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Brandeis 1998 Ethics and Coexistence Student Projects Fellows

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Amazon Worlds Museum: An Experiment in Cultural Tourism and Sustainable Development in the Upper Ecuadorian Amazon

Internship with Fundacion Sinchi Sacha and Union Huacamayos, Archidona near Tena, Ecuador

Summary of Paper

"The Amazon Worlds Story." I spent the summer of 1998 in Napo Province in the northern Ecuadorian Amazon. I was an intern for an ecotourism project jointly managed by a group of local Quichua communities and a sustainable development non-governmental organization. One of the purposes of the project was to promote greater understanding of indigenous Amazonian cultures. My paper examines the goals of the project and some of the interesting issues that arose during its implementation.



Project Goals:

To create a museum of indigenous ethnicity that will:

- represent all of the cultures of the Amazon.
- become a sustainable source of cash revenue for local indigenous communities.
- serve as an educational center for scholars, eco-tourists and indigenous young people themselves.

Personal Goals:

To educate myself about indigenous culture and the cultural politics of the Upper Ecuadorian Amazon.



**Activities:**

Observing the relationships among different people and players in the community.

Capacity-building for the indigenous people working in the museum.

Translating museum labels into English.

Key Dilemmas:

How can indigenous cultures coexist with the Western culture that is intruding into their region? How can they survive?

What are the most effective ways to promote sustainable development projects? What are appropriate roles for local, national and international players?

How can sustainable development projects in the region be better designed and implemented to facilitate cooperation and respect between indigenous groups and the NGO's and other organizations that want to assist them?

**Important Learnings**

It is very important to negotiate clear roles from the very beginning of such a project.

The conflicts between the indigenous people and the NGO about the museum project did not seem to be about the content of the museum or the representation of the culture. They seemed to be primarily about issues of credit, money and power.

In terms of maintaining their own cultural integrity, the indigenous people valued their language, their chicha rituals, and their agricultural work - all sustained independently of the museum.

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