SIX WEEKS IN THE PERUVIAN AMAZON

A summer of conservation, collaboration, and creation

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WHO I WORKED WITH

For my LiA, I went to the **Los Amigos Biological Research Station** based in the Madre de Dios region in Peru. This is one of the biological stations of Asociación para la **Conservación de la Cuenca Amazónica (ACCA)**, a Peruvian non-profit organization. Since the start of ACCA's operation in 1999, it has pioneered a multitude of initiatives to **empower** indigenous populations, **protect** over 5 million hectares of the Peruvian Amazon, and **facilitate** research collaboratives to find innovative solutions to conservation.

Neighbouring the illegal mining hotspot, La Pampa, the Los Amigos biostation is directly at the frontier of conservation. Through the efforts of ACCA, the **Los Amigos Conservation Concession (LACC)** was created in 2001 to protect 146,000 hectares of the rainforest. LACC was the first in Peru to be recognized by the United Nations and is also responsible for successfully safeguarding the area from forest degradation (e.g., logging, illegal mining, and hunting).

I chose to come to Los Amigos because of its research-driven approach to biodiversity monitoring, geographic location, and the access to nature directly from the biostation.

GOAL 1

The first goal was to design **educational and promotional material for social media platforms** to help **raise awareness** of the need to protect Peru's biodiversity.
My LiA partner, Murray Purkis, and I shadowed different researchers, carried out interviews, and made sure to get as much footage as possible of all the activities happening at the station. The content made includes but is not limited to daily highlights, funny animal moments, infographics, and quizzes.
The idea behind making social media content is to promote the station's projects to a variety of audiences, from researchers to tourists to university courses, with the aim being to disseminate knowledge in an engaging way.
Even though our LiA has ended, we will continue making social media content for the biostation.

GOAL 2

The second goal was to **create a museum collection which can be used by station visitors to learn about the diversity of local flora and fauna.**
To prepare the exhibit, I required a whole load of bleach, a lot of scrubbing, and a lot of patience. My job was to clean each and every skull, and then to identify which animal it belonged to. To clarify, all skulls were found in nature. My favorite part of this process was the conversations it sparked with fellow station members, as I often referred to the experts there to make sure I am not jumping to any wrong conclusions. I hope that this collection can act as a library of the natural world.
This project took me by surprise and yet, it was a pleasure seeing the enthusiasm with which the station's staff and visitors examined the wide range of skull specimens available, from a black caiman to a paca.

GOAL 3

The third goal was to **produce a dataset based on fieldwork and write a structured guide for future volunteers to allow for continuity beyond our project.**
Instead of one dataset, we created two to which future volunteers can either add on to or use as a template for other projects. The first was a list of all the publications that were written using data collected at the station which will be used as a running archive of all the exciting research that occurs here. The second was the levels of mercury present in soil and termite samples along a gradient that we had collected ourselves as a part of a researcher's project there. This research will be used to inform future policies on how to mitigate mercury getting into the ecosystem.
The volunteer guide we have created contains details relevant to daily life at the station as well as useful advice for future projects they might want to contribute to.

CONCLUSIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Coming to the Los Amigos Biostation has been a transformative experience I will never forget. The mornings started with a crescendo of titi monkeys, the afternoons were spent trekking through the difficult terra firme and floodplain terrains in high humidity, and the evenings were the time to watch the sun descend below the horizon and the stars come out. Apart from the natural beauty, what I treasured most are the conversations and knowledge I gained from the incredible team of scientists. With my degree being primarily in molecular biology, this LiA forced me to step out of my comfort zone, both mentally and physically, and venture out into the field. These 6 weeks have shown me that I want to continue working alongside nature and fighting for its existence.

I want to express my warmest gratitude to the team at the Los Amigos Biostation for making us feel the most welcome during our stay and especially to Dan Nicholson, my amazing supervisor, for his guidance and support throughout our project. I would also like to say a huge thank you to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for their generous funding that has made this experience possible.