

Leadership-in-Configuration in the Peruvian Amazon

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From New York City to the Peruvian Amazon, I immediately felt a massive change in the atmosphere when I first landed in Puerto Maldonado. Before Peru, I felt that I was still exploring my skills as a leader and what it means to be one. To explore such uncertainty in the Peruvian Amazon with new people, language, and area was an adventure. In Madre de Dios, I observed leadership as helping others, being patient, providing guidance, and most importantly being present. People thought about others and how it affected the environment and communities that surrounded them. For New York City, this was the opposite. People used unlimited resources and environment was the least of their worries.

Madre de Dios is a region where diverse biodiversity exists in plants, animals, and landscape. However, it is also one of the most threatened regions in Peru due to legal and illegal mining, natural resources extraction, deforestation, and poor agricultural practices (WWF, 2022). The following factors mentioned framed my LiA project and experience. Forest regeneration and reforestation here is a must to keep the biodiversity of the tropical rainforest alive and functioning.

For my LiA project, I participated as an intern at Alliance for a Sustainable Amazon (ASA). This is a non-profit organization that focuses on reforestation, conservation, and preservation of both plant and animal biodiversity. The research station is at Finca Las Piedras, Madre de Dios, Peru. My project specifically contributed to ASA's reforestation efforts. At ASA, I studied the three-way interaction between plant growth, sunlight exposure, and soil quality in the secondary forest with young Spiked Peppers trees. In this project, two sites were compared in

the secondary forest. Site A is near the research station in Finca Las Piedras, Madre de Dios, Peru. Meanwhile, Site B is the native food forest is the edge of the forest.

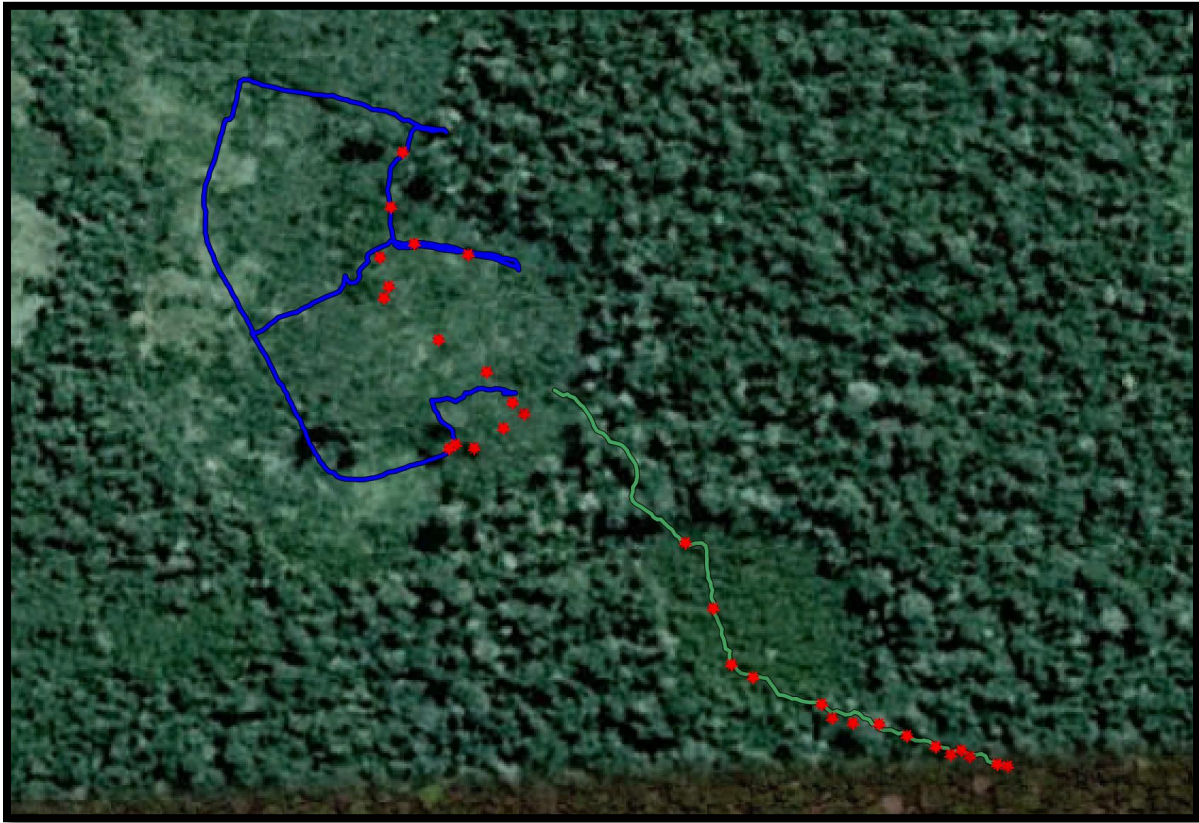


Figure 1. Tagged young Spiked Pepper trees (red) on two Secondary forest plots: Finca Las Piedras (blue) and Native Food Forest (green)

To investigate the difference in overall net growth of young trees, I tested pH, phosphorus, potassium and nitrogen content in soil and documented sunlight exposure with a lux meter, a way to measure light intensity. With those values, I identified patterns and relationships by measuring the average radius of tree canopy, circumference of tree canopy coverage, estimated maximum height of the trunk, average length and width of leaves, area of leaf, and estimated number of leaves. Moreover, I also took photographs of the surroundings to produce a narrative approach on nature photography by creating a Japanese hand-bound mock-up book that illustrated the importance of science communication through photographs and research activities.



