

Fighting for Survival: Environmental and Societal Transformations in the Peruvian Amazon

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My project focuses on ways in which teachers, students, and travelers can become a force for positive change in the midst of vast environmental and societal transformations that are occurring in the Peruvian Amazon, but are relevant to humans anywhere on Earth.

The Amazon Rainforest is in crisis. Logging, industrial agriculture, dam construction, oil extraction, and other forms of destruction are endangering the survival of indigenous groups and causing scientists to worry about sweeping impacts on ecosystem services that support life throughout the world. The Maijuna, an endangered indigenous group in the Peruvian Amazon, have been fighting for biological and cultural survival in the midst of these sweeping transformations imposed by broader society. With an average family income of less than €2/day, they are searching for environmentally and socially responsible ways to earn a living in their remote rainforest communities. Following decades of hardship caused by commercial logging, poaching, and other illegal exploitation of the resources on which they depend, in 2015 the Maijuna and allies successfully pushed the Peruvian government to create a 391,000-hectare conservation area that legally protects their ancestral homeland. I will create outreach materials that help the Maijuna in their quest for survival by highlighting their conservation initiatives in ways that inspire and educate students in the US and other countries who learn about them from afar, as well as teachers and ecotourists who have the opportunity to visit in person.

People are driven to care about environmental conservation not through prospects of gloom and doom, but rather through compelling stories highlighting why nature matters, to whom, and how. The Maijuna's experience provides such a story. Empowered with managing their new reserve, they are implementing community-based rainforest conservation practices designed to sustain their traditional way of life. Camera traps and GPS records indicate resurgence of ecologically and culturally important wildlife including monkeys, tapirs, macaws, and even jaguars and harpy eagles. These conservation gains are threatened by a federal plan to construct a 130-km-long highway directly through the heart of the conservation reserve. If built, this road will imperil the Maijuna's livelihood and traditional culture by bisecting their homeland and opening it to oil palm production and other types of mass development. A new documentary film, *Guardians of the Forest*, highlights their fight against the proposed highway.

As a faculty member of the [Educator Academy in the Amazon Rainforest](#), I am collaborating with American educators, Maijuna leaders, and Peruvian ecotourism practitioners to create resources that will:

- inspire US youth to care about conservation issues at home and abroad;
- provide the Maijuna with educational resources for culturally-sensitive ecotourism that will support their livelihoods in remote Amazonian villages;
- and provide a concrete example of how people (no matter how few in number and how marginalized) can affect positive change in the environment and society.

Although the Amazon rainforest is a common topic in US curricula, typically it is addressed through textbook readings. I plan instead to engage students in grappling with complex real-world issues related to resource use, human rights, and conservation needs at home and abroad. Students will explore how the Maijuna are managing their resources for sustainability. Using maps, videos, and other data, they will consider the effectiveness of efforts by the Maijuna to balance social well-being, economic prosperity, and environmental protection—the “triple bottom line.” Investigating the Amazon's