

# 100 Projects for Peace

## Final Report - Summer 2007

**Title: Creating Peace through Animals**

**School: Colby College**

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### **Project Summary:**

The project "Creating Peace through Animals" was conducted in the Chimborazo and Azuay provinces of Ecuador, between June 3 and August 15 of 2007. My goals were to improve the lives of the impoverished people of this region and to support a peaceful compromise between conservation and the need for development in a rural nation. During my time in Ecuador, I focused on two objectives: to repopulate Ecuador with more camelids (llamas and alpacas) and to work toward solving conflicts in Cajas National Park that dealt with an alpaca reintroduction program. Specifically, I wanted to maintain the steady population growth within Ecuador of these species by publishing a pamphlet to broaden and strengthen the knowledge of the people raising these animals, donate money to a credit program so that more animals could be purchased, provide animal husbandry assistance, and maintain an open demeanor so that people felt comfortable sharing their experiences with me, an unbiased moderator. With these small changes, I hoped to generate momentum on a broader scale by helping to revitalize lost traditions in the indigenous culture, conserve the endangered páramo grassland and cloud forests, and protect water resources by preventing erosion, all of which are possible through the reintroduction of native llamas and alpacas.

### **Project Results:**

I met all of the goals of the project, albeit with many interesting adventures along the way. In Chimborazo province, I worked with two organizations based in the city of Riobamba: Project Llamas (which is supported by the Roman Catholic Church) and the Llama Breeder Association of Ecuador "INTIÑAN". In connection with Project Llamas, I traveled on weekdays with two employees to the surrounding communities to tend sick animals and gave animal husbandry presentations. There, I spoke candidly with community members as to their opinions on the project, and was able to give direct suggestions and observations to Project Llamas (Figure 1). I also became a contributor to their weekly radio show dedicated to llama care, which reaches about 6,000 people in the area. During the eight-weeks that I participated in these shows, I discussed the importance of these animals to conservation, culture, nutrition, and education. In addition, I helped to teach classes to new llama owners and developed and enhanced the ecology portion of Project Llama's presentation. Because llamas and alpacas have been extirpated from these communities for more than 400 years, it is important to educate new owners in everything from camelid husbandry to economic opportunities. As a capstone to my time with the Project, I collaborated with a local veterinary technician to publish a 16 page pamphlet, in Spanish, which is being published for distribution throughout the southern region of Ecuador. I found that volunteering with a large organization such as the Catholic Church, which has significant amounts of influence in Ecuador, was at times a frustrating bureaucracy and that many suggestions fell on deaf ears. If I were to work with the same organization in the future, I would try to make more connections to the upper members of the hierarchy (such as the bishop) to help enact change.

To help repopulate Ecuador with camelids, I contributed more than \$4,000 to the Association "INTIÑAN", which gives credits for the purchase of llamas (Figure 2). Finding animals for sale proved to be one of the toughest parts of the project, because these animals are now highly valued to their owners. To aid my efforts, a personal contact in Ecuador donated 20 llamas and four alpacas, a gift worth over \$1,600 USD. The sale of the meat and fiber from these animals will help to pay for INTIÑAN's new development initiatives, such as a llama sausage project and cultural expositions. I also gave financial support to two young women at a local university who are conducting their thesis on llama sausage, and want to work with INTIÑAN to market their product. This was an exciting opportunity to contribute to the future of INTIÑAN while furthering the education of two women who will be the first people from their communities to graduate from college. Finally, I donated the remaining \$150 to repair a yarn spinning facility in time for the alpaca and llama shearing season, which is free to use for members of the Association.

