

NATUTAMA FOUNDATION

Summary of activities for 2023

Introduction

The Natutama team had chosen the sun as the unifying theme for Natutama week 2023 and for many of the workshops with school and community groups. The long drought, with rivers at their lowest levels ever recorded in some areas, highlighted the all-embracing nature of the sun for indigenous culture and the environment. The difficulty of adapting to climate change was a constant topic as the river changed shape and new islands formed, while harvests became even less predictable.



Natutama represented the Sun Bird for the village anniversary

The interpretation centre has now received over 100,000 visitors since opening 18 years ago, but only 3459 people were registered in 2023, a drop of 21% compared with the previous year. Overall, tourism in Colombia's Amazon area was affected by the drought and fewer people reached Puerto Nariño, where a new jetty is being built. One of the Natutama educators has been elected to the municipal council and hopes to ensure that a visit to the Centre figures more strongly in Puerto Nariño's publicity for tourists and Natutama Week is officially adopted as part of the annual programme.

Wildlife monitoring

Much of the Amazon area was affected by severe drought during the low water season of 2023. The main rivers fell far lower than normal and many

areas were cut off as local channels dried up. Water temperatures were higher than usual, especially in shallow lakes - we plan to record temperatures in a variety of aquatic locations in 2024. The Tarapoto lake system was completely isolated when the waterway connecting Tarapoto to the Amazon dwindled to a few puddles. Most manatees and dolphins had already migrated to the main river but a few were trapped in the lakes. Upriver from Puerto Nariño a large section of the river Amazon was cut off, trapping more than ten very vulnerable manatees. One of the Natutama team spoke with authorities in the nearest village to try and ensure their safety; we heard that none were hunted and all the manatees swam free when the water rose.

Dolphins

Despite the dangers to aquatic animals during the drought, with more than 100 dolphins and several manatees found dead in the Tefé area in Brazil, there were no serious consequences in the Puerto Nariño area. Three pink dolphins (Inia) were reported dead during the year further upriver in fishing nets but no animals were stranded as far as we know.



Dead Inia floating in the Amazon river

The fishermen recorded 1044 Inia and Sotalia dolphin sightings in 2023, comparable with figures for the last 5 years. Although the maximum number of dolphins sighted in one day (78) was slightly down on 2022, the average number of dolphins recorded on a survey was higher (23.7). 35% of the dolphins sighted were Inia, and 16 Inia calves were registered, the highest number for some years.

Guides from Leticia on longer river trips reported seeing more dolphins below and above the Puerto Nariño area, where there are now very few backwaters suitable for dolphins and manatees. The fishermen will carry

out at least two longer surveys up and down river in 2024 to gain a broader view of the distribution of dolphins in the area.

Manatees

The manatee count of 134 sightings for the Puerto Nariño area was relatively low, but 4 calves were recorded. There has been much disturbance along the manatee route past the village, with the building of a new concrete wharf to accommodate bigger tourist boats; this has affected two lakes where manatees pause on inward and outward migrations.

The lack of Amazon backwaters nearby accounts for the very few sightings (22) during the low water season in the main river, though new islands are taking shape so there should be more backwaters in the future. However, upstream in the Atacuari area, the Natutama fisherman recorded 216 manatee sightings, including 16 calves. 70% of the Atacuari sightings were registered in Amazon backwaters, reinforcing the possibility that manatees from the Tarapoto area are migrating further upriver to find suitable low water resting areas. While none of the manatees trapped by sandbanks below Atacuari in 2023 was hunted, we need to be alert to future events of this kind in areas not normally patrolled by Natutama fishermen.



Fisherman shows new islands in the Amazon near Puerto Nariño

One manatee was hunted in Peru above Atacuari during low water. A young manatee released by the Omacha foundation in the Puerto Nariño area was monitored by people from the Tarapoto community and appeared to be adapting to the lakes, though fishermen said the animal was very

tame, frequently approaching their canoes. We hope that our work with the communities to eliminate hunting will ensure the manatee's safety.

