



Amazonian Adventures

by Jenny Holden

Snatching up my binoculars, I suddenly remembered what had drawn me here to the National Reserve Tambopata Candamo in the Amazon Basin, Peru.

The fact that I had sat up half the night peering in vain into the blackness for tapir and that the local mosquito population had turned my body into their regular drinking hole, paled into insignificance. In the tree opposite, five scarlet macaws had landed, garishly bright against the foliage. Below them on the clay cliffs of the riverbank hung over 30 orange-cheeked parrots, three blue-headed parrots, and 20 dusky-headed parakeets. Here and there, an orange cheek would flap its wings to balance itself, adding a spark of red to the mosaic of green and blue.

I had been living in the rain forest for two weeks in a bamboo hut with a palm leaf thatched roof. No creature comforts here, no electricity, running water or roads; just a waterfall to dive into for a shower and a small boat which, in three or four hours, could get you to Puerto Maldonado, the nearest town. The purpose of my trip was to join a Biosphere Expeditions research team, monitoring parrots and rain forest mammals to find out whether ecotourism is having an impact on their populations.

The parrots come down to these cliffs, known as colpas, to nibble the clay. This coats their stomachs and acts as a detox against the toxins contained by the seeds and fruits they feed on.

These colpas are the only places where the parrots can be accurately counted, since even their vivid colours melt away into the forest canopy, and so here we sat every morning in a little hide we shared with many lizards. In the heat of the afternoons, we would thankfully take cover in the dense forest and walk transects, wading up to our necks across rivers full of piranha and sting-ray, and carefully hopping across highways of army and leaf-cutter ants. Sometimes tamarins or tyra would peep at us from behind a branch or a spectacled owl would swoop low over our heads. At night, our torches would occasionally catch the eyes of an ocelot crouched in the fork of a tree and caimans lurking in the river. Every encounter was carefully noted for analysis later on.

Despite the fact that the Amazon Basin has 25% of the world's biodiversity, the wildlife here is amazingly elusive. Trekking for hours through miles of hot sticky jungle can prove totally fruitless, although the rustling, flapping, and singing of forest inhabitants can be heard constantly. To see an animal is a privilege and one that never loses its magic.

One day we visited Lake Sandoval, an oxbow off the Madre de Dios. The lake is a haven for many birds including the strange hoatzin: a large heavy creature with a stomach like a cow's to cope with the leaves it feeds upon. It is thought to be closely related to reptiles as the chicks have claws on their wings to aid climbing.

top. tree frog **main.** the research base camp (photos - © Biosphere Expeditions)

As dusk fell, we were paddling our dugout down a little creek leading off from the lake, when we heard splashing and high whistles. We glanced at each other, "otters" we whispered excitedly. James, our guide, skilfully paddled our canoe silently toward the sound. Sure enough, there appeared the eight heads of a family of giant river otters. They regarded us calmly for a moment before turning tail and making their way casually off into the swamp forest. We turned so as not to disturb them further and paddled back to the lake, each with an indelible grin on our faces.

The giant river otter, locally known as Lobo de Rio [wolf of the river], like so many species here, is now extinct from much of its former range. Fur hunting from the 1940s until 1970, decimated the population. Add to this overfishing;

mercury contamination of the water by gold miners; irresponsible tourism; and the fact that 12.5 million hectares of rain forest are felled every year to provide us with plywood for our DIY projects and grazing space for our fast food, and you have a problem which isn't going away soon.

This wild place cannot be allowed to disappear and people are piling a lot of money into some excellent and vital research. But it is the local people with whom we need to work. The Peruvians are proud of their rain forest and are pleased that we love it too, but who can blame them for wanting the money to live as we do? A country that seems constantly on crisis alert whether it be earthquakes (as in Arequipa whilst I was in the country), volcanoes, floods, war or terrorism, it is no wonder that

the poverty rate hovers constantly between 30 and 40%. In Puerto Maldonado, 200 miles from the Inca Trails and beaches, the main industries are Brazil nuts, logging, gold mining, and ecotourism. Several large jungle lodges in the area attract many rich tourists. However, too many tourists can have a detrimental effect on the wildlife and, although local people are employed as guides, cooks and boat drivers, the lodges tend to be owned by foreigners, and so relatively little of the US\$100 per night from each visitor, enters the local economy. Also, since lodges collect their guests from the airport, few spend much time and money in the town itself.

bottom left. squirrel monkey

top left. map of area

right. red and green macaws flying from the colpa
(photos - © Biosphere Expeditions)



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So the friendly little town of Puerto plods on. It is now building a monument to biodiversity that will house exhibitions and hopefully attract visitors to the town. The way to save the rain forest is to make it pay for the local people and provide them with an income other than logging and selling the land for cattle grazing. There is no such thing as sustainable logging, on any kind of commercial scale, in the rain forest, and, because of the poor soil and complex ecosystem, it can not simply be replanted.

The results of our research here are to be presented to the Peruvian government in order to help them decide on numbers of people allowed into the rain forest. In the future we hope to see the forest and its people supporting each other so that the Lobo de Rio can continue to charm and enchant others as it did me.

Jenny Holden is a freelance writer and also works for the World Owl Trust.

Jenny went to Peru as part of a Biosphere Expeditions volunteer research team. Biosphere Expeditions is an award-winning, non-profit-making organisation offering hands-on wildlife conservation expeditions as an adventure with a purpose for everyone.

Projects are not tours, photographic safaris or excursions, but genuine wildlife expeditions placing ordinary people with no research experience alongside scientists who are at the forefront of conservation work.

Expeditions start from two weeks, are open to all, there are no special skills or fitness required to join and there are no age limits whatsoever. Expedition team members are people from all walks of life, of all ages, looking for an adventure with a conscience and a sense of purpose.



The expedition to Peru next runs in May/June 2006. The expedition contribution is £1100 for a two-week slot and Biosphere Expeditions guarantees that at least two-thirds of this is spent on the project in-country.

Further information 0870 4460801, www.biosphere-expeditions.org.

above. tayra around base camp
top left. entering sightings into the map
top right. marking the study transect
bottom. red and green macaws flying from the colpa
(photos - © Biosphere Expeditions)

