

# Conservation Project, Taricaya Research Centre, Rio Madre De Dios, Peru

## INTRODUCTION



Taricaya is situated by the Rio Madre de Dios. The above photo captures a stunning sunset.

Having returned from the Taricaya Research Centre deep in the amazonian rainforests of Peru, I feel privileged to have relished such a magical area of our planet that is more impressive than I ever could have imagined. The marvellous array of flora and fauna can be only be described as simply beautiful. No amount of praise and gushing enthusiasm could ever justify the extraordinary wealth of natural enchantment. Only those who have experienced it will ever comprehend the emotions such a

haven has stirred within me. Not only have I encountered one of the most stunning corners of our planet, but I have also gained the satisfaction that I have ultimately made my own small, yet significant effort to help conserve this area against destruction. The following report is designed to outline the projects that I have participated in, and to summarise the progress made as a result.

## TARICAYA RESEARCH CENTRE

The Taricaya Research Centre was built in 2001 by Teaching and Projects Abroad conservation manager Stuart Timson, in an area of land owned by his former colleague. The centre was then rented to Teaching and Projects Abroad, a UK based company who send volunteers overseas to help with a variety of projects. The two colleagues planned to use the research centre as a base to conduct research within the surrounding rainforest in order to collect enough data to ultimately gain the area as Reserve status by the Peruvian government. Until this point the land had been strongly hunted by local rainforest inhabitants and as a result wildlife populations had suffered severely. Initially only six volunteers resided at the lodge, where they found that population sizes were small and the variety of wildlife was less diverse than in other less severely hunted areas of the rainforest. Additionally they found the behaviour of the animals had been badly affected by hunting, as animals were extremely fearful in the presence of humans. This made sightings a rare experience.



Volunteers meet in the Taricaya lodge to discuss ideas and progress.

From then until my arrival on July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2003, hundreds of volunteers have visited Taricaya and carried out a wealth of much needed research. Animal population sizes, the range of species

and the behaviour of the animals has changed so dramatically that a wealth of data has been collected to prove to the government that the area is worthy of Reserve status. On July 8<sup>th</sup> 2003 Stuart Timson announced to us the most groundbreaking improvement to date. The Taricaya reserve proposal has been approved by the Peruvian Ministry of Agriculture and has now only to be approved by the Ministry of Natural Resources. This means the area of land will receive reserve status for 40 years. In order to maintain the reserve, the volunteers must continue to gather data and present it to the government as an annual report to prove the land is benefiting from our work.

Upon my arrival at the lodge I met my co-ordinator (and owner of the Taricaya land) Fernando, who introduced me to the projects currently in progress and gave me an insight into rainforest life. The soundtrack of the jungle is overwhelmingly huge, and brings to life the reality that we were living entirely alongside and exposed to all forms of wildlife. I met my fellow volunteers and I instantly felt part of the team. Morale was high and I felt the other volunteers held great pride in their work. Justifiably so as I found over the following two months.

## THE PROJECTS

There are a variety of projects and activities currently in progress at the Taricaya Research Centre, as outlined below.

### Observation Activities

This is possibly the most vital activity to ensure our success in gaining Reserve status. Observations are carried out daily. Morning observations were carried out from 6.00am until 8.30am and afternoon observations between 3.00pm and 5.00pm. Both morning and afternoon observations are designed to embrace a variety of wildlife. For example, I found that observations at New Farm Platform mainly consisted of bird sightings. Here we were regularly blessed with sightings of Vultures, Casiks, Orrapendula,



Myself and another volunteer, Nicola Croft on an observation walk.

hummingbirds, mealy parrots, nunbirds, parakeets and scarlet macaws. Although sightings of these birds were also common at Old Farm Platform, here it was also usual to see larger animals such as Tayra and squirrel monkeys. Hangover Blind Platform was built recently to provide studies of organisms living in a swamp habitat. Here we mainly studied hoatzins, jabirus, woodstorks, heron and kingfishers.



