I need this shot – Essay by Greg Harriott

Greg Harriott is a film and video major in the Schreyer Honors College at Penn State University in University Park, PA. He spent six weeks traveling in the Peruvian Amazon with Campbell Plowden, executive director of the Center for Amazon Community Ecology. ©Photos by C. Plowden/CACE

I need this shot. My mind is focused as I step off the dock at Jenaro Herrera onto the Sofy equipped with my video camera. Live water buffalo reluctantly board the ship through my viewfinder, pulling against their Peruvian loaders and catching the attention of a small crowd of spectators. I need a new angle. Next to the mountains of bananas and cargo, a full sized bulldozer rests on the ship’s deck. I climb on top of the machine to get a better shot of the live animals being pulled onboard. My focus is now on the horse and other buffalo tied to the bank, waiting their turn. Hand on my record button, and camera braced I wait for them to rumble past me as the ship starts to slowly drift down the Ucayali River. The boat clears the dock, and an unsettling feeling enters my stomach as Dr. Plowden shouts jokingly from the wooden platform: “How far can you jump?” Not that far. It looks like I’m going for an unexpected boat ride. A 12 hour boat ride to Iquitos. I stand almost a foot taller than most passengers, have white pasty skin, blond hair, and almost no money. I know only a little Spanish and I’m tightly gripping a borrowed 3,000 dollar camera. Maybe I didn’t need the shot that bad.

My trip to Peru this summer as an Amazon Field Volunteer with the Center for Amazon Community Ecology taught me a lot about shooting a documentary in the jungle and boats. During my six week journey, I rode on 17 different boats to document the Center’s work with its founder Dr. Plowden as we visited small towns and villages throughout Peru’s northeastern Amazon. We spent two weeks in the town of Jenaro Herrera where the Center began its research and another week each in communities along the Ampiyacu and Tahuayo rivers to explore new project sites. Before this trip, I knew very little about the rainforest, copal resin, and Spanish. I left with 30 hours of video and a lot more.

In the spring of 2008, I did my first work for the Center editing footage that Dr. Plowden had already shot in Peru. Watching these images about copal resin and life around Jenaro Herrera had already given me a good introduction to the Center’s projects and the people it works with, but being in Peru deepened my understanding of the complexity of rainforest conservation.

I learned that the words “forest reserve” often don’t mean much in Peru. In every river we traveled along, I saw rafts of logs being towed by small motorboats and large tugs. Some of these trees were probably cut legally, but I learned that many trees are cut in areas that
were supposedly protected. The people involved in this trade are not bad; many are just acting according to simple cold economics. The Center has taken on the challenge of doing creative research and other activities to make economics work in favor of forest conservation.

Traveling to a rainforest to film the Center’s work taught me a lot about shooting a documentary – particularly the importance of planning and local conditions. Walking through a misty forest near San Pedro village, my camera lens fogged up from the inside. I luckily had some silica gel on me I’d brought to keep my gear dry. I put some in the lens, and fifteen minutes later, the camera worked fine again. The next time I travel to a humid area I will be sure to bring an even larger supply of these wonderful moisture absorbing packets.

Some of my best memories of the trip come from our visits to several indigenous villages in the Ampiyacu River region. It was very interesting to see how people held on to their history while incorporating aspects of the modern world such as televisions and stereos. I got to meet a Huitoto Indian painter named Brus Rubio whose work had been featured in a museum in Iquitos. Brus impressed me with his abstract depictions of local legends and myths painted on handmade tree bark canvass. I ended up buying two of his paintings and shot an extended interview with him for a short documentary. While visiting villages from four ethnic groups in this region, I became fascinated by the stark differences between their cultures and mine while also noticing many similarities. You generally don’t find people in the U.S. living in houses built from local wood resting on stilts, but I found that the people who inside had many of the same thoughts and dreams of people as other Americans and me.

While I had a great time making friends and learning in the Amazon, I do not want it to be just a once in a lifetime experience. I want to go back. I am applying for a Fulbright Fellowship to return to the Ampiyacu River region to shoot a feature length documentary on its people and the pressures their communities face. But that’s in the future.

Back to the Sofy, floating down the Ucayali standing on the deck with my camera and almost no money. It turns out the vendors, many of them “queso” kids (kids selling local buffalo milk cheese to passengers) also are on board and have no intention of going all the way to Iquitos. I use my poor Spanish to ask a small boy carrying several pieces of cheese in a plastic tub, “Tu volver a Jenaro?. Está posible para mi volver tambien? Hay un otro barco?” He smiles and nods. I say relieved, “Bien. Bien. Todo Bien.” I find out there is an open motor boat waiting down river that’s willing to take vendors or anyone with 1 Peruvian Sole (about 35 cents) back to Jenaro. I finally realize that I’m not going to Iquitos today, as I float down the river mirrored with the setting sun. That was a good shot.