

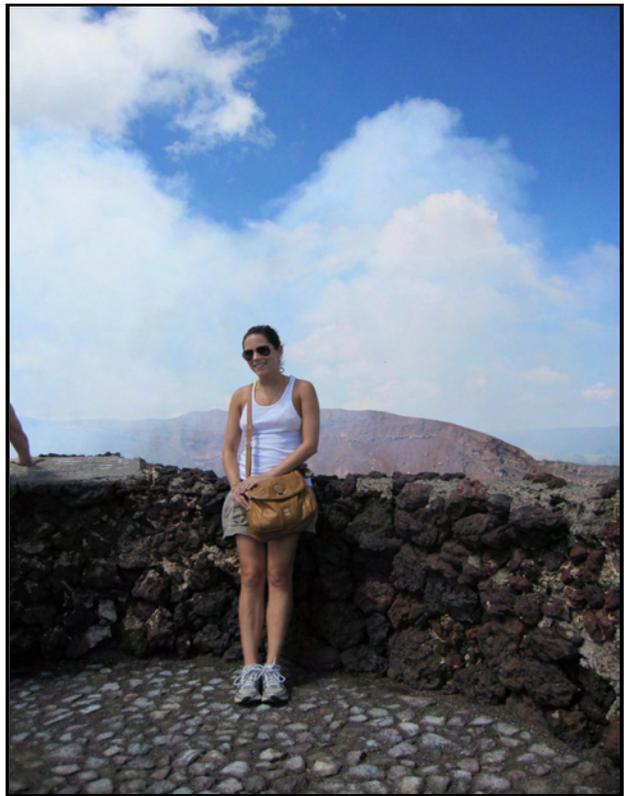
## December 2009 Newsletter

### Spotlight on Kirsten Harmon, Arias Foundation, San Jose, Costa Rica

It was on an otherwise-ordinary day during my first month with the Arias Foundation. I sat at my desk, scanning the day's news headlines and listening to the roar of the San Jose rain on the tin roof above my head, when suddenly my eyes locked on a new press release from the U.S. Department of State. It said "U.S. Support for the Arms Trade Treaty". I read and re-read the statement, hardly able to believe my eyes. Yes, it was true: the United States – the "superpower" – was declaring support for the treaty that Costa Rica and the Arias Foundation have labored so diligently to promote over the past three years.

Since you may not have heard of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), allow me a moment to explain why it is so important. The international arms trade generates an estimated \$50 billion dollars each year, with poor developing countries serving as its primary clients. These conventional weapons kill 300,000 people per year. That breaks down to about 1,000 people per day... one person every minute.

In the three years since the UN General Assembly voted in favor of ... **(continued in page 2)**



I have been able to travel around Central America quite a bit in the past few months, and I absolutely fell in love with Nicaragua! This photo is of me at the top of Volcán Masaya, an active volcano located near the colonial city of Granada, Nicaragua.



With a youth religious leader from Guyana, celebrating the launch of the Global Youth Campaign on Disarmament for Shared Security sponsored by the Arias Foundation, Religions for Peace and the University for Peace.

...“Toward an Arms Trade Treaty” in 2006, nearly 2.1 million men, women and children have died as a result of armed violence. Millions more have been wounded, displaced or have fallen deeper into poverty. Such statistics show us that the need for an effective Arms Trade Treaty to regulate the international transfer of conventional weapons is not only critical – it is *urgent*.

So when the United States, the number-one arms exporter in the world, breaks with the previous administration's policy and takes a stand in favor of the ATT, the result is a huge boost in the treaty's viability and a giant step toward making the world a more peaceful place. Knowing that I played even the tiniest part in making such a step possible was a feeling unlike any I have experienced before.

Only weeks before, I knew about as much about the ATT as your average person; which is to say, I had never even heard of it. Yet on my first day at the Arias Foundation, the Executive Director, Don Luis Alberto, asked me to prepare a presentation advocating for the ATT, to be presented by him at a regional conference in El Salvador the very next week! This was a sink or swim moment in the truest sense – but rather than deciding to panic, I opted to use the resources available to me (namely my Comparative Literature Major's research and analysis skills, and a lot of Google-ing on the United Nations Website) to create the best presentation I could.



Watching the final Costa Rica vs. Uruguay World Cup Game with my fellow Arias Foundation interns (or *pasantes*, as we are called in Spanish).

Sure enough, within just a few days I had taught myself to be conversational in the rich technical vocabulary I fondly refer to as ATT-speak – though it I am convinced it will take me a lifetime to become fully fluent. These sorts of intellectual challenges have allowed me to delve into the fascinating and complex fields of disarmament, development and human security, literally learning something new every day. But, perhaps even more importantly, they have also taught me a great deal about myself and about the importance of being able to acknowledge what you don't know and then *do something about it*.

As I write to you today, my somewhat-frantic Google searches for ATT term definitions have grown far fewer and further between, yet it is still this need to keep learning *more*, to keep rising to the daily challenges of that which I do not know, that I love most about working at the Arias Foundation. The ever-evolving socio-political landscape of Central America provides no shortage of new issues to explore, and the more writing and research I do about political leadership, economic development and peace in the region, the more it becomes clear how profoundly and inextricably linked these forces are...for better and for worse.