Daniella, a baby howler monkey who was rescued when her mother was found dead. Although she has been released into the wild, she still remains around the lodge.

Groups of volunteers venture daily to Anaconda Colpa Platform, roughly 8km from the lodge. Volunteers remain here from 7.00am until 5.00pm. Although I felt that observations were much rarer at Anaconda Colpa, they were often more satisfying. We sometimes spent hours seeing no movement at all, but the reward became instant if a rabble of peccary stumbled out from amidst the trees and bathed in the mud at the colpa. Other past sightings have included Tapir, Agouti, and a Puma.

Observation walks are also carried out daily and I

learned they require a great deal of patience as any slight aggravation can disturb nearby wildlife and vital sightings may be lost. Observation walks lead volunteers along several trails around the reserve. We were often blessed with sightings of squirrel monkeys, spider monkeys, capuchin monkeys, tamarin monkeys, agouti, peccary and tayra. We sometimes heard howler monkeys but they are very difficult to spot.

Occasionally there are opportunities for volunteers to participate in night observation activities at Anaconda Colpa or Empto Colpa. I was privileged to spend a night at Empto Colpa. Although my group did not spot anything, the variety of noises in the remote depths of the jungle is deeply intriguing and sometimes unsettlingly bizarre!

### **New Farm Activities**

New Farm was created roughly 1.5km from Taricaya Lodge in order to develop more environmentally friendly and economically viable farming techniques for local farmers to implement. A variety of animals including guinea pigs, chickens, ducks, pigs, goats and donkeys are being bred and cared for at New Farm. The chickens are nearly at egg producing age and will produce roughly 90 eggs per day – enough to provide to both volunteers and locals. Mahogany tree saplings are being grown at New Farm as part of the reforestation project, as are several crops of rice, cucumbers, lettuce, cabbage, coriander, limes, avocados, bananas and plantains. The crops are grown to provide additional information to local farmers on farming methods, as well as a welcome food supply to the volunteers.

I found a days work at New Farm exhausting but satisfying.

Not only did we have to weigh and feed the animals but the crops had to be watered using a giant fire-mans hose, weeds had to be chopped with machetes, bedding changed, tree growth monitored and the animals treated for infections.

### **Platform and Walkway Construction**

New trails and observation platforms are continuously being developed in order to create additional scope for the collection of species data from various parts of the proposed reserve. I



Myself and Katie at Hangover blind platform

was often involved with the marking of trails. It is important to mark distances along the trails so that when observations are made the location can be accurately recorded. This was obviously worthwhile but nevertheless time consuming as every trail in the reserve had to be marked.

I am also proud to have been a part of the most adventurous project Taricaya has had to date. In order to gain knowledge of the tremendous array of birds and animals residing in the rainforest canopy, Stuart

Timson proposed that we should construct the 4<sup>th</sup> ever South American canopy walkway. The base platform has so far been constructed to a height of 10metres, and will lead by cable walkway up to a 45metre high main platform high in a Kapoc tree. Work involved in such a project included carrying planks cut from naturally fallen trees and heaving them up the 45metres to their destination. Experienced Peruvian volunteers constructed the platform itself high in the canopy. I feel disappointed that I will not



The big tree

witness the completion of this major project, however I am proud that I added to its construction.

