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Ecuador, Fall 2008

For fall term 2008, I interned in Ecuador with the Yanapuma Foundation. I learned about my project through the website [idealist.org](http://idealist.org), a great source for finding international volunteer and internship opportunities. The project consisted of finishing a map of an indigenous jungle community called Bua de las Tsachilas. The purpose was to give the community the map (it's the first one they have ever had) so that they may protect their land from encroaching "mestizos" (people with Spanish heritage) and also provide a basis for future reforestation and other environmental projects that will take place in the community. Basically, once this initial map was made, much needed development projects and basic public services can be more efficiently and effectively brought into this community.

When I arrived in Quito I soon went to the Yanapuma office to meet my coworkers and learn more about my project. All communication about the project was in Spanish which was challenging at first but became easier as time progressed. The language barrier was most evident in conversations relating to the computer software; terms like "file, archives, download, excel spreadsheet...etc" were tricky but eventually became intuitive. My main coworker was a young woman from Quito working on her thesis and she lived in the Bua community with me during my first week. I was basically continuing her work and she made it an easy transition for me and introduced me to everyone I needed to know. Her passion for the work definitely upped my confidence and enthusiasm for the project.

Overall, I spent the majority of my time living in Bua and using a GPS device to make the final measurements of several farms and of the perimeter of the community.

Every few weeks I went back into Quito to upload my data, do my laundry, and take a hot shower, and then I hopped back on the four hour windy bus ride back into the jungle. The switch in altitude was quite drastic which made for a scenic and impressive bus ride.

Back in the jungle, I lived in a raised platform hut with open doors and windows. I was fortunate to have a mosquito net because the bugs were unbearable. I went to bed at 8pm and woke up at 6am every morning. It felt great to live with the natural light and I was exhausted at the end of each day. Of course, I was lonely at times and struggled with language, food, bathing in the river, fear of being bit by a poisonous snake...but I became more comfortable each day and time began to pass too quickly.

The actual work consisted of trekking through the jungle for nearly 8 hours each day, avoiding said poisonous snakes and plants (I carried a snake bite kit with me), and marking points with the GPS. Luckily, I was accompanied by various community members while I made my way through the jungle; they were great guides and taught me about the medicinal plants and exotic fruits that we came across. My guides helped my stay safe by keeping me away from hornet's nests and stinging thorns on trees. The jungle is a complex environment shared by all sorts of species. In my short time there, I had numerous wildlife adventures which include being urinated on by bats and running from dangerous ant nests.

After finishing the GPS work for the farms in Bua, I set out to track the entire perimeter of the community. To ensure the perimeter was done correctly, 16 community members accompanied me on these days. It was a bit frustrating at times to have 16 people waiting around for me to take the GPS points but everyone was enthusiastic and patient. After six days we finished marking the perimeter and then I was off to Quito to

make the map in the Yanapuma office. The office work was quite a contrast to my jungle trekking but it was equally important. I gained experience working with programs ExpertGPS and ArcGIS and was excited to see a visual representation of the 1,356 points I had taken with the GPS device. The computer work went smoothly and the map was finished sooner than expected. Yanapuma plans to use the map in their funding and educational efforts with the Ecuadorian government.

My project was nicely concluded when I discovered that the Ecuadorian government is starting an initiative to fund GPS work across the country. This means that my work was desirable to the Ecuadorian government as well as useful to the Bua community. I feel that regardless of the projects that may now be possible because of my map, it is simply *necessary* to map this uncharted territory. No matter what comes from my work, Ecuador is further ahead in their initiative to map their country, free of charge.