

## Natütama Foundation - Summary of activities for 2020

Puerto Nariño had a particularly difficult year in 2020, not only because of the spread of the Covid-19 virus to Amazon indigenous groups, but also due to the fierce erosion of the river bank by the River Amazon. The small town has changed from being a protected site just up an Amazon tributary to receiving the full force of the main river, with the loss in mid-year of its main port and embarkation infrastructure. The Natütama Centre, which is just downriver of the town, also lost its port access, including steps and bridges. For the foreseeable future, this access will be unusable for much of the year and everyone will have to use the bridges connecting to Puerto Nariño behind the Centre.



Karina in the remains of the Natütama-Omacha port



The river bank by the tourist port of Puerto Nariño has broken up and is constantly slipping into the river. The Natütama port is just beyond this section. Local authorities have still not come up with a strategy to deal with the problem for 2021, when it is presumed that tourists will start returning to the Amazon.

We do not know how bad the flooding will be this year and whether the river will push back up the creek by the Centre. It is possible that in the future the Centre might have to be moved, which would be a major undertaking. We have a suitable plot of land with a small house on it up behind the Foundation, but it would be much less accessible for tourists.

In 2020, we had 896 visitors to the Centre, mainly in January and February. This was about a tenth of the number visiting in our best years and had a major impact on the funds available for personnel and maintenance. The Centre team received training so the Centre could be reopened after the worst of the Covid months.



Puerto Nariño was badly affected by Covid early on and at least 3 people close to Natutama died. We joined with the Fenix foundation to raise money and channel health supplies and food to the local hospital and inhabitants, delivering 80 generous food parcels to local families. From September the situation improved and indigenous people were using their own remedies for Covid symptoms. But for several months there was no boat service and people were struggling with unemployment as a result of the collapse of tourism.

### **Education**

We tried to ensure that the educators, who rely on Natütama for a basic income to support their children, could keep working all through the year even though they could not carry out normal activities with children and elders.

The schools only stayed open for February-March and Natütama was able to carry out some workshops with children from 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grades. The 1<sup>st</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades were able to visit the Natütama Centre, with the Flooded Forest and the Beach by Night.

### Summary of children's groups covered by the Foundation

Group	Age of children	No. of children	Location	Frequency
1 <sup>st</sup> & 2 <sup>nd</sup> grades of school	6 – 7 years	127	Puerto Nariño	Feb-Mar workshops each grade
3 <sup>rd</sup> , 4 <sup>th</sup> , 5 <sup>th</sup> grades of school	8 -12 years	183	Puerto Nariño	Feb –Mar workshops each grade
Junior ecology groups (three))	4-12 years	37	Puerto Nariño, Puerto Esperanza & Aticoya	Weekly during early and final months of year
<b>Total number of children</b>		<b>347</b>		



Working with children in Covid times

The junior ecology groups only functioned for part of the year. In Puerto Nariño, the children concentrated on the Flooded Forest, with the giant anaconda as the mythical creature which guides all the aquatic animals in and out of the lakes. In Ticoya, the main theme was Birds, including identification and uses of birds and their Ticuna and Yagua stories. In

Puerto Esperanza, the educator chose to work on plants, especially medicinal plants, and also the Jaguar.

### **Natütama Week**

Although we had chosen a special cultural theme for Natütama Week to celebrate 15 years of work, we decided this was not suitable for a year when there were so many limitations on activities and community participation. So we changed the theme to Manatees – their origins, their place in indigenous culture and the conservation problems associated with the capture of manatee calves. Because of the erosion to the river bank, climate change also became an important sub-theme during the week.

The educators worked hard to find strategies to reach people in the area without forming gatherings and meetings. They developed many posters along the main pathways and used the local loud speaker systems for interviews, story-telling, information and music. The elders talked about manatees and also about the influence of Natütama in the area, especially the benefits for children growing up and learning to care about their history and their surroundings. A teacher from the school, one of the children from an ecology group and the father of children who take part in an ecology group also spoke about the contribution of Natütama in raising awareness, emphasizing the fact that the education programme is carried out by indigenous educators who reinforce local cultural values.



Natütama Week, alternative strategies to reach the community

The educators also organized story and painting competitions and mural paintings on houses, which proved very popular. In addition the education

leader in Cali put out social media material, with short videos related to manatees and opportunities for working with small children.

In the months of lockdown, the educators developed new story booklets, short videos and games for the future. Thus, although we were unable to carry out some of the usual activities, we worked to use the time and funding in the best possible way and made a difference to the lives of many people in Puerto Nariño, especially in creating opportunities for children to reflect and to celebrate on their Amazon world.

