

CONSERVATION IN PERU: THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONNECTIONS TO SOCIAL JUSTICE

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The afternoon heat and humidity had already set in as I slipped on my knee-high rubber boots, preparing for my afternoon of work. After weeks of anticipation, we were finally going to transport a group of six spider monkeys from captivity to a pre-release cage from which they would be soon released into the wild. As the only rescue center in Peru, the Taricaya Rescue Center has spearheaded an effort to reintroduce the spider monkey into the wild after over thirty years of their extinction in this region due to hunting and loss of habitat. That afternoon, I was fortunate enough to be a part of the release of the second group of spider monkeys released by Taricaya. This required hiking four kilometers through the rainforest with the weight of a large monkey resting on my shoulders. The successful release and subsequent monitoring of these monkeys not only demonstrated that captive monkeys can be re-released into the wild, but it also represented a small step toward greater environmental conservation of this region of Latin America.

Leading this movement in Peru is the Taricaya Rescue Center, situated along the Madre de Dios River, a main waterway leading to Bolivia and eventually Brazil. As the site of my service, Taricaya consists of an ecological reserve and an animal rescue center. It lines a region environmentally devastated by gold mining, hunting, and logging. There are few regulations on these industries, particularly mining, because the people in this region fervently protest any governmental attempts at regulation. In many senses, this outcry is with good reason since there are few economic opportunities and limited access to education in this region. Yet the growth of the mining, drilling, hunting, and logging industries is having very tangible, negative consequences on the environmental well-being of the rainforest which provides such an abundance and diversity of natural resources.

This summer, I spent six weeks living and learning in this region. I slept in a small hut at Taricaya, almost two hours by boat to the nearest town. In addition to the preparation and release of the spider monkey group, my work also consisted of caring and feeding for the various animals at the center, helping nearby farmers harvest their crops, and assisting with various research projects with birds, bats, insects, and sustainable agriculture. Whether carrying bags of gravel on my back for a new jungle path, wading in knee-deep mud to repair various bridges, or using a machete to clear plots of land to begin a new eco-farm, each day I was able to see the physical results of my time and energy.

In addition to the manual labor I performed, I also learned about Peruvian culture and conservation in Latin America, as well as built relationships with both the local staff and foreign volunteers. I witnessed the interconnectivity of social justice – the ways in which environmentalism and conservation are inextricably linked to issues surrounding poverty,

education, health care, racism, and indigenous and women's rights. I saw tangible connections to my own coursework as a minor in Poverty, Justice, and Human Capabilities, renewing my dedication to both my studies and work as an activist.

At Taricaya, I also interacted with tourists who came to visit the animals and grappled with the complexity of the "eco-tourist" movement, including both its costs and benefits to the environment and local culture. I found myself reflecting on my own privilege to have the opportunity to live in the rainforest and to learn about the issues surrounding conservation when many Peruvians never even have the opportunity to visit the wonder that exists in their own country. I remained critical of my own presence and the presence of many foreigners at Taricaya, including staff and volunteers. From the gas spilled into the river on the boat trips to town, to the heaps of plastic bottles and trash we accumulated at the center (with no recycling program), to the implicit "colonizing"/"civilizing" effects of spreading our culture and "values" around the globe, the positive difference being made by the Taricaya team also required a critical lens to view the resulting negative consequences of our presence in the rainforest despite the benefits of our presence.

As I reflect on my time in Peru, I really cannot express the immense gratitude I feel for being afforded this opportunity. Each day represented a new challenge and a new experience. Living without electricity and often without running water altered my perspective on my life outside of the rainforest. The time I spent "unplugged" from my life back in the US allowed me to be immersed in my life in Peru and truly invest in the relationships I was building and the work I committed to perform. The experiential knowledge I gained and service I performed in Peru will continue to influence my work at Rice as I enroll in courses on conservation and remain involved in the environmental movement in Houston.

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