



BOGOTÁ, CITY OF MILLIONS

For the last months, I have been living in Colombia's capital of Bogotá to follow courses at the National University for my PhD in Agricultural Sciences. Life here at 2600 metres altitude and amongst 8 to 11 million people (the estimates are rather different) is very distinct from life in the Amazon. Generally, it's cool, rainy and extremely busy. Exactly these months, there have been impressive protests by indigenous people all over the country. These have been organised to question the responsibility of the state concerning the assassinations of hundreds of



indigenous leaders over the last few years. The protests are also to claim the legal recognition of the subsoil of the indigenous reserves as real property, as this soil contains natural resources and represents an integral part of the environment. Actually, this subsoil is property of the state, which can really decide how to use it. Exploitation, often by foreign companies, usually has disastrous socioeconomic consequences for the indigenous communities. Additionally, the protests of these months claim the promised but never legalised lands, and a review of the agricultural reform policy, which, according to the protesting people, has negative consequences for indigenous communities. When the president spoke with them in Medellín, he basically denied all allegations, kept going on about small



details and did not propose anything constructive. When the protest had finally arrived in the capital of Bogotá after weeks of walking, he was not even present to attend the thousands of people. Check the pictures on the website www.smallworldfoundation.org. These protests are even more of a reason for San Martín de Amacayacu to continue their efforts to obtain the official recognition of their ancestral lands, and contribute as such to pressure the government to take the indigenous people seriously.

This was also the aim of the visit of José Gregorio Vásquez to Bogotá in November. José is one of the most important people in San Martín when it comes to the coordination of all running projects which represent these efforts. Together with him, I visited several government entities such as the Ministry of Agriculture (picture below), Housing (picture next page),



Culture and Internal Affairs. Every time, it is clear that there is a lack of communication between these ministries and the communities. In other words: the local municipalities do not really make an effort to promote the opportunities concerning agriculture, tourism, housing etc., offered on a national level. Now, we have gathered information and established contacts which may be useful for the community, such as a possibility for economic support from the Ministry of Agricultura in February 2009 to construct fish breeding ponds. This initiative has been mentioned for years in San Martin de Amacayacu. Of course, we will send a proposal!



The Ministry of Housing seemed extraordinarily happy with our visit and put us around the table at once with a bunch of important people to revive a failed tourist home project in San Martin. This project has caused quite some upheaval in the whole country. The entity which eventually got the government subsidy in hands to carry out the project nationwide, soon made it disappear, which in San Martin only allowed 5 of the 10 planned tourist homes in San Martin to be half finished (picture above right). These got the nickname *calaboso*, or prison. The almost flat aluminium roof causes an oven effect, which also creates a rather hostile environment for any tourist. The roofs were not intended like this, but somewhere along the road of construction, it was presented as an approved change, while the budget for the real roofs had been long gone. The Ministry of Housing now wants a second chance to get at least the five houses a little more decent. This means quite a lot of consulting in the community, because the confidence of the people there in the project obviously has reached



zero. Also, the community leader (*curaca*) has to arrange several issues with the banks and other entities in Leticia. This is not always so easy (and sometimes impossible) if there is no income at all for this person. However, the people from the Ministries really don't have any idea and think any community leader has a salary. They also think it possible to get to a solution of this kind of situations by cellphone. You can imagine that there was enough to explain..

We also talked for almost a day with the director of Tropenbos-Colombia (picture below), with as a result a small fund for a young guy in San Martin to study and document the family tree of the community. This is a very relevant task, which is related to the documented malokas which those ancestors lived, which justifies the claim on the ancestral lands.



SMALL WORLD IN CANADA!

As has been mentioned before on the website, the Small World Foundation now has a representative in Canada. Javier Diaz (picture next page), who was introduced in Newsletter 20, will play the same role for San Martin de Amacayacu in Canada as I do in the Netherlands and Belgium. This means that he will try to ask

for attention for the situation of San Martin de Amacayacu and to search for additional funding to make the local initiatives a reality. This newsletter will of course be available to provide first hand information for those interested in Canada. In due time, Javier will also contribute to the text. In December, Javier will be in San Martin de Amacayacu to assist in the technical part of the mapping of the ancestral lands.



