

Leadership in Action in Ecuador

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IMPACT

Pachaysana works with — not for — communities, treating them as equal partners in decision-making. In Pintag, an Andean agricultural community just outside Quito, I helped Pachaysana support identity-based education, eco-tourism, seed banks, and the building of the “Píntag Amaru” ecovillage. In Mushullakta, a Kichwa Amazonian community, we helped lead efforts in reforestation, alternative education (through the *Children of the Living Forest School*), permaculture, and shifting away from monoculture and logging. Because I was there in those contexts, I saw firsthand how these initiatives are rooted in ancestral knowledge, ecological restoration, and community-defined visions of “development.”

From top to bottom: Poetry recitation and hiking in Pintag; Making a traditional Andean offering to Pachamama – “Mother Earth.”; Kichwa elder Jose Narvaez performing a cleansing ritual on me in front of a sacred tree; Face painting and preparing yuca in Cuyabeno.

GROWTH

Growing up Pakistani-American gave me two lenses: one for community and shared responsibility, one for independence and self-direction. In Ecuador, I learned to balance these values in practice, staying true to my moral compass while respecting the perspectives and dignity of others. I realized that ethical choices often require courage and reflection, and that across cultures, people share hopes, struggles, and resilience.

CONTEXT

On a toxic tour in Lago Agrio, I saw oil pits left behind by Chevron-Texaco’s drilling — black sludge seeping into soil that people still farm and drink from. Hearing the Amazonian locals describe generations of illness and displacement made environmental justice feel heartbreakingly tangible. It taught me that environmental disasters aren’t accidents. Rather, they’re built into global economic systems where imperialist and capitalist forces continue to concentrate wealth while distributing harm.

From top to bottom: The remnants of an 80s-era oil pit in the Amazon; Crossing a river during our tour; Driving to our last drilling site; Views of Cochasqui Archaeological Park; Holding a puppy of one of my students in Mushullakta.

PATH

Ecuador gave me a vivid sense of how interconnected environmental sustainability and labor rights are across the globe. Motivated by this, I plan to join the Peace Corps after graduation, where I can gain practical skills and deepen my understanding of community-led solutions. This experience will serve as a foundation for my goal of becoming a Foreign Service Officer, prepared to navigate global political systems while promoting equitable outcomes.

