**Laidlaw Programme Leadership in Action (LIA) Reflection**

A reflective report is required after each summer period (by 20th September). Once submitted we will ask you to post onto the Laidlaw Network (without your project leader comments if you wish).

This should be supplied as a Word document. Interesting photographs directly related to your LIA project or scholarship are encouraged and should be inserted into the body of the word document, not supplied separately.

You are expected to write a detailed and thorough report; which should be around ca 2000-3000 words.

Scholars should include a description of the project, the stakeholders, the experience, the leadership learnings, the impact and how it will be sustained. You should further include lessons that you have learnt about being immersed in an unfamiliar community / environment in need. You should include all of the following points but it is not limited to these

- **the project/placement you have conducted during this period.**
- **how has the project you have been undertaking been impactful or important?**
- **what impact has the LIA project had on you? Have you achieved the SMART goals as set out at the beginning of the project? (please give examples of how these SMART goals have been achieved)**
- **what leadership skills do you believe you have gained/demonstrated during the LIA period? (please refer to the leadership attributes below)**
- **what activities you've been involved in to disseminate your project, including but not limited to attending conferences, producing posters, and promotion of the project and programme**
- **include elements of the cultural experiences differences you have learned about**
- **what are your future career or educational plans? Have these changed during your time as a scholar? (If so please explain why).**

Please note: This is NOT a technical research report. Scientific reports with a covering note cannot be accepted.

This report will need comments from your supervisor/placement manager and is to be signed off by both you and your supervisor/placement manager before submission.

If you have any problems or queries please contact the Laidlaw Programme Team, ugresearch@leeds.ac.uk

## Scholar

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|---|---|
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| Title of LIA Project: | Back to Source |

When I suggested my plan to go to the Amazon, I could not have fathomed how personally impactful my trip would be. Naively I thought it would simply be a great opportunity to learn more about ecology, a field that I had the pleasure of experiencing in my research project last summer. Once again, I am overwhelmingly grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation and it's Leeds-based team for putting me in the extremely privileged position to set foot on what I consider to be sacred land, the Amazon rainforest. I am indebted to the ecologists, cooks and handymen of the Manu Learning Centre for so passionately teaching me about their work, their culture and their language; thank you for welcoming me into your community. And finally, I have been deeply moved by the compassion, kindness and friendship offered to me by my fellow volunteers. I have felt supported and encouraged on each step of this path, which has left me changed for good.

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### ACT I: Beginnings

#### The Mountains

At the Peruvian border, I declared my trip would last 43 days. The words 'forty-three days' left heavy on my tongue. Although the dread of such a mammoth quest sank deep in my core, I must admit that my head was swimming with excitement.

Our journey began in Cusco, the sacred city of the Incas and the conquest of the Spaniards. Cusco is situated within the Andes mountains, much higher above sea level than my river-dwelling hometown. The environment was harsh. The sun was scolding, yet the shadows were icy. The thin altitude left us breathless. It was in these conditions, with jet lag and altitude sickness synergising against me, that I met my fellow volunteers at a quaint hostel close to the city centre. Our time in Cusco was brief, serving only to acclimatise us to the high altitudes and prepare for our two-day journey into the jungle. We enjoyed a brief tour of the city by an ecologist who would be accompanying us to the research station, and checked we had all we would need at the station. Before we knew it, it was 04:00 AM on the day of our journey to the Amazon. With heavy eyes, we hauled our bags into a minivan, then took our seats. It was time to descend from the mountains and enter the jungle below.

#### The Jungle

The thing about long journeys is that time begins to warp. I had decided to take advantage of the lack of phone signal by spending my time on the minivan totally unplugged. No music, no book, no entertainment. Beneath the tires gravel crumbled and gnawed, whilst I fervently soaked up the changing world around me. Stark and golden cliffs melted into fluffy greens. Trees grew taller and swayed in a tentative

breeze; the Earth was breathing. Without me noticing, the sun crept down into its Western blanket, and we arrived at our first camp in the cloud forest.