### **Dam Building**

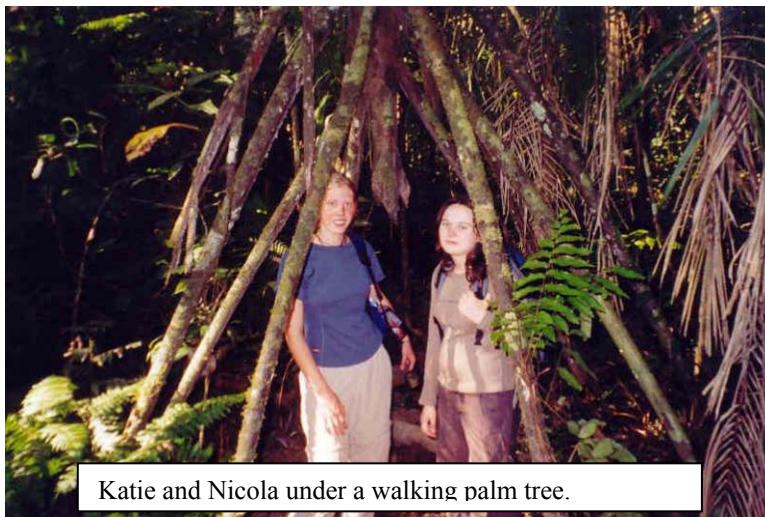
During my stay we commenced the initial construction phase of our hydro-electric dam project. The purpose of the dam is to provide a more environmentally friendly and economical method of energy production for the lodge. A petrol-operated generator is currently being used and only runs for three hours per day. Additionally, the pool created will be used to farm fish (boca chica). The swamps used for this project last year are only viable for this project five months each year before they dry up, and therefore the fish did not reach a marketable size. Flooding last year meant that river species entered the swamps and caused additional competition for the fish, thus reducing the numbers available for harvest. The dam pool will be used to keep the fish in floating pens to reduce predation and competition. Hopefully this will prove that next year the results will improve so that the fish farming project idea can be presented to local farmers for them to implement themselves.

Dam building itself involved constructing a 25m wide by 3m high wooden base structure spanning the width of the creek beside the lodge. This was then packed with several hundred

sacks of earth, which took a large amount of work to achieve. This was probably the most physically demanding project that I was involved in.

### **Reforestation**

As I was volunteering at Taricaya during the dry season, the reforestation project was mainly on hold as rainfall was too infrequent to ensure the survival of newly planted trees. Towards the end of my stay just before the beginning of the wet season, we did begin planting



Katie and Nicola under a walking palm tree.

Chimichua palms in areas where trees had fallen and cleared an open space in their path.

We also continued to monitor the previously planted palmiche trees around the reserve by noting their height and health regularly.

### **Caiman Project**

Some local species of caiman such as Black Caiman are severely endangered as they have been rigorously hunted for many years. One of the main problems with caiman development is that mortality is high before the young reach adulthood. Other caiman, piranhas and predators often kill young caiman, therefore populations are struggling to recover. Last year young caiman were captured from the river and raised in a specially designed pen to increase the number of caiman reaching adulthood before they can be re-released back into the wild. This was unsuccessful as the caiman all escaped during the flood, however a repeat attempt is being made this year. We ventured out by boat in the evening to capture caiman, and we managed to gather around six or seven for the enclosure. Some young had already shown evidence of injuries by other caiman and piranha.

## THE FUTURE

Progress to date has proved to be rapid and impressive, yet the new developments concerning the actual reserve status means that a whole host of new data has to be collected in order to create the required annual report. Volunteers must now investigate species density; tree type, density and size; vegetation cover and topology. Additionally, Stuart Timson would also like to create a project involved in monitoring amphibian species as he believes there is a much greater range of amphibians living in this area of the rainforest than previously anticipated.

## CONCLUSIONS

The rainforest experience may be over for me for now, but these projects will continue to run with the help of new volunteers for the foreseeable future. I am proud to have left my mark and gained the experiences that I have. Not only in the rainforest, but also by visiting Cusco and successfully completing the Inca Trail and visiting Machu Pichu. The trail took four days, we



walked a total of nearly 40

kilometres and climbed 1200metres on the second day alone. On the way I damaged my ribs badly when the bus crashed, before it was attacked by a mob of fifty angry Peruvians who slashed our tyres. I explored the landmarks of Cusco by horseback, enjoyed a day of white water rafting in the Sacred Valley. All of my experiences whether good or bad will remain with me forever and I've learned from them. The most

significant thing I've learnt is that the world is a much more beautiful place than we realise and we must do anything we can to protect it.