LAPTOP STOLEN

A real big city experience is only unforgettable really when you get robbed old fashionably. This did happen. In broad day light, and by means of a trick in which participated various ladies of around 50 years old. First they threw something on my sleeve, without me being aware where it had come from. After that, they offered me to clean my sleeve. Yesss, and at the same time my big friend Dell was taken from my backpack unnoticed. How stupid right, that I didn't notice.. Until it happens to you too.. Unforgettable allright, but no fun al all!

IGUAQUE: A MAGIC EXPERIENCE

To escape the pressure of Bogotá, and clean ourselves of the stress involuntarily

caused by the robbery and the visits to the government entities, we visited the spectacular Iguaque lake ("I-gwá-ke"). This lake is very special because in the times before the arrival of the Spanish people at the continent, this used to be a very sacred place for the people who lived in this region: the Muiscas. The mother of these people was born from this lake, together with the child who would be her husbands later on. They disappeared again in this lake when they saw that there were enough people in the world. Also, the location is breath taking at almost 3.000 meters, and surrounded by *páramo*, which as an almost extinct high mountain ecosystem basically found only in Colombia, Peru en Ecuador. It is the water factory of the lowlands. The frequent rains and dense mists cause a permanently soaking underground. Several special and very rare plant species can be observed here, such as the characteristic *Espletia* species (foto left and right under) and orchids. These are often the victim of illegal trade. People from the surrounding villages frequently hunt animals in this area, and the agricultural plots are created higher and higher up the mountain every time. This can happen easily, because there is only one caretaker for the more than 6.000 hectares of *páramo* around the lake. It took us about 4 hours climbing over rocks, roots and slippery turf to get to the lake. The cold, a lack of oxigen, rain and even hail made the trip a lot more difficult, but the satisfaction was enormous. Just as we arrived, and for less than 5 minutes, the sun was even shining, the mist disappeared and the whole lake and the surrounding mountains were all visible. In a few words: a magic experience.





A lot of indigenous people still have a lot of respect for the Iguaque lake and they are very worried. The hundreds of golden statues of the mother and the child, which originally used to be spread out over the *páramo* for worship, are currently to be found heavily guarded and behind glass in the Gold Museum in the centre of Bogotá. The lake and the *páramo* are “property” of the System of National Parks of Colombia. The closest town is called Villa de Leyva. This historic town has the lake as one of the tourist attractions. For many indigenous people, these facts are all a deep offense and have tried to stop the

tourism. Others are actively trying to get the statues and other objects, which are of enormous spiritual value, back to where they were taken from, to establish again the “order” in the world, for which they were meant in the first place. Really, they don’t belong in a museum where an entree fee is charged to see them. This situation is not only as such for Iguaque, but also for many other sites in Colombia. In some places, some people still exist who have the knowledge to give the statues and objects back their function, but we need to hurry....

Would you like to support the Tikuna indigenous community of San Martin together with the Small World Foundation, and stay in touch about the local developments in this remote corner of Colombia?

Please transfer 15 euro yearly (or more!) to either on of the following bank accounts:

For the **Netherlands**:

Bank name: **Rabobank**

Bank Address: Singel 4

5111CD

Baarle-Nassau

The Nether lands

SWIFT/BIC Code: RABONL2U

Account number: 13 27 26 203.

Account name:

Stichting SMALL WORLD FOUNDATION

IBAN code: NL28 RABO 0132 7262 03.

For **Canada**:

Bank name: **CAISSE CENTRALE DESJARDINS**

Montréal, Canada

SWIFT/BIC Code: CCDQCAMM

Branch ID: CC081520439

Account Number : 0815 2043 9090 9150

Account Name:

THE SMALL WORLD FOUNDATION

Please **DON'T FORGET TO INFORM US ABOUT YOUR NAME AND EMAIL ADDRESS!!**

(heike_van_gils@hotmail.com for The Netherlands or chaquenalt@hotmail.com for Canada) !

The contributions will be spent exclusively on the development and realisation of local initiatives in San Martin de Amacayacu in the Colombian Amazon, and under my personal guidance. The expenses will be mentioned as much as possible in the newsletters. For alternative contributions, please contact Heike van Gils at **heike_van_gils@hotmail.com**.

For more information about this initiative, please check the website: **www.smallworldfoundation.org**.

In advance: thank you very much on behalf of San Martin de Amacayacu!