In the cloud forest lodge, I had the first taste of my new life. A simple structure made of bamboo with a communal space at one end, and rows of bedrooms along each side. As I put my things down onto the bed, only now realising how tired I had grown, I thought about all the firsts I was experiencing that night, as small as sleeping in a mosquito net. But my weary mind was full of anxieties about intruders and spiders and things that go bump in the night, though as I would soon learn, most things in the forest go bump in the night.

Our second day of travel to the research centre was one of my favourite days of the whole trip. As we descended ever deeper into the rainforest, the environment changed again. The air bore down hotter and heavier, and greenery encroached ever closer. Down, down, down we went until we reached the river Madre the Dios, the mother of God. Madre de Dios, although in the Amazon rainforest, is not itself an Amazon River. The water is a blue-green and rocks line the shore, for it is an Andean River, descending from the mountains as we had done. This was our final obstacle to reach the research centre. Currents picked up where two river veins met which was skilfully handled by our boatmen.

**The Manu Learning Centre**

The first few days at the MLC live in my memory as a fever dream. On our very first day, whilst being given a tour of the camp, an ecologist crept around the corner whispering about capuchins in the trees. Eyes wide, we followed in silent step behind him and looked upon our first monkey returning our stare. There were so many wonders to explore. A perpetual glint of rainbow wings fluttered in our eyeline, blurs of green lizard skin scurried across the gravel paths, and birds squawked and screamed and sang overhead. Within the research centre, little treasures, parrot feathers and mammal skulls lined the bookcases filled with books left from volunteers' past. And here I stood – present – feeling the weight of this place. Time melted into a singularity, and I was simply another passerby.

The Manu Learning Centre (MLC) sits within the buffer zone of the Manu National Park. The Manu National Park is 17,000 $km^2$ of untouched primary rainforest teeming with life and protected by the Peruvian government. Although this may seem substantial, the national park makes up only a fraction of the 5.5 million $km^2$ of Peruvian Amazon rainforest, which is of course home to a myriad of tropical species, but also 5% of the Peruvian population. Due to the rainforest's wealth of resources, including rubber and minerals, it is under threat by illegal farming and mining operations. The effects of reforestation on biodiversity are measured through various surveys, which aim to capture the temporal and spatial distribution of mammals, reptiles, and butterflies. Surveys are undertaken on the trail systems which span several kilometres of harsh jungle terrain.

The sun set on our first day, and the reality of this new situation began to dawn on me. We sat at a long communal table, illuminated by candles, and ate our meal consisting of something-and-rice. The sounds of the rainforest were at once fascinating, but disconcerting. Moths flew into the candles and sometimes into our food. All our senses were on high alert, which is perhaps why the jug of unknown juice commanded our attention. This night, the juice was sweet and refreshing, but as I would learn nothing in the forest, not even juice, is predictable.

## ACT II: Relinquished control!

### The Trails

Each time we entered the interior of the rainforest we followed a trail. The trails flowed with the forest, accepting the rooted steps and the fallen trees. The entrance to the trails is steep and unforgiving; a harsh initiation to the energy the forest would tax us each time we entered its labyrinth. The trails were thin and intertwined, littered with slippery puddles, and twisted roots. Each wrong step we made became immediately obvious through the thin soles of our wellie boots, occasionally followed by a splash or a thud. Our clothes became drenched in sweat, which is a sensation I had little patience for in my everyday life. These elements were frustrating (not to mention all the insects buzzing around your ears, too), but this was only the journey to the survey location, so we found ways to occupy our minds and keep morale up. This often came in the form of conversation. It was on these long walks that I learnt about my fellow volunteers and the staff. Why were they here? What did they hope to gain from this experience?

I learnt that most volunteers were here to gain some perspective, having finished their bachelor's degrees, or taking a career break. Some were simply there to admire the wildlife. I began to wonder why I was there. I began to wonder why we were all driven to travel halfway across the world to find something within ourselves.