Otters, sloths and turtles

Although our one-day annual sloth count for the Tarapoto channel was low (9 sloths), fishermen have reported a big increase in giant otters in the Tarapoto and the Atacuari lakes, with groups of 6-7 animals quite common. There was also a surprising increase in the number of charapas (giant turtles) laying eggs on the Peruvian beaches opposite Puerto Nariño. Although many of the turtles escaped, most of the nests were emptied. A Natutama team presented a play about the charapa at a festival in Santa Sofia, where there is a turtle conservation project and we continued to work with 2nd year schoolchildren on the preservation of nests.



Schoolchildren with their turtle diplomas at Natutama

Education

The environmental education programme for 2023 covered 400 children in five primary school grades, as well as 140 children in three neighbourhoods of Puerto Nariño, four river communities and two junior ecology groups. In most cases, the workshops with children were held every 15 days.

Overall, the children's groups seem to generate more commitment by adults and children, while the school programme is useful in terms of reaching greater numbers - but teaching schedules are constantly being changed and class teachers sometimes limit activities.

The sun theme was received with enthusiasm by adults and children. A comment by one educator is typical of the response to a hotter sun:

“The children realize that the sun is heating up more than it did in past years, but the sun is important because it gives life and light and allows people to grow food.” Many of the groups planted trees along streams and in areas near their communities, both for shade and to provide fruits for animals. Shade has always been taken for granted but now people realize they have cut down too many trees near their houses.

The educators were able to take the children on more field outings this year and the interpretation centre was visited at least once by nearly all groups. The Underwater World and the Beach by Night continued to work their magic for local people, especially those who came from the river communities.



There were more workshops at the Natutama Centre in 2023, including training for the community educators and women working with pre-school groups in Puerto Nariño. The new educators from the four river communities (Naranjales, San Antonio (Peru), 12 de Octubre and San Juan de Socó) travelled to the Centre for training and also received support from the Natutama education team during the year.

The river programme was very successful, earning praise from parents and local authorities, who said the children were learning to care for their communities. Activities included dolphin watching, artwork, clean-up campaigns and performances for Natutama week related to sun stories. The community educators also began to collect stories from indigenous

elders, including many related to the sun, which are being collated for future use.



Community children learning the dolphin dive-dance

Natutama week



Apart from local schools, groups from several communities joined Natutama week with the sun theme. In preparatory workshops, educators from several communities made puppets for story-telling and said they welcomed the chance to explore the theme of climate change.

For 2024, many of the groups will be working on “pepiaderos”, where the fruits and debris of overhanging trees and plants create aquatic feeding and breeding areas for fish, turtles and others.

Looking ahead

We plan to consolidate the community aspect of the education programme, probably extending downriver towards Leticia later in the year. One of the communities hopes to host a dolphin festival focusing on stories and the arts. And we shall be extending some monitoring to cover longer river trips above and below Puerto Nariño.

An Amazon core team of four is taking on more administration and accounting, with plans to revive the shop with local products for sale and to increase visitors to the Centre.

The Natütama team 2023

Director and legal representative: Diana Luz Orozco, Clara Ximena Torres (founder members)

Education coordinator in the Amazon: Marelvi Laureano

Centre coordinator: Omar Lopez

Monitoring coordinator: Edgar Pinto

Education coordinator: Diana Luz Orozco (founder member)

Conservation adviser: Sarita Kendall (founder member)

Amazon communications and back-up: Rocio Perdomo

Selvando educators and Centre guides: Marelvi Laureano, Karina Laureano, Edgar Pinto, Steffany Carvajal, Omar Lopez, Nelcy Lopez, Dikson Coello, Linder Napuche, Zelena Mora.

12 de Octubre community: Edgar Gomez

Naranjales: Leyda Pereira

San Antonio: Marlith Melendez

San Juan de Socó: Magda Ramos

Coinvestigators: Casimiro Ahue, Pedro Ahue, Jesus Uriel Peña, Luis Hernando Peña, Luis Ahuanari.

Legal affairs and accounting: Cesar Hernandez, Alejandro Ruiz

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