

14-06-01-06 – Inga Healing Project, Putumayo Colombia

Alex Robins – EGF Members Project Report – We only eat fish with small mouths.

My initial impression of Putumayo State was the rolling hills that turned into huge mountains covered in thick forest. The journey there was problematic. No flights to this part of Colombia. The first bus's front bearings gave up and we wobbled slowly into Neiva in the rain. We were promised a connection on to Mocoa that evening, the company did not want to foot a hotel bill for its annoyed passengers. The replacement bus seemed mechanically worse than the first and was easily overtaken by the numerous oil tankers that roll into and out of Putumayo, Colombia's equivalent to Texas. Finally, at 2 am, after numerous flat tyres and dark military checkpoint searches, we arrived in downtown Mocoa. Tacky nightclubs blared-out Salsa music as people enjoyed their Saturday night.

Eating an empanada and juice for breakfast, I could see the population of Mocoa was largely Indigenous. The difference between here and Bogota, with places and people you could easily mistake for Europe, was huge. Birds buzzed around the town square, vultures soared and huge moths fluttered around, caught out in the daylight.

We were collected by Mama Luzmilla and various *Mama-Wasi* members with whom . She took us to the longhouse that the elders and shamans live in, and shyly introduced us to her family. People began to gather and introduce themselves. "The Australian Gringo has arrived!" It seems my presence was expected and many, many people came to inspect me, including the impressive Taita Juan, local Shaman and chief. A short man on crutches, he moved slowly with the help of his brother. He observed and smiled but said little. We made our hammocks and evening fell.

During the time I was there, the Inga leaders, Mama-Wasi workers and various community members took us out to significant local sites and we were able to gain a good insight to their situation. They discussed some of the things they'd like to do, which will be built into local initiatives that the funding from Ethos would be used for:

- Create a digital database of the vast botanical knowledge they possessed. Just walking around local sites literally hundreds of plants were picked and the medicinal properties they had related to us.
- The need for a functioning Inga Healing Center for both medicinal and cultural service to the community. Some government run townships outside of Mocoa have clinics but if these facilities are used by Ingas they can be accused of informing on the Guerillas or collaborating with the army and retribution by guerillas (often terrible) is a real possibility. The same with the townships run by the Guerillas, where they find they are accused of collaboration by the army and paramilitaries. A terrible situation to be caught in-between.
- Inga Indians also felt they were loosing their cultural strength due to the urban lifestyle forced upon them. Yahe rituals were necessary for them to stay culturally strong and deal with problems in a culturally appropriate way. The selection of Shamans and intense training was necessary to keep the leadership of their Inga National successful.
- The need to further fund pre & post-natal care center at *Mama-Wasi Women's Centre* so Inga *Mama Luzmilla (Female Shaman)* could give baby-care to the young mums coming through town. If Inga women go to the clinics in smaller villages funded by the government. they are often accused of collaboration or informing and subsequently targeted by Guerillas. If they go to the clinic in Guerilla towns they are accused of being guerillas and targeted by the army and paramilitaries.
- The need for cultural education programs at the local Inga school. Stories and out-bush days discussed as possibilities. There is an Inga song project already in process, but further funding is required to finish this.

- The need to improve the public perception and profile of Inga peoples in the urban setting; by other townsfolk flocking to the region for work in the oil business through annual festival and

Getting to know people better I began to see individuals open up about the terror they experienced being displaced into Mocoa. This was happening all the time: from as long as 10 years ago to the previous week.

“The Guerillas came, killed our cattle and gave the meat out to fellow villagers. They took everything from our shop for themselves. They killed both my nephews and told us to leave immediately. This was because he nephews had volunteered for national service with the army elsewhere in Colombia.”

“I was forced to leave my village because my son was a policeman elsewhere in Colombia.”

“They tell us where we can live, who can come into our settlements, who can have a have phone... Anyone goes against them is dead.”

“The oil wells are in our territory. They tax the oil companies who pay them-otherwise they blow up the oil pipelines. The chairman is indigenous but not from our region. By Colombia’s National Charter on Indigenous Communities, he isn’t allowed to be chairman if he can’t speak Inga. Well he can’t but the Guerilla have picked him so that’s who we have got. He has been chairman for 6 years. He spends the revenue oil revenue provided by the oil company on himself, his family, his associates and his friends. We get nothing.”

It seemed that the further you got away from Mocoa the stronger the terror. The remote settlements Villagarzon and Puerto-Limon were ok, but as you crossed the river you left the safety of the army presence (base & barracks) there, you were truly in Guerilla country. Puerto Asis and La Hormiga (The Ant) are Inga towns run by Guerillas.

I tried to break the uncomfortable silence. “Shall we go fishing?” I asked. “What kind of fish do you like?” Venerable Inga Leader Taiga Juan said grimly....“We only eat fish with small mouths-like Catchama.” I didn’t understand what this meant. It was spelt out to me.... “When people are murdered their grave is the River Putumayo. Local people only ate Catchama, a vegetarian bottom feeder, not the larger carnivores. A fear of accidentally eating their relatives who too often ‘disappear’ in the night was obvious. YukkY!