Upon reaching our destination, our work began. Most of the time we were conducting surveys and identifying fauna that crossed our paths, however maintenance was also an important part of our jobs. Maintenance could look like clearing the trails with machetes, demanding strength, and observation, lest you cut into a wasp net. It could also be setting up butterfly nets with a slingshot, requiring patience and accuracy.

At the beginning, it felt like the forest was taking a lot from me; a sacrifice or a trial to enter its realm, but I was rewarded with the awe I felt watching a group of monkeys swing passed and curiously gaze down at us, or holding giant blue morpho butterflies. I silently wished for the forest to deem me worthy and one day welcome me as though I had always belonged there.

### The Bat and the Tapir

When the night had fallen, the forest shifted. The camp was claustrophobic, yet infinitely vast. A perimeter of inky shadows shrouded our huts and the echoes of the forest transformed unnoticed. The bugs continued to hum, but new guttural sounds emerged. I found myself hurrying towards people and light, in fear of the unknown. As I crossed the threshold of the commodore, it struck me that I was holding the mask I present to my friends and family of a palatable young woman. Perhaps out of guilt for my fear of the dark, I vowed in that moment to approach my new friends in a new, more authentic light.

The forest was not finished with me by the time my eyes grew heavy with sleep. My sleep was fractured by intensely realistic and detailed nightmares, my deepest fears boiling over and committing my heart to a race.

'Look at your fears,' the forest whispered.

The forest was purging me. Once my pulse was back under control, a new fear arose. What was that scratching noise? What is that swooping noise? And why is it so close to my head?! In this moment, unsafe in my inner world and feeling increasingly unsafe

in my bed, I let out a faint call to my roommate, who said she couldn't hear a thing. Perhaps they were mice in the straw roofs, she suggested. I tried to go back to sleep.

Despite the wonder of discovering that you can now identify several monkey and bird species by their call, the novelty of the situation began to wear thin. Our days were repetitive, and I grew weary of embarking on the trails. Still, I tried to find gratitude in every moment, and I found a lot of it embedded in community. It is often lost on us when we live in large civilisations that humans enjoy their success as a species due to our highly social nature. Through open conversation and genuine kindness, the heaviness dissolved, and I could enjoy the forest once more.

**The Breaking Point**

Cracks in our collective enthusiasm revealed themselves after we visited the local town of *Salvacion*. We were there to learn more about a gardening project. Remote towns in the Amazon are often reliant on imports from larger towns, such as Cusco. This is detrimental not only to the environment, encouraging the construction of new, illegal road networks, but also for the local economy, stripping these towns of jobs and autonomy. Thus, a scheme was established in the town to educate and promote the use of gardens to harvest their own vegetables, and thereby giving local families more control over their nutrition and finances. As my LiA project focused on the effects of ecotourism on the environment and the local communities, this event was highly anticipated, but we were all left underwhelmed. With no explanations or introductions, we arrived at a family's house, where we weeded an obviously unused allotment. We did not have any contact with the family, and left feeling used and confused.

From here on, I began to feel the organisation I had booked through had oversold the experience, highlighting a key issue with voluntourism. By marketing these experiences as a commodity, the volunteer becomes a customer, and therefore extends to them certain privileges. Many organisations, such as Crees Manu, depend upon voluntourism to continue and disseminate their important research, giving them incentive to twist the truth about the work volunteers are expected to do.

After speaking to an ecology intern, I discovered that the MLC's own biogarden was essentially neglected despite its potential, pointing out a large arabica coffee tree.

'This tree is ready to be harvested', he explained, 'we could be harvesting our own coffee'.

Hoping to lead by example and instigate impactful change, I volunteered to help harvest and process the beans into coffee. By the end of the day, everyone wanted to get involved.