To address the conflicts in Cajas National Park, I journeyed south by bus to the province of Azuay and the city of Cuenca. There I met with the park's superintendent, who welcomed me to travel with the park guards to visit the surrounding communities. We descended 2,500 meters by foot into three rural villages that were going to receive alpacas from the park free of charge. I traveled twice to the same communities, the first time with a younger park guard who met a lot of resistance from community members, then with a more experienced leader who was in charge of the alpaca project (Figure 3). Each time, I recorded my observations and talked with community members. Since I spoke with guards, the superintendent, and the villagers, I heard all sides of the issue. Afterwards, I met with the park guard in charge of the alpaca project to discuss both the positive and negative observations, from these trips. From this experience, I have learned that while both sides are making an effort at peace, this will be a decades-long struggle over land rights; only in the last several months have relations begun to warm between the park and the communities. However, it was reassuring to know that the administration was open to all suggestions and a stranger's interpretations, and to see that community members were willing to try to new ideas and have a stronger relationship with the park.

### **Implications:**

The next war will not be fought for nuclear rights, freedom of speech, or oil. The most precious commodity for life on earth is potable water, which is quickly disappearing as development accelerates. One way to reverse erosion and protect the sources of fresh water in Ecuador is to maintain the páramo grasslands, which act as a sponge to sequester both water and carbon. Indigenous Ecuadorians can live harmoniously with the environment by raising camelids, which are native to these areas, in place of cows, sheep, and pigs. The specially adapted feet and grazing habits of llamas and alpacas do not cause erosion, and because they thrive in intact páramo both the natural diversity and indigenous farmers can coexist peacefully. When conservation is a priority, sometimes the people that live in the area are ignored in the rush to save land from destruction. In the case of Cajas National Park, this approach left many villagers furious at the government and park officials when the only available grazing land was set aside for protection. To promote both conservation and a sustainable way of life, the park will introduce alpacas to the willing communities as an olive branch. Through this project the park and communities have had an unbiased assessment of what the problems are and possible solutions for a peaceful future. Also, more people have been introduced to these animals, more information is available to those who are interested, and three communities will receive more than 60 llamas, which will hopefully begin to replace cows as their population grows.

This project will continue to expand with time. The pamphlet, which was co-authored by an Ecuadorian university student, will remain in the hands of the project for future revision and republication. The donated animals from a previous contact will be fattened and slaughtered to provide income that will support future projects. I met with the new leaders of both the association INTIÑAN and Project Llamas, and am confident that both will move forward with new initiatives and ideas. Lastly, since the \$4,000 donated to buying llamas is lent out on credit, the donation will continue to give once the loan is repaid, so more animals can be purchased for the next community. There are many growth possibilities for the project, from international tourism to selling llama meat (the most nutritious meat of any domesticated animal) and yarn in the local market. Interested college and post-graduate students, especially veterinarians, are welcome and through the Round River Conservation Studies abroad program students will contribute to the success of this repopulation effort. I hope to expand the awareness of this issue at Colby, so that in the future students can travel to this region and support the work that is being done to help the indigenous people and the Ecuadorian flora and fauna.

This past summer cannot be described in two pages. I faced many challenges; mentally, personally, and physically working in Ecuador and found strength I did not know I had. I learned of the generosity of the Ecuadorian people, especially in the indigenous communities, and the challenges that face the nation and its citizens. I developed skills in animal husbandry, Spanish, accounting, social work, anthropology, and history in my journey, and was reminded every day of the advantages I have as a citizen of the United States. I learned how incredibly challenging it is to do business in a foreign country, to respect cultural norms even if they feel awkward, and why it is so important to shake hands, smile, and say thank you because in the end, the people of Ecuador were my teachers, mentors, and most importantly, friends.



**Figure 1: Christine Avena (left center) with the local children of Alao, while helping conduct a veterinary clinic day for their llamas. Chimborazo, Ecuador.**



**Figure 2: Community members from the village of Puchara walk their new animals home. The money for the loans to purchase the llamas was provided through the Kathryn Wasserman Davis 100 Projects for Peace program. Chimborazo, Ecuador.**



**Figure 3: Children play soccer in the town of Zhin Alto on the border of Cajas National Park before an environmental education class. This community is considering raising alpacas as a sustainable alternative to cows and sheep. Azuay, Ecuador.**