This is just one of many such experiences I have had so far in my short time with the Arias Foundation. After four years of studying “everything there is to know” about Latin America –from economics, politics and government to culture and literature – what I wanted most upon graduating from Georgetown this past May was to get out of the classroom and *do something*. It was this insatiable desire for action, to go out and “get my hands dirty”, that drew me to PiLA. Here at the Arias Foundation I have been given the opportunity for concrete involvement that I so longed for in my years at Georgetown: that and so much more. I have suddenly found myself in the incredible position of having... **(continued in page 3)**

... a voice to express my ideas and perspectives that people *actually listen to* – a means of putting my frustration with the injustices and inequalities of the world around me to good use.

Amazingly enough, these sorts of sink-or-swim learning experiences have not been the exception during my time at the Arias Foundation: they are the rule. And it is for this reason that the past four months have been such a whirlwind – one that would take me far more than one newsletter to do justice to – so I will give just a few examples. The first conference I attended with Don Luis Alberto was a gathering of international parliamentarians in Managua, Nicaragua to discuss the problem of small arms in Latin America. However, I realized upon my arrival that I had not been registered as an intern, but as an observer. This meant, among other things, that I was able to sit at the table with the parliamentarians during their plenary discussions, as well as to sit in on – and occasionally contribute to – daily working groups with some of the world's leading experts on small arms issues.

I had a similar experience at the Fulbright Foundation's *Global Symposium of Peaceful Nations* conference in Washington, DC a few weeks later, where I was not only invited to participate in the various working groups, discussions and informal sharing between the representatives of the 18 most peaceful nations in the world, but on several occasions was asked by my boss to address the conference group myself. Talk about being given a voice!

Such incredible opportunities are by no means easy to come by, and in my case they are nothing short of a gift...indeed sometimes I feel like I literally need to pinch myself to be sure that this is really my job. Much of what I have been able to do and learn is due to Don Luis Alberto, who has exceeded even my highest expectations in terms of his generosity and willingness to include me in all aspects of the Arias Foundation's work. Since day-one he has not only invited me to share my opinions and perspectives, but has taken them seriously – which is all the more humbling in view of the decades of experience and expertise he has in Central American political life. It is his support, and that of the other amazing Arias Foundation staff, that has shaped my PiLA fellowship into the life-changing experience that it has already turned out to be.

It has become a standing joke in my family that after the challenging and exciting work that my PiLA Fellowship has exposed me to at the age of 22, it is all going to be downhill from here. I sincerely hope that this is not the case, but it *is* true that my experience with the Arias Foundation will be a tough act to follow. I could go on singing the praises of the Arias Foundation, but instead I will end in the only way that seems fitting – by looking forward with

excitement and anticipation for what my remaining months in Costa Rica will bring, and by expressing my gratitude to Princeton in Latin America for providing me with this amazing opportunity. Thank you!



The cityscape of Granada, Nicaragua – the first Spanish settlement in Central America and (in my opinion) one of the most beautiful cities in the world!

## Spotlight on Sarah Federman, Amazon Conservation Association, Los Amigos, Peru

Sordid little detail: bugs, although I prefer the Spanish term: bichos—the sound of the word describes more fully my feelings than the hard ending of 'bug'—have made off with the rubber parts of my earphones. I am not pleased. However, this is a price I am more than willing to pay to live and work at the Amazon Conservation Association CICRA field station.

I wish I could package-up the sounds here: trills, screeches, squawks, growls, chirps, clicks, the mechanical hum of cicadas, or the steady patter of the swarm of wasps that flies repeatedly into the metal screens behind me. A flock of birds lives outside of the *comedor* (dining hall), when they call you can almost hear ringing drops of water falling into a metal bowl.

This morning a big rain beat against the palm leaf roofs and turned the paths into swift running streams.

The river is swelling, inching its way steadily up the mud carved stairs of our port. The steady pounding of crystalline drops, now turned sheets easily wash away the flimsy trappings of solar internet connection which often cause me to forget how truly far I've come.

To get to the Amazon Conser-

vation Association (ACA)'s CICRA field station, you must travel up the Madre de Dios river in a motorized canoe for any-

where between five and eight hours. The boat ride is amazing, providing a milieu of disparate ideals. The wide river stretches sinuously below an imposing and mysterious wall of shining greens and browns reaching into the glaringly blue sky (or, as the rainy season sets in, the slate grey of an impending downpour)—it is easy to here to imagine nature as *Nature*. Below the wall of green, the water is littered liberally with piles of discarded rocks upon which crouch men, women, and children. They sift and add to their ever-growing islands of refuse, which, with time become archipelagoes of unrealized aspirations. At moments though, hidden within the chaff, is a whisper of gold that glints with the promise of paradise.

It would be easy to condemn one of these 'ideals,' especially presented with a literal divide at one point during the ride: conservation concession beyond the bank of the river with mining on the water. I wonder though if there is something more, some entanglement of these two seemingly irreconcilable Edens.

