**Bernard Nietschmann Ph.D Award**

**Field Research Report (Summer 2015)**

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**Research experience and objectives accomplished**

*It was a beautiful and warm day in the city of Coca, the point of entrance into the lower Napo River that travels east to west from Ecuador into the Brazilian Amazon. While my contact (a Kichwa woman) does everything in her power to find us a canoe to be able to travel that very day to Pañacocha, I start to understand the important role that oil and gas play in every aspect of communities’ lives in the lower Amazon.*

*After a heated negotiation on the gas price and the transportation service, the indigenous family hosting me, the canoe owner, and I began to travel down a river full of contrasts. The landscape consists of a tropical forest with scattered spots where families keep their households. The wide range of green colors combined with the color of the earth depicts the local materials used in the making of homes and small artisanal ports along the river. This pattern gets continuously disrupted by large barges that transport heavy machinery down the river; large bulldozers can be seen nearby as they build roads within the forest and gas burners and seismic towers are also a piece of the landscape. The river seems busier than ever as the number of high speed motorized canoes increased after numerous oil service companies arrived a few years ago.*

*After four hours of travel, the green and brown pattern ends, and a small urban area is visible. That is when I knew we had arrived in Pañacocha. Two years ago, the Ecuadorian oil company Petroamazonas built a small urban area with 74 houses on peasant and indigenous land as part of a compensation plan for oil extractive activities. The urban area is divided in two centers, one on a site named Pañacocha and another one in Tereré. Each was designed to have piped water, sewer system, electricity and even internet; additionally, each has a school while Pañacocha also hosts a health center, a market, and a police unit. (Research notes, September 4th, 2015)*

At the time of my visit, less than ten families lived in the urban areas built by the government. Deterioration was already evident in these areas, especially on sidewalks and public areas, and services such as the sewer system already collapsed in Pañacocha. Because homes were given fully furnished to the possessors, many families had taken appliances such as fridges and kitchens to their farm houses, while others appliances had been sold or stolen.

My summer research was aimed at collecting preliminary information to better understand how indigenous peoples adapt to the growth of modern towns and new roads as the oil extraction industry expands into their territories. Specifically, I focused on traditional survival strategies such as agriculture, use of forest resources, and seasonal labor change at the family and communal level. At the same time, I collected information that would clarify how the territory is being transformed within the context of natural resource extraction as well as examined the possibilities for the rise of a working class and the legal contradictions between communitarian and private property of land. All these aspects significantly affect families’ abilities to sustain their livelihoods in the area.

Below are listed the most important findings that will lead the continuation of my research:

* Despite the fact that at least 9 similar urban projects and associated roads will be built in the Amazon in the next year, the case of Pañacocha shows that, because the population in the lower Amazon is still reliant on subsistence agriculture, fishing and forest gathering, small urban areas in the region will not be used for housing purposes unless there are regional economic and cultural transformations to mediate a transition to waged labor. There are currently no productive projects being fostered by the government in the Pañacocha Parish, and apparently, there are no private ventures located there outside some tourist businesses and the oil industry. Permanent job sources in the area come from oil associated businesses such as seismic operations, road construction, and oil extraction. Because these businesses require unskilled labor only for short periods of time, the demand for labor is extremely limited and unsustainable for the local population.
* Local leaders are worried about foreign unskilled labor being attracted to the area to join the oil sector. There are also concerns about having outsiders colonize the land through direct purchase. Outside interests in large scale agriculture would rapidly deforest the area while other entrepreneurs interested in providing services to skilled oil workers could accelerate capital based logics in the area.
* Finally, local communities such as Pañacocha are trying to legalize their territories as communal land to prevent land alienation. Still, there is opposition within the community itself, and state officials are ambivalent in their approach because both private property and communal property are useful to government strategies to access and control oil resources.

**Methodology and Budget**

I spent two weeks in the cities of Quito and Coca during August and two weeks living with and amongst indigenous and peasant families from three different communities: Tereré, Pañayacu and Pañacocha (in September). My time in the cities took place during a difficult political situation as the indigenous movement lead a series of countrywide protests that were heavily repressed by police and military forces. Accessing official information under these circumstances was really difficult; however, I was still able to collect two interviews from governmental officials working on the development of infrastructure in the Amazon and four interviews with high ranking indigenous leaders.

In the Amazon, I was able to collect up to ten interviews with household heads and community leaders. I was able to attend two community assemblies, and I collected several pages of notes while doing participant observations.

Overall the trip cost was $2,200 dollars. The Bernard Nietschmann Ph.D Award ($500) allowed me to pay field research in the Amazon as follows: boat transportation along the Napo River for 10 days $280; food during 14 days in the Amazon $180; and lodging with families $91dollars. The expenses sum up to $551 dollars; the difference was paid by me.