Despite feeling satisfied that I had taken control of the situation, a volunteer reminded me of our split identity as a customer. He had emailed the booking company on behalf of the group with grievances about the false advertisement of the project, including not being in the national park itself. Having previously mentioned to him a small line in the introduction leaflet quoting an excursion to the national park as $450 each, he suggested compensation for this trip. To our surprise, they agreed to pay the full amount. Within the span of three days, we had organised ourselves and arranged our travel to the national park.

## ACT III: Flying the Nest

### The National Park

Our renewed hope in response to the trip quickly vanished. The evening before departure, we gathered in the commodore under the rare flicker and buzz of electric lights for a briefing. Our guide, a photographer who spent stints at the research centre, was to be our guide. He informed us that, regrettably, our journey would mostly be by car as the river was too low for the boats.

'The Romero lodge has also not been maintained since COVID,' he told us, as the family who lived there moved away. With these seeds of doubt nestled in our mind, we prepared for the long journey ahead.

With almost a month of mental resilience training behind us, we persevered through our journey, enjoying new colours, shapes and sounds as we traversed deeper into the labyrinth. But nothing in the forest lasts forever, not even the heat.

A Friaje silently drifted over us, as a ship floats on a windless sea. A light fog settled on the road and the moist air was dead still. For the first time in weeks, the forest was quiet. A dull, cold pain sank into my bones. The cold front was to last our entire trip.

When we reached the river leading into the park, we finally transferred on to a boat. The water was now brown and the currents weaker – an Amazonian River. Our boat journey was long, making it to our camp just before nightfall. Due to the lack of maintenance our showers were biting cold, but the lodgings were comfortable.

Although the trail systems around camp were overgrown and therefore unusable, hope was still alive for our time on the river. As I sat in several layers of clothes, I kept my expectations low, and enjoyed the sunrise over the river. Densely packed trees fought for space on the bank and spilt over, forming natural ramps to the water's edge. The earth was a vibrant red, indicating the richness of the soil that laid the foundation of all life in the ecosystem. Our guide directed us to look at various birds, explaining their hunting or feeding mechanisms. Suddenly we heard a call from behind. 'Tapir,' our boatsman shouted. Just ahead of us, a tapir's head bobbed above the water. The engines were killed, and we watched with bated breath as it swam towards us. Within arm's reach, he passed then took his leave on the bank. The sun continued to climb up the sky, antagonising the Friaje just enough to encourage capybaras, caimans, and monkeys to the riverside. Our day had turned out better than anyone had anticipated.

'Not so fast,' the forest answered. 'Remember you are not in control'.

A log under the water struck the underside of the boat and partially amputated the engine. Now we were stuck, and the backup engine did not seem to be functional. But our problems did not end there; it was getting dark, and we were at the mouth of a no-contact tribe's territory. The chilling embrace of the Friaje was intoxicating, taking every inch of my willpower to suppress and ignore. As we inched closer to camp through hand-paddling and strategic engine use, I gazed up at the perfect night sky, picking out constellations. I felt lucky to be there at all, even if to be stranded on a boat for the next nine hours.

Although I was trying to remain positive about our accumulative poor situations, the final day had broken me. A different group of tourists were arriving to share dinner with us, but when the food arrived, there was a stark difference in quality and presentation. With the same cook and the same ingredients, I wondered why we had been given

lower quality food all this time. Upon talking to their tour guide, I also began to wonder why our guide seemed so ill-prepared in comparison.

Our return to the research centre was sombre, an air of exhaustion and vague disappointment lingered in the minivan. It was during the seven-hour car journey that I decided the forest had offered everything it had to give me. With a heavy heart, I made the decision that I would return to Cusco with two other volunteers and continue my travels elsewhere in the Inca empire.

'One last thing,' the forest called.

