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• LORE OF THE jungle

From monkeys to milk frogs, ecotourists help scientists collect data for an Amazon wildlife census.

WORDS CATHERINE MARSHALL

Flooded forest on the Rio Negro, an Amazon tributary and home to the Amazon River dolphin

PHOTOGRAPHY: CORBIS AUSTRALIA

THE COMMUTE FROM Alfredo Dosantos Santillán's hometown of Iquitos to his office – the airless confines of the Amazon jungle in north-eastern Peru – is an eight-hour round trip. He must take a small motorboat southwards along the Amazon River, then south-eastwards along the Tahuayo River tributary. In the dry season, he transfers to a low-slung wooden boat, better suited to navigating the upper reaches of this tree-choked channel, and wends his way in ox-bow twists and turns all the way up to the Área de Conservación Regional Comunal Tamshiyacu-Tahuayo (ARCTT) or Tamshiyacu Tahuayo Community Regional Conservation Area.

Dosantos alights at his jungle base, the Tahuayo River Amazon Research Center (TRARC), where he is research director. It is damp and humid, even in the dry season, but he is easily distracted by the curtain of foliage that rises up from the compound's edge, muffling the sounds that emanate from within: the hissing of insects, the caw of birds, the creaking jaws of so many ravenous, hidden life forms.

Dosantos strains his ears for sounds as yet unheard – the calls made by new species of the titi, saki, squirrel or night monkey – primates that are believed to exist, but not, as yet, documented. As the sun rises over the Amazonian canopy, Dosantos picks up his camera and a machete and walks into the jungle. It's a good day for new discoveries.

Deep in the Tahuayo basin, the TRARC is a 420,000ha tract of land sequestered from the endless, unregulated

jungle encircling it. The Peruvian Amazon comprises 60 per cent of the country, stretching northwards to Ecuador and Colombia, southwards to Bolivia and eastwards to Brazil. The basin has a rich diversity of creatures: pink and grey dolphins; elusive red uakari monkeys, nicknamed "Englishmen" for their ruddy, hairless faces resembling a white man who has been in the sun too long; bird-eating tarantulas, piranhas and anacondas; and the feline jungle kings – pumas and jaguars.

