



Princeton in Latin America December Newsletter

Update from the field: Meredith Wilensky Amazon Conservation Association, Peru

I arrived at Los Amigos Biological Station in August and can hardly believe that my stay is now approaching 4 months. Traveling from the United States to the station was my first adventure as a PiLA fellow. The journey involved 3 planes, 2 nights, a 2 hour taxi and finally a 5 hour boat on the Madre de Dios River. Winding our way up the Madre de Dios River it became clear just how remote my new home was. No roads. No concrete. There was nothing but dense jungle and the occasional rustic gold mining operation.

The station is on a terrace nestled at the confluence of the Madre de Dios and Los Amigos Rivers. The main facilities sit in a clearing surrounded by dormitories and private cabins. All buildings have thatched roofs and screened windows blurring the distinction between indoors and outdoors. I have spent the majority of my time at the station living in a simple cabin set back into the woods. The cabin is one room with a simple wooden slat bed and dresser. It lacks electricity and a simple bathroom (with cold running water) is located down a nearby path. Although it is secluded from the bustling station, the cabin is never quiet. Monkeys and macaws sound in the mornings and frogs and insects fill the night with their calls.



Work starts early and ends early at the station. My days are as variable as my many responsibilities here as the assistant to the station's research director. My most extensive project has been conducting an environmental audit of the station that assesses environmental impact and proposes ways to improve. I started collecting data for this extensive report a few weeks after my arrival and am still editing and expanding. I have tried to implement some suggested changes and have begun composting and tending to the fruit and vegetable garden. Another rewarding task has been planning and helping run Sabado Cientifico, a weekly 3 hour science and nature program the station conducts with the children who live in a nearby mining village. I also spend time inputting data into excel and conducting other administrative duties.

Of course most exciting is the time I spend out exploring the rainforest that surrounds our pocket of civilization here in the Amazonian basin. I assist with long-term canopy density and mammal monitoring projects and also occasionally aid investigators with their research. Stepping out of the

clearing into one of the many paths in the station's extensive trail system opens up a new world, a world you do not enter without first arming yourself with long pants, long sleeves, head covering, rubber boots and a healthy dose of insect repellent. On my first day, walking with a friend and fellow researcher, I saw 5 species of monkeys and countless birds, insects and butterflies.

At lunchtime the researchers come in from a long morning in the field and inevitably the conversation begins, "What did you see today?" Occasionally someone tells of sightings of a black jaguar on the airstrip, an anaconda in Pozo don Pedro or giant river otters in Cocha Lobo (all are places I frequent but have not been lucky enough to spot any of these jungle predators). After lunch, the heat of the day is the most oppressive and everyone disappears for an afternoon siesta or to read a book. Before dinner there is an occasional soccer or volleyball game and sometimes after dinner we declare a movie night and set up the projector in the classroom to watch a flick. The guests at the station come from all over but share much common ground. Despite the constant come-and-go of researchers, the station has a strong sense of community. Everyone seems to wonder where the time went when it is their turn to leave and we all file down to the dock at dawn and wave as another boat full of friends heads down river.

I have become so accustomed to my life here but there are moments that remind me exactly where I am. When the passing of two blue and yellow macaws stops a volleyball game temporarily, when the Friday boat arrives and we all rush down the 250 steps to bring up the weekly groceries, when I wonder if that rumbling noise outside my cabin could possibly be a jaguar, when I feel the first breeze and see the first storm clouds that bring in the rain, and, of course, when I climb into my mosquito net each night and the rainforest sounds lull me to sleep, I am reminded of how lucky I am to call this unique place my home.



Letter from the Director

Dear Friends of PiLA:

December has been an exciting month for us here in Princeton, as we've just had the application deadline for the 2009-10 Fellowships and received **110** applications! Last year, there were 63 applicants, so you can see that interest in PiLA has almost doubled. We're very pleased by how word has spread about our program and the amazing opportunities which it offers to graduating college students and young alumni. While we haven't read all the applications yet, it is clear from those we have examined, that the group of stellar applicants is large and impressive. More than ever, we are seeing candidates with extremely strong backgrounds in Latin American Studies, Spanish and Portuguese, internships at non-profits in both the US and Latin America, and volunteer records which demonstrate a deep commitment to public service both at home and abroad.

In order to ensure that we can serve as many qualified candidates as possible, we must call upon our friends to support us in what is, as we are aware, a challenging year. But we feel strongly, as do our donors-to-date, that PiLA is a program whose future is important and needs to be assured. Therefore, we hope that you will consider making a gift to PiLA, if you haven't already, at any amount which is meaningful and comfortable for you. Below is a list of our current donors, since July 1, 2008. You can donate via our website or by check. We hope that you will wish to find your name included in this list as we head into the new year.

Further, in order to offer as many fellowships to qualified applicants as possible this year, we are looking for excellent new partner organizations who will be willing and able to take on the entire cost of a fellowship. If you know of an NGO office which has the means and interest to host a PiLA fellow, please contact me and I will make the necessary arrangements. While it is most simple if the partner can pay the fellow's stipend (which can range from \$4,800 in Guatemala to about \$10-12,000 in a major metropolitan area), we are also open to discussing homestays in exchange for English language instruction.

Thank you for your continued support and interest in PiLA.

Best wishes for the New Year,

Claire Brown '94
Executive Director

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