



Project Selva



In 2020, Roger Williams Park Zoo partnered with the Center for Conservation and Research at San Antonio Zoo to provide emergency relief including food and medical support for the Bora, an indigenous people from the Amazon Basin of Peru, whose livelihood has been disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

The potential partnership with indigenous peoples inhabiting a focal habitat type is often overlooked. In the past, these peoples were viewed as another force driving a decline or stressing a natural resource; however, ignoring the locals around any conservation issue is fraught with peril.

In 2013, San Antonio Zoo piloted an approach borne from discussions with indigenous communities in northeastern Peru. Based on trust developed over 25 years of working with indigenous communities during biological surveys, this program approaches rainforest conservation from the perspective of the people living in the forests. Indigenous leaders have identified areas of need and have specified times where communities have been inclined to sell logging or mineral extraction rights. These activities remove the rainforests in each region or irreparably alter them.

The efforts put into supporting indigenous communities and their desire to maintain stands of rainforest on traditional lands are an action step toward a specific goal, retention of Amazonian rainforest in the upper Amazon Basin. The forests that these indigenous groups live in are home to the greatest assemblage of biodiversity on Earth. Scientists continually describe new species from these forests and the diversity of life is staggering. For example, in a square hectare of Amazonian rainforest (2.47 acres), there can be as many as 750 species of trees! In the entire lower 48 states, there are ~1000 species of trees. Developing pathways through which local support for the conservation of rainforest can be bolstered is the aim of this program.

Project Selva opened an office in the Amazonian city of Iquitos to fund a co-op where select arts and crafts can be purchased from indigenous communities. Our co-op solicits and obtains these artisan items from locals, including such things as traditional bracelets, necklaces, carvings, bark paintings, and more. The items we seek form a part of local life and allow for the inclusiveness of a much larger indigenous constituency in this co-op. We do not purchase items made of feathers, seeds, teeth or other animal and plant parts that are prohibited for export. Items are then exported to the zoos for sale in gift shops. Funds from the sale of these items go directly back into maintaining the program - which in turn provides a regular revenue stream to indigenous artists and communities.

Developing skill sets and opportunities for Peruvian artists

We wanted this project to develop some signature artistic products and wanted to center them around Peruvian artists. We also wanted to find a pathway to generate more funding to develop and expand Project Selva. We worked through a long process that took into consideration the resources available to Peruvian artists and considered a process that would deliver artistic pieces different than those that were being produced in the region prior to our project. One resource for which the Amazon Basin is famous is the diversity of fish. In fact, there are more species of freshwater fishes in the Amazon than in any other corner of the planet. The indigenous groups of the Amazon Basin are intimately tied to the fishes in the region because they are an indispensable resource and serve as a critically important protein source. No one knows the diversity of fishes in these forests like the people living there; so we thought about other cultures with a connection to fishing and the Japanese culture immediately came to mind. One method that arose in the Japanese culture to record their catches of fishes (before photography was around) was fish printing, known as *gyotaku*.

Gyotaku involves painting a fish with non-toxic dyes, placing rice paper onto the fish, and extracting a print of the fish, an exact replica, once the art form is perfected. Subsequently to this, the print is meticulously hand-painted. It quickly became apparent to the organizers of Project Selva that we had found an art form to import into the Amazon Basin to our young team of artists in the city of Iquitos. Project Selva arranged for a famous *gyotaku* artist to fly to Iquitos and teach two hands-on training exercises in *gyotaku* technique. The workshops lasted a week each and the artists quickly picked up the methods. In a very short time, the Peruvian artists not only demonstrated proficiency in their *gyotaku* skill sets but began altering the art form in their own ways to deliver an artistic product uniquely their own. This was exactly the outcome for which Project Selva had hoped.

Gyotaku fish prints will be available in select galleries in North America. The prints have been used on T-shirts, stationery, greeting cards, etc., which are available in gift stores at the Zoos and on our website – www.projectselva.org. All funds raised from the sales of these items are used to maintain the office in the city of Iquitos so that the project can continue to purchase indigenous art from local communities and support them through a stable revenue stream.



Sticking with Your Conservation Obligations through a Pandemic:

When the pandemic hit in early 2020, zoo visitation decreased dramatically or stopped altogether. Few institutions had the financial resources to handle the event and maintain all existing programs. Our two zoos were no exception. But finding creative solutions to maintaining conservation initiatives through a pandemic was our goal – and a key point to this piece. One of the indigenous groups that Project Selva works with had become reliant on tourism and tourist visits to their village. The pandemic eliminated the revenue stream, and the group was in real trouble. Our objective in Project Selva has been the financial support of indigenous groups such that they are less likely to sell logging, mineral, or oil extraction rights, damaging the rainforests on their traditional lands. This was an opportunity for the two zoos to step up to the plate. We went to our board members. We organized special art shows to sell more gytaku pieces. Both CEOs stood by the project financially. We organized monthly emergency food deliveries. We used the team we already had in Iquitos, and the project's boat, to deliver the emergency supplies. In the words of the indigenous leaders, "Project Selva and the two zoos were the only ones who came to help us in our desperate time of need." Even when the zoos were facing critical shortfalls in attendance, they have stood by their conservation programs. The Roger Williams Park Zoo contributed an additional \$12,000.00 to purchase a new boat for the project

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