It was my final survey before leaving the next day. A night walk to the furthest trail. As if by divine reckoning, the instant we had finished the survey, light filled the gloomy sky and the clouds let out a long, deep grumble. The rain was unrelenting, and the light faded fast. We raced down the hill with care to take over under denser foliage. Just as we approached ever closer, one last obstacle stood before us. A tree struck by lightning blocked our path. The ecologist leading us began to carve out a new path with the machete.

'Remember there is always another way out,' the forest lectured.

'I know,' I answered.

**The Goodbyes**

There is a tradition at the MLC to throw rocks besides the boat of those leaving the programme. Giggles erupted as interns and ecologists attempted to throw the largest rocks possible in our direction, leaving us soaked by the Madre de Dios, a clumsy baptism. I like to think that the size of the rocks is testament to the strong bonds we had formed at the camp.

For the forest, our presence was an insignificant blip on its timeline, but for me I was changed. As I gazed out at the forest and its brilliant blue sky for the last time, I thought about all that I had gained. I felt bolder, more decisive. I felt grounded by the deep connections I had formed in that small familial place. As for my fears, I do not think they will ever leave, but the next time I am facing Dread, I will greet it with a knowing smile.

Returning to Cusco was a shock to the system. So quiet, so cold, so exposed. It took a few days to reacclimatise to the altitude. In the meantime, we took advantage of all the comforts of modern life; a hot shower, a lack of bats, a menu to choose from.

Our final days together were filled with visits to archaeological and geological sites. First, we traversed the mountains on horseback to the Devil's Balcony, an Inca site used by nobility for ayahuasca ceremonies. It was – and still is – believed that ayahuasca cleanses the soul, revealing your fears or opening a portal to ancestral wisdom. Rulers would sit in this cave and emerge through a narrow crack in the cliffsides, reborn and cleansed. We hiked a peak to see the crystalline waters of the Humantay lagoons, which are thousands of years old and provide economic value to the local Quechua communities through tourism. Finally, we rode quadbikes to the Moray agriculture site and the Maras salt mines. The Moray site is a testament to the ingenuity of the Incas, who carved terraces into the ground, creating microenvironments for their produce to grow in. Consequently, Peru enjoys 3000 native potato species and several hundred quinoa species. The Maras salt mines are naturally occurring salt deposits that have been farmed by the same families for

generations, providing much of the salt found in Cusco and its surrounding regions. By observing natural phenomena, the Inca produced some of the most profound technologies still in use today.

As our adventures were taking place, a bittersweet note loomed above us as we sequentially said goodbye. Eventually there were only two of us left, and now it was my time to say goodbye. At 04:00 AM, I woke up prepared to leave for my last adventure. My last friend woke with me for our final farewell – the most painful one for last. And then I left, taking everything with me for my final test; the Salkantay trail.

**The Trek**

The Salkantay trail is a four-day long trek starting in the Sacred Valley mountains, descending into the rainforest, and finishing at Machu Picchu, covering some 70 km. It is notoriously challenging.

I sat in the front on the drive to the start of our hike, my heart and bones more tired than I had expected. Perhaps it was not a good idea to finish my trip with such a mammoth task.

The first day was a warmup, though I think the guide and I have different concepts of that term. It was difficult, physically, and mentally, but I could hear the forest in the distance willing me to push.

'Remember all you have learnt,' it called.

By the time the sun had set, the icy mountain wind was seeping through my clothes, but then I looked up. The Milky Way, our galaxy, stared down at me, and suddenly I felt at ease. No matter how far away I am from home and friends, the Earth and its sky will always be there. I was exactly where I needed to be.

We woke early to take breakfast and hit the road once more. I opted to go up the mountain by horseback, wanting to soak in the surroundings without physical strain. The air was biting cold, my legs numb and stiff. At the peak, the other side of the mountain descended into that familiar green blanket. I hiked down the mountain hungry for the warm forest air.

