

Learning from the Middle of the World: Discovering Leadership In Ecuador

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PINTAG AMARU



Pintag is a community on the outskirts of the capital city, Quito. The organization we worked with, Pintag Amaru, was dedicated to restoring old cultural traditions and landscapes before agriculture took over. They did this through teaching permaculture and partaking in Children of the Living Forest School, which intertwines environmental education with indigenous knowledge.



LAGO AGRIO

Lago Agrio is a city directly affected by the actions of the Texaco oil corporation, now part of Chevron. After leaving Ecuador in 1992, Texaco also left environmental devastation in the form of petroleum and waste pools and heavily polluted water. To this day, there are regions of Ecuador facing long-term adverse health consequences, such as cancer, due to Texaco's actions. In Lago Agrio, we went on the Toxic Tour with the Union de Afectados por Texaco, led by Donald, who had spent decades demanding justice for his community and all those affected.



CUYABENO



Cuyabeno, the "perfect" tourist destination only accessible by canoe, boasted access to much of the Amazon's diverse wildlife and provided our group with the opportunity for ample pictures and sightseeing. Compared to the communities we stayed with, it seemed shallow and curated.



MUSHULLAKTA



Mushullakta's rural indigenous community focused on fostering permaculture and reducing the damage done by commercial agriculture as well as partaking in Children of the Living Forest School, which focused on indigenous traditions. Mushullakta is a close-knit, small community with communal values. It is not uncommon to see children playing soccer in the large field, to be asked to go swimming in the river or to be welcomed into any home.



THE SELF



Depicted to the left is a painting by renowned Ecuadorian artist Oswaldo Guayasamin, depicting a woman with her hands raised in what I consider peace or prayer. It was painted during his last era, the Era of Tenderness, and it struck me immediately. It would not take me until the end of our stay in Ecuador to understand why.

Being in Ecuador was the closest I had felt to nature in years and the freest I felt from US-centric ideals of productivity and utility. Through long hikes, poems by waterfalls and first-person observation of how commercialized agriculture and pollution affected pristine, rural communities, I felt more connection with the grass below me and the sun above me than I could have imagined. In doing so, I felt more open to connecting with the communities we interacted with, and being willing to learn.

The



THE COMMUNITY

The communities of Ecuador, particularly Pintag and Mushullakta, where we stayed the longest, were drastically different in some ways but remarkably similar in others. A common denominator I found in both was laughter. It was imbued in every activity. The care with which they welcomed us, accommodated us, and showed us their traditions was something I will always be grateful for. They emphasized leadership values that were centered around connection, communication, and ancestral knowledge, marking a stark departure from the leadership I had grown used to in the US.



One moment that struck me was during a day picking out coffee beans in Mushullakta. We spent hours methodically sifting through beans, and while I was growing restless, our facilitator plowed on with a quiet dedication. Occasionally, others would stop by to help. During midday, the children of the Forest School stopped by with fresh juice and handmade snacks. That day, I found leadership in community unity, in perseverance and in small beans of coffee, something that those in the US will rarely even touch despite their coffee consumption, yet requires so much care.

CRITICAL MOMENTS

The mecheros in Lago Agrio, positioned close to residential areas. They burn natural gas that could be used, but is instead wasted. Despite mandates to end this practice, they continue to burn endlessly. They are a relic of an era of petroleum extraction that upended the lives of citizens that did not have the voice or power to oppose powerful international forces.



Contrasted with the natural beauty we saw in Pintag afterward, fostered by a respect for the land and a focus on regenerative practices, we saw how Ecuador is a country of stark contrast. Where towers are burning perpetually, there is also rainbows and vistas of green. We saw how communities in Ecuador are healing from the past, re-learning lost practices and teaching the youth, their future, how to carry on practices that continue to repair their environments and communities.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Ecuador taught me how to approach an experience with an open mind, to work to put aside learned values that I've had instilled in me. With my interest in population health, I never want to forget the Toxic Tour and the emotions it imparted. I see now, more than ever, how important it is to know the communities who are most relevant to large-scale policy or health issues before taking any action. I cannot ever understand the trauma experienced by a community, but I do hope to continue to learn from them and become someone that can use my own experiences to amplify that of others.



In the context of healthcare, I hope to bring with me the intercultural skills I learned in Ecuador. In Pintag, adapted to different methods of communication with my host mother despite a large language barrier. I learned to problem-solve through my experiences in Ecuador, even if I often struggled with a language barrier or a cultural gap. Some of the populations more vulnerable to unstable healthcare access are immigrants or racial minorities. As a future healthcare professional, I hope to bridge barriers to access and understanding for vulnerable populations due to a cultural mismatch and foster an environment that can support patients of all backgrounds.