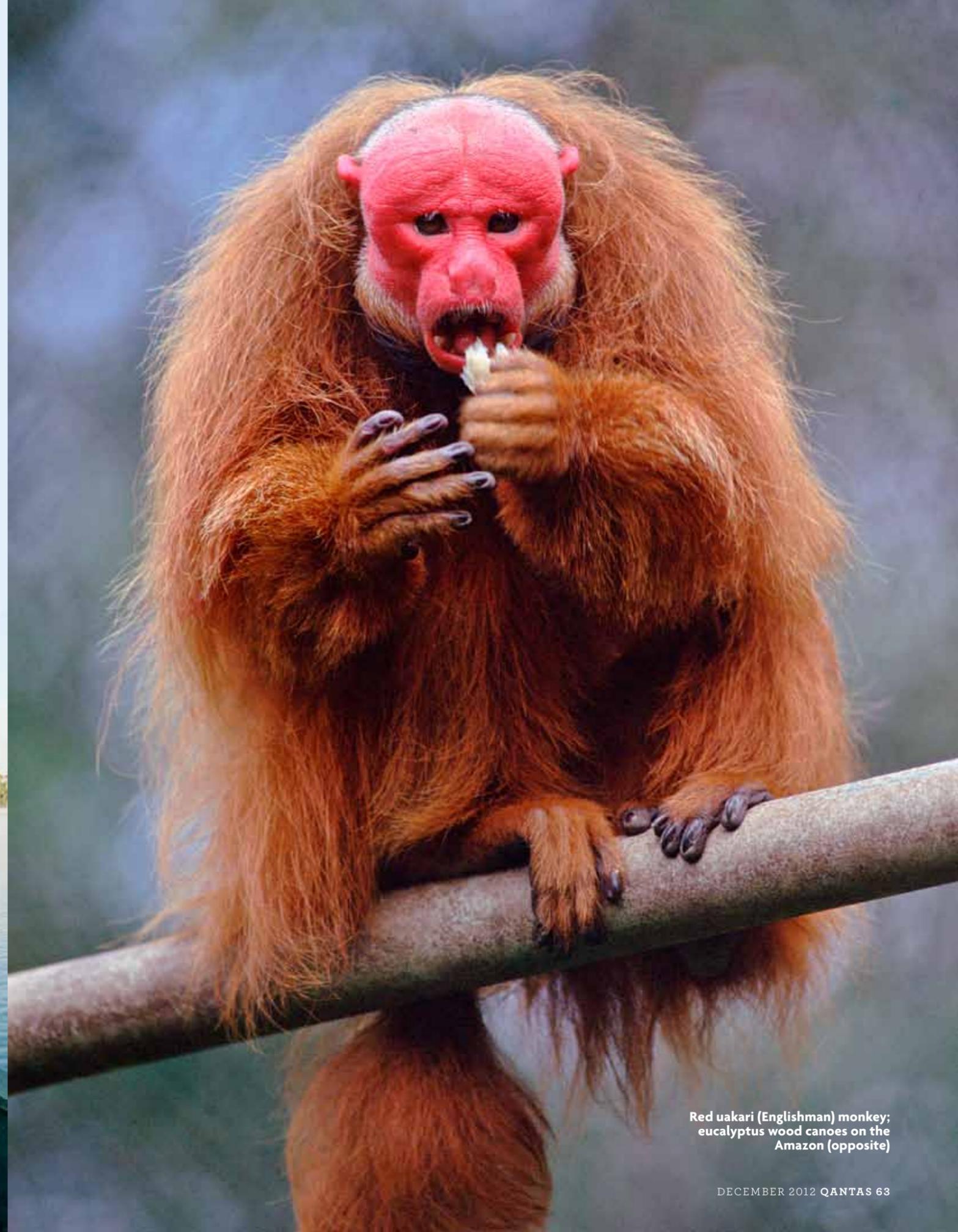
Riverside communities founded the reserve in 1991 to sustainably manage their wildlife resources – an important food source – but a lack of funding has prevented the completion of a baseline study of its ecological riches. To address the problem, US ecotour operator Amazonia Expeditions, which owns the research centre, has joined UK-based Biosphere Expeditions, a conservation-focused organisation that provides funding and volunteers.

Expedition members collect data and undertake surveys, helping to determine the abundance and density of "indicator" species – primates, cats and other large terrestrial mammals whose numbers give important clues about the health of the forest. Their work will contribute to the development of a wildlife management plan for the region.

It is August, the middle of the dry season, when a group of volunteers from Australia, the US and Europe arrives in the jungle-locked city of Iquitos. *Motocarros* (auto-rickshaws) buzz about in a blaze of colour and locals ▶



MONKEY PHOTOGRAPHY: CORBIS AUSTRALIA;
CANOES: GETTY IMAGES



Red uakari (Englishman) monkey; eucalyptus wood canoes on the Amazon (opposite)



Clockwise from above:
jaguar; triangle
or clown tree frog;
kapok tree

“OCCASIONALLY A BEAM OF SUNLIGHT FORCES THROUGH, ILLUMINATING THE HEAVING, STEAMING WORLD BELOW

gather at night on the promenade to celebrate life in music and dance. Taking Dosantos’ lead, the volunteers cruise up the Amazon and Tahuayo Rivers, then transfer to a smaller boat. Sitting very still so as not to spill over into the clay-swirled water, they hunch

together in ponchos beneath a weeping grey sky.

Rounding a bend, they find their home for the next week: the research centre is a series of cabins connected by walkways and built on soaring stilts to protect against flooding. However, such measures were helpless against April’s deluge, when snow-melt from the Andes Mountains and ceaseless rain forced a retreat from the jungle enclave.

The volunteers quickly set to work. Under the guidance of Dosantos and expedition leader Malika Fettak from Biosphere Expeditions, they learn how to record data and set up sensor-equipped camera traps. They familiarise themselves with the forest and the animals that form the focus of this study, and prepare defensively against the risks

inherent in the jungle: bees, wasps, ants and caterpillars that sting, botflies that embed their larvae under a host’s skin, bushmaster snakes that become hunters when provoked, gnarled tree roots that trip, spiny palm trees that pierce skin, and the unremitting heat and humidity that can dehydrate to the point of dazed hallucination.