In the forest once again, we visited a local coffee farm and a hot spring, breaking up our trek. Refreshed, we began to walk once more. The trail was beautiful, steep mountains protruded from the Earth, shrouded in mist. Like pilgrims we walked the length of the train tracks until, at last, we reached *Aguas Calientes*, a town just outside of Machu Picchu. In the morning, we would be in the ancient citadel.

Machu Picchu was built under the instruction of the 9$^{th}$ Inca ruler, Pachacuti, who aimed to create a sacred land for nobility to rule over the Empire. Its construction took all of 80 years, yet it was inhabited for only 40 years. The ascent to Machu Picchu is no less that 1600 steps built by the Incas themselves and I can attest that every single step was its own trial. The past six weeks had affirmed to me that my body, mind and spirit were far stronger than I could have imagined. I pushed until at last I gazed upon the citadel that had sat untouched for centuries.

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My trip was over before I knew it. Each day had been long, yet six weeks had flown by. At my airport gate, I thought back on everything I had accomplished. I had not only survived but thrived in some of the harshest environments and enjoyed the abundance

of the Amazon rainforest, which sustains all life on planet Earth. I left my LiA changed, with better appreciation for the interconnection of all life on Earth and deeper gratitude for those in my life. I have gained insight from all walks of life on the hardships I could not fathom yet found common hopes and fears in each person I have had the pleasure to meet.

Life is unpredictable on a micro and macro scale; I appreciate and embrace that now. As I write this report, I am three weeks into my industrial placement year at my dream company. Although it is a far cry from the natural ebb and flow of the forest that I miss so dearly, I carry its spirit, Pacha Mama as the Incas called it, with me always. She reminds me of my worth and my strength. I have started my role with confidence and sociability. Every day that is to follow, I owe to Pacha Mama and to all the people who have helped me along the way.

## **Project Leader**

Please comment on your scholar's LIA period, what you consider to be your scholar's strengths and which leadership attributes (please refer to the leadership attributes below) you feel your scholar has demonstrated and is particularly skilled in. You could also identify areas which the scholar can develop further.

I feel that Amarni achieved a lot of personal growth through her time at the Manu Learning Centre in Peru. When I first met her in Cusco, she seemed apprehensive about stepping into the unknown, into a strange new environment with people she didn't know. However, she quickly opened herself up to new friends and surrendered herself to the jungle, showing an appreciation and respect for the beautiful environment she was in and the work we do at the MLC.

Amarni showed a growing ability to navigate new and foreign situations, using this to build strong relationships with her fellow volunteers facing the same challenges, as well as the staff at the MLC. She also displayed a healthy ability to assess her own knowledge, limitations, and preferences, communicating these to people around her to avoid any misunderstandings and fostering a culture of honesty within her group. Amarni has a strong intellectual ability, but she could speak up more often when he has something to add to the conversation and turn some of her strong ideas and contributions into action.

It was a pleasure to have Amarni as part of our program at the Crees Manu, we wish her the best in her studies and hope she continues to use this opportunity to her best advantage.

Signature of Scholar *Amarni Newman* Date: 20/09/2024

Signature of Project Leader *Tim McGrath* Date: 20/09/2024

Leadership Attributes

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|---|
| Able to lead without authority |
| Able to convey purpose and build coalitions |
| Cultural intelligence and capacity for empathy |
| Honestly assess own knowledge/leadership style/preferences |
| Knows own limitations and acts accordingly |
| Learns continually |
| Speaks and writes clearly and confidently |
| Able to listen with understanding |
| Uses digital connectivity |
| Makes effective decisions in complex environments |
| Seeks out and fosters innovation and creativity |
| Strong intellectual ability |
| Turns ideas into action |
| Builds relationships and networks |
| Works collaboratively and across boundaries |
| Uses emotional intelligence to achieve this |
| Capitalises on the power of diversity |
| Able to navigate new and foreign situations |
| Uses this to build relationships and networks |
| Has energy and impact |
| Makes things happen |
| Able to analyse data and interpret results |
| Able to work and think independently |
| Prioritises activities and manages own time |