My work with ACA allows me an intimate view of international conservation and the inner workings of a non-governmental organization. I recently had an experience that reaffirmed my desire to study the ecology of tropical plant-animal interactions in a conservation framework that includes humans living in areas subject to rapid economic development and other consequences of globalization. The Peruvian Minister of... **(continued in page 5)**



Mining boat along the Madre de Dios River

... the Environment has proposed to significantly reduce the possible area of gold mining in the state of Madre de Dios, causing outrage within mining communities. Unfortunately for ACA, being an NGO in remote areas can often lead to conflation of the organization with government, which is exactly what occurred; some mining communities threatened the station with vandalism and arson.

In order to address this issue of miscommunication, I worked to compile and elucidate community concerns to be conveyed to ACA. I was able to help coordinate community-wide meetings where ACA can clarify in an accessible and transparent way their goals and role within Madre de Dios. This experience made clear to me the importance of constant and clear exchanges between local communities and conservation initiatives. I am determined that any future ecological investigations I perform will also work to open channels of discourse between researchers and local communities.

One of the best perks of the job is that I get to organize and teach *sábados científicos* (science Saturdays) at the closest town along the river. I was able to coordinate with the town's teacher in order to create a year of lesson plans to complement the students' scientific curriculum. The children are quite young, so *sábado científico* classes have a strong emphasis on combining group work, play, and knowledge of local biodiversity and ecosystems with the aim of promoting a sense of communal pride and protectiveness over local flora and fauna. Students often work in teams to solve questions, find and identify useful plants, or act out parts of an ecosystem; in this way we create a positive association between learning, the amazing natural world we live in, and play.

ACA provides me with the perfect outlet for continuing with and improving upon my passion for ecological investigations. I am allowed time to work with visiting researchers in order to gain valuable field experience and skills, as well as to design and implement my own research project. Thus far, I have designed two projects which I find quite interesting, the first to monitor butterfly diversity with standard baited traps on an altitudinal gradient between



ACA's cloud forest station (Wayquecha) and CICRA, focusing on fruit feeding Nymphalidae as indicators of overall butterfly diversity. The object of this investigation is that it will be primarily a 'teaching study' maintained by students and volunteers with the intent to create opportunities to gain experience and learn field skills in the tropics. The second project is more of an independent investigation which compares vegetative regeneration in pristine and anthropogenically altered riparian succession sites.

In the Western Amazon, meandering rivers wend their way through the basin, turning upon themselves to constantly re-create space for forest succession. Riparian succession generally follows a predictable pattern of vegetation bands which establish sequentially along the bank. Rivers such as the Madre de Dios of Peru are targets for resource exploitation such as logging and mining, which not only drastically alters topography and... **(continued in page 6)**

Sarah with a child at Sabado Cientifico

... abiotic factors at the succession site in manners poorly understood, but also lowers populations of larger vertebrate seed dispersers via hunting. With populations of larger vertebrates restricted by hunting, community composition of late successional forest is likely to reflect seed rains by smaller dispersers, such as chiroptera, that are generally overlooked by hunters. I expect these altered rates of disperser activity to result in significantly altered community composition of successional regeneration, namely higher rates of establishment by bat- and bird-dispersed old-growth tree species. My study compares late sequential succession and disperser activity, especially chiropteran, between sites of natural riparian succession and anthropogenically modified riverbanks. Thus far my work at CICRA has greatly expanded my array of field skills I am confident that these important skills will further my goal to implement meaningful change as a professor or within a conservation organization, researching and educating on the subjects of ecology and conservation.



Sarah and children at Sabado Cientifico

## Letter from the Editor

Dear Friends of PiLA,

This past Friday was a hectic day as over 180 applications flooded the office. We look forward to reading these files, although it's a bit intimidating! Judging by the essays I've scanned while processing dossiers, it will be a difficult year for decision making, as it is clear already that there are many highly qualified candidates. As ever, news from the field continues to roll in, from our fellows in the Peruvian Amazon and San José, Costa Rica. This month, we have reports from Sarah Federman at the Amazon Conservation Association and Kirsten Harmon at the Arias Foundation for Peace and Human Progress.

Many of you have already received our yearly appeal and I hope that you will consider making a donation this year (by Dec. 31 if you would like it to count for this tax year). We would like to offer 20 placements this year, especially now that we have such a great number of applications, but we cannot do this without your help. Here is a quick example, from Janine at Funcedescr, which might encourage your support. She writes: **"I hope that everything is going well up in New Jersey. I am sure it is crazy with the application deadline. The demand for PiLA is incredible! And from my experience, the demand is definitely deserved. I am having such an incredible experience and have never learned more! In fact, I am really not ready to go home for Christmas. I am sad to be leaving. I feel so lucky for this experience-thank you!"** We would like to offer such opportunities to as many of the qualified candidates that we can and thank you, in advance, for whatever you do to help us achieve this goal.

The January newsletter will bring you some statistics on the work accomplished by our fellows—numbers of: people aided, dollars raised, initiatives launched, programs evaluated, grants written, and other results which our partner organizations couldn't achieve without our Fellows.

Best wishes for a happy New Year,



Claire Brown '94  
Executive Director

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