### **Wildlife monitoring**

The Tarapoto lakes and neighbouring stretches of the Amazon benefited from the sharp reduction in boat traffic. In particular, we registered a record number of Tucuxi dolphins (*Sotalia fluviatilis*) in the lakes in May and June. Natütama fishermen sighted giant otters in Chepeten and Atacuari, while they also saw more aquatic birds than usual. Our monitoring continued through most of the year, with minor hitches due to Covid and difficult communications. New beaches and incipient islands are forming in the Amazon river close to Puerto Nariño, with backwaters suitable for manatees and turtles.

Last year's sloth count for the Tarapoto channel area was a record and in 2020 the count was even higher, with 21 three-toed sloths in Cotocaspi trees in January.

### **Manatees**

Our manatee sightings for the Puerto Nariño area increased to 171 in 2020, partly because there were manatees in the new backwaters of the river Amazon during low water. 127 of these sightings were in the lakes (compared with 119 in 2019) and 44 in the river. The average number of manatees registered for each sighting was 2.34, comparable with recent years. Three calves were also recorded.

For the Atacuari area, the Natütama fisherman registered 98 sightings and 2 calves. In one Peruvian community people reported that more than 30 manatees had travelled through the channel from the main river to the Atacuari lakes at the beginning of the flood season. Although this is probably an exaggeration, the important point is that they did not hunt any of the manatees, which they would have done 15 years ago.

One dead manatee was found on a levee, possibly the result of becoming trapped by the sudden drop in water level mid-year. And two manatee calves were rescued by fishermen, one in the Tarapoto area and the other at the mouth of the Amacayacu river. In both cases the fishermen said they could not see an adult anywhere near. One calf died but the other was fed and cared for until it could be moved to a facility further

downriver, with a view to releasing it in the Tarapoto lakes when it has been weaned.

The appearance of these two calves was one of the reasons for changing the theme for Natütama Week and deciding to focus on manatees, their conservation and stories.



Natütama educator painting murals for houses in Puerto Nariño

## **Dolphins**

Natütama fishermen were able to continue monitoring the two species of dolphins all through the year, with a total of 1254 sightings and an average of 25.1 sightings per survey sector. These figures are higher than recent years, boosted in particular by the large numbers of *Sotalia*. On one Amazon river survey in September, 71 *Sotalia* were registered, an all-time record for *Sotalia* sightings since we began monitoring in 2005. This reinforces the importance of the Colombian stretch of the Amazon as a place where conservation can work. Last year, *Sotalia*, a small grey dolphin, joined the pink Amazon river dolphin (*Inia geoffrensis*) on the IUCN endangered list because of threats from fishing and habitat degradation.

The maximum number of dolphins of both species seen on a complete survey was 98, lower than last year's record 101, but still high for recent years. Fishermen said there were more dolphins in the newly formed Amazon backwaters, with very little boat traffic to affect them. Overall, pink river dolphins sighting accounted for only 32.5% of total sightings, the result of the increase in *Sotalia*. Only 17 *Inia* were recorded in the flooded forest in 2020, a reflection of the fact that the flood was not very high and did not last as long as usual.



Children's drawing competition, the pink dolphins look after the manatee

### **Other activities**

We had to rely on poor signals and mobile phones for much of our communication as the Puerto Nariño Wifi is very limited. This made it difficult to send and receive documents and photos. In addition, there was no travel between Bogotá and Leticia for most of the year so some planned workshops had to be cancelled.

However, we took part in Zoom congresses and discussions, including a Brazilian university Anthropology Congress on working in communities and a round table on manatee conservation organized by a Mexican NGO. The Bogotá newspaper El Tiempo published a long article about Natütama and manatee conservation.

The Foundation published the book “Manatee Trees”, which tells the story of manatee conservation with the community, leading to the creation of Natütama. For now this is only available in English but we hope to have it translated and printed in Spanish by mid-year. The author also organized interviews with 3 elders in the Amazon for a book on manatees edited by international scientists.

### **Looking ahead**

There are three main unknowns – when we will be able to open the Centre for normal visiting and recover our main source of income, whether the erosion of the river bank will force us to move the Centre and when schools will reopen. While monitoring and some other activities can continue normally, for now we are planning education activities based on three different zones of Puerto Nariño and surrounding communities, building on the strengths of the ecology groups and expanding workshops to include some 500 children. Natütama Week will focus on the Ticuna, Cocama and Yagua ceremonies and rituals related to the natural world.

### **The Natütama team 2020**

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December 2020, a reduced team at Natütama