But the forest expertly conceals its inhabitants, and it will take perseverance to document their existence. At dawn, the team – doused with insect repellent and provisioned with water – sets out in small groups along a latticework of trails that transects the 4sq km grid comprising the study site. On a map, the trails are neatly interspersed at 100m intervals, but in reality they meander through the forest, imprinting softly upon its matted floor and yielding obediently to its chaotic, vine- and tree-entangled whims.

Dosantos leads a group into the forest. The biomass swallows them, blotting out sunlight and filling the confined space with the sweet scent of humus and the tendrils of moisture-tipped vines. Human anatomy is manifested in the scapula-like buttresses of ficus trees, the mature vines resembling thick, ropy umbilical cords and stretched tendons. Red lichens spatter like blood across fallen tree limbs. Occasionally a beam of sunlight forces through the canopy, illuminating the heaving, steaming world below.

Dosantos treads softly, his ears and camera poised, his eyes penetrating the canopy. He swiftly identifies the bird call: macaw, parrot, manakin, woodpecker. A metallic blue ▶

TREK PERUVIAN AMAZON



Clockwise from left:
Iquitos; giving insects
a hand in the rainforest;
Amazon river dolphin

morpho butterfly wafts by, a giant Amazonian millipede emerges from the leaf-litter, and a violent crash alerts the group to the presence of titi monkeys, zipping through the trees on their morning breakfast run.

For five hours, the volunteers trek through lowland *restinga* forest, palm swamp and seasonally flooded *igapo* forest; their rubber boots alternatively sink into the marshy clay substrate and bounce off a robust webbing of decomposing leaf litter and tree-fall. The census yields several common monkey species and an Amazon red squirrel, coloured a charcoal grey.

Over the next week, the group traverses 48km of transected routes. They spend afternoons in siesta, and as the heat subsides they paddle up- or downriver, taking a census from the relative comfort of a wooden canoe.

The drained waterway creates an optical illusion, lengthening the trees so that they appear even taller than they would in the wet season. In the distance the silhouettes of tamarin monkeys are visible. A luxuriant bromeliad display squats in the trees. At night, the group returns to the river where caimans, gladiator frogs and marine toads lurk at the shoreline, and to the jungle where Dosantos reveals in the beam of his headlamp a tiny frog with translucent pink feet clinging to a vine, and a cicada whose bridal-veil wings are rimmed with lurid green piping. The croaking of milk frogs penetrates the stillness and smothers the call of less-garrulous nocturnal creatures. What predators lie in wait further down the track?

Dosantos turns off his headlamp, bathing the volunteers in pure, unsullied darkness. They can almost hear the forest festering with death and decay. Strangler figs squeeze the life out of host palms, vines cast about for limbs on which to anchor themselves, leaf-cutter ants tear apart foliage and



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march homewards with their loot, and wasps lay their murderous larvae inside unsuspecting tarantulas. This hostile dance plays out all around the volunteers in the forest, but they cannot easily see it with the naked eye. To observe the Amazon devouring and then rebirthing itself, they must stop, be still and listen.

By day seven, the group has sighted an impressive number of indicator species and observed countless birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, fish, trees, grasses, flowers and fungi. They have identified the tracks of puma, tapir and deer, and discovered on the camera traps images of margay (a spotted native cat), agouti (a kind of rodent) and opossums. This is pleasing news for Dosantos, who has previously identified four individual jaguars on the site. While this is a long-term study, he is feeling optimistic about the health of the reserve.

Still, he is desperate to uncover all of its bounty, to identify species rumoured to exist. For now, he must accompany the volunteers back down the Amazon, where grey dolphins frolic in the current, and on to the sweltering city of Iquitos where the expedition team will split up.

The volunteers will return to their metropolitan working lives, while Dosantos will journey back up the Amazon, returning to his beloved jungle where each day brings with it the promise of a new discovery. 🌐

+ *Biosphere Expeditions* supports conservation projects in 11 countries, including Oman, Honduras, Australia, Namibia and the Azores. More information at biosphere-expeditions.org