus far. As someone who has long dreamed about doing conservation research, I now have the real-world experience I need to further define my role in that field. As I head into senior year, I am approaching graduate and law school applications for dual-degree programs in Environmental Law and Environmental Science with a full awareness about the kinds of lifestyles I’m pursuing as an international researcher.

As related to the future of this project, I will be analyzing the data gathered through March 2015 as I write my senior Environmental Science thesis. This will involve close work with both the Environmental Science Program here at Northwestern as well as my continued work with my colleagues at the Field Museum. Additionally, I will most likely be working on a collaborative paper with Dr. Jim Penn from the Rainforest Conservation Fund to compare our studies on chambira palm population health and management within the next year.

Thank you to the Undergraduate Research Office and the Institute for Sustainability and Energy at Northwestern for making this experience possible, the Field Museum of Natural History for directing my attention to the issue of chambira management and for providing the contacts necessary for completing this project, and to Dr. Patricia Beddows for serving as the official advisor for this research project. After an adventure-filled summer, I am happily returning to Evanston for my senior year feeling as though I finally have the exposure I need to determine which next step will be right for me.