Figure 2. The process of soil chemistry testing in the intern room

Handling between two projects allowed me to apply my strategic and consistency skills. Time management was the key component of my experience for a self-directed research project living in a field station. Most activities were guided by resident naturalists like walking in the Amazon rainforest in daytime and nighttime. Food was served at such a specific time. Breakfast is at 7:00 in the morning, lunch is at 1:00 in the afternoon and dinner is at 6:30 in the evening. Hence, I ate and woke up consistently every day. Power and internet were also conserved from 8:30 A.M. until 8:30 P.M. Therefore, managing enough working time for both projects was challenging, yet it was manageable. I had to learn to dedicate enough time to each project, workshops for interns, events, activities held by staff, and more importantly hobbies that fulfill personal mindfulness and creativity like journaling, sports, and reading (Schaetti et al., 2008). As much as I needed to be consistent and show up for my projects, I learned that being a leader isn't

all about the service that you do for your community, but it was also about showing up for yourself and attending to your emotions (Schaetti et al., 2008). Without adequate reflection and knowing yourself, it was hard to be there for others. That was the first primary lesson I had to learn. Being there for yourself as much as you do for others and the community you want to support.

Despite all the new routines and changes compared to unlimited resources I had back home in New York City, I was able to be more present with other interns, nature, staff members of ASA and especially myself. When you have limited resources, I realize you make sure to make something out of them like making activities with others such as birding, movie nights from people who have downloaded shows, walking trails, discovering new frogs to identify, reading, and many more. The more I became present in these spaces, the more I connected with others and myself. I became more present in the moments that were in front of me and learned to navigate research without fully relying on the internet but instead asking others and those with expertise. I feel more connected not only with others but my core values, nature, and especially myself. I was able to practice emotional regulation, time management, and the consistency of showing up for myself every day.



Figure 3. Photography in the rain with interns



Figure 4. Birding and photography with interns

My other leadership skills were seen through the physical demands of data collection and photography. Data collections were always timed from 11:00 A.M. until 12:00 P.M. and I had to be responsible for collecting my data around a set time. However, field work was never perfect. Weather was a problem due to friajes where sudden extreme wind and rain occupy the forest. I had to be deliberative when it came to weighing my options and adjusting data collection. Some days, I had to make sacrifices to perform data collection for another day to ensure my safety in the forest because of falling trees. Other days, I would enter the forest even if it's raining but only when wind isn't a problem. Hence, through data collection a lot were altered to adapt to situations I did not account for while planning.



Figure 5. Taking notes of sunlight exposure from 11:00 A.M. to 12:00 P.M.

On the other hand, one of my strongest leadership skills was being a relator. In a place so isolated with animals, nature, and nothing else but the community we built at the research station. Hence, I challenged myself to spend time with peers and staff members who only spoke Spanish. I managed to practice my Spanish even where embarrassing myself was a possibility. However, I engaged and acknowledge the ambiguity of the language and still attempted to participate in speaking Spanish (Schaetti et al., 2008). In the process, I learned more words when I spoke up and asked the staff questions. Furthermore, talking to peers allowed me to socialize, network, and bounce off each other's ideas for projects. Despite everyone's differences, I found my way in connecting by engaging with everyone else's difference as a bridge to communicate with one another. I was able to connect but also align and use the differences as new perspectives to my vision and values (Schaetti et al., 2008). Therefore, I also learned that differences are a way to explore unique qualities we may not have but others do. Being different from others is a good way to connect and learn as well.

Conversely, one of the leaders I look up the most who advocated for equality and highlighted that differences are what makes us unique and acceptable, Marthin Luther King Jr. (The King Center, 2022). From him, I learned leadership lessons about being a transformational leader and about believing in what we contribute to the community while communicating with them effectively (Barker, 2022). More importantly, Marthin Luther King Jr. was well known for his public speaking, and I learned as a leader that it is important to speak up about values we care for, problems that arise, and about thoughts that bother us. As noted by Marthin Luther King Jr. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (NAACP, 2022). If leaders never speak up for the community we serve, people won't feel heard or supported. As the traditional saying

suggests “Closed mouths don’t get fed” (St. Martin Caraïbes, 2024). In the end, we have a community that we can lean on and a community with supportive leaders.

In this analysis, I connected my leadership-in-action experience and Marthin King Luther King Jr. leadership skills as an additional lesson to my personal, professional, and academic well-being. After my summer internship, my interest in serving the community still stands. With my focus, majoring in Civil Engineering, I aim to consider environmental conditions and effects when it comes to making decisions for infrastructures. Hence, I prioritize being a leader who advocates for such UN SDG goals in Sustainable Cities and Communities, Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, Life on Land, and Climate Action.

With this independent research experience, I also understood that in the face of an unknown place, you must get to know it. By visiting multiple sites, I enhanced my observation, hearing, and identification skills. This is very helpful for Civil Engineering when it comes to visiting sites to conduct risk assessments. Understanding the environmental surroundings is also important for Civil Engineering to be aware and to be conscious if it is sustainable enough to avoid habitat destruction, threatened biodiversity, and heightened climate change. Other skills I’ve learned when conducting my independent research project were coding in R Studio, basic mapping skills in QGIS, soil chemistry, light distribution study, science communication, navigation through maps, tagging points, biology of plants, and time management. More importantly, I intend to serve communities that are in need and create a space where they feel like they belong and are welcome. I want my innovations to be a way for others to connect and spend time together even when conflicts arise. This way, my infrastructure is in conversation with people by being present for them. Hence, I strive to be that kind of engineer.

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