

VOCALIZATIONS OF TAMARIN MONKEYS IN AMAZONIAN PERU



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I waved goodbye to the people who had quickly become my family as I took my last steps in Amazonian Peru. As my plane took off, I marveled at the intricate river system below that gives life to the forest and its people. The large immense rivers grew narrower and narrower until they were thin veins that disappeared in the vast green. Despite my desire to absorb the last view of my adopted home, exhaustion overwhelmed me, and I drifted to sleep. It's hard for the body to cope with abrupt change. I had grown to love waking up to the sound of humidity falling from the leaves, a symphony of insects, the encore of the night, a predawn restedness.

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I was leaving a place I loved, a place of tranquility and simplicity, for a place of chaos and confusion. I awoke to Lima, where insecurity and commotion of urban life taint the air. I felt overwhelmed about the drastic change of lifestyles I faced. But when a taxi driver snickered,



“Hablas como si fueras una charapita,” or “You speak like a little jungle girl,” I smiled to myself and thought, I still can hold on to the “charapita.” I had grown as a person in a way that only the jungle, the people of the forest and monkeys can teach.

I used my Burch fellowship to study the ecology and vocal communication of tamarin monkeys in Amazonian Peru. My journey began in Iquitos, Peru, the largest city in the world unreachable by car. From Iquitos, I traveled 150 km by boat down the Amazon River to the Madre Selva (Mother Jungle) research station, located on Río Orosa (a tributary of the Amazon River).

I boarded the crowded boat and timidly hung my hammock in whatever free space I could find. I looked around at all the stern faces observing me, and I wondered what this boat ride would entail. Twelve hours later, we reached our destination, and I had to kiss my new friends goodbye. I stepped off the boat with a new sense of reassurance after being received so kindly by the people of the jungle.

After a few days of exploring the rainforest, organizing my

tent and practicing my kayaking skills, it was time to begin my research on tamarins. I studied two subspecies of Saddle-back Tamarins. One of the subspecies (*S. fuscicollis nigrifrons*) occurs in the forest that surrounds Madre Selva, which is located south of the Amazon River. The other subspecies (*S. fuscicollis lagonotus*) occurs north of the Amazon River. Due to geographic isolation, the two subspecies have diverged from one another in various ways. For example, their vocalizations are different, however no previous research has determined if the two subspecies respond to the other's calls. Failure to respond to each other's calls could indicate they are reproductively isolated. In order to explore this question I played vocalizations of both the home and away subspecies to the home subspecies and determined the local subspecies responded more strongly to its own subspecies calls than to those of the away subspecies.

In order to conduct the experiment I constructed blinds out of material from the forest and waited long hours in the huts with my guide for the tamarins to reach the blinds so I could play the vocalizations and record the monkey's response to the different calls. The forest, the river and the people

had so much to teach me. I hoped my research would help improve my understanding of ecology, evolution and the research process as a whole. Undoubtedly, I left with a deeper understanding and an even greater thirst for knowledge and research, but I had not expected to learn so much about myself. I left with a greater sense of identity. I grew more secure while recognizing flaws within myself. I developed a passion for soccer. I became more spiritual, more patient and more understanding. There is something deep and meaningful

I learned by living a simple life; a life without TV, internet, or telephones; a life where I woke up at 4:00 a.m., and a life where the social interactions I analyzed were of monkeys.



I learned from the struggles I faced there, both in my research and in day-to-day challenges. I saw how the people, the forest and the animals interacted, and they taught me more than I could have ever expected.

I wanted to repay them, but I did not know how. But one day as I watched a piece of my finger sink to the bottom of the river after a piranha bit me, one of my dearest friends laughed and exclaimed, “Ahora tú siempre vas a estar aquí, has dejado una parte tuya con nosotros.” or “Now you always will be here, you have left a part of yourself with us.” At that moment it dawned on me that life is fluid, and in the end forms a circle. Just as the piranha took a part of me, I took a part of him; the presence of the people would always be with me, and my presence would always be with them. Likewise, I hope I can repay Mother Earth for the incredible teachings she so generously granted me. By learning through her wise ways, I have only become more adept and willing to dedicate my career to research that will benefit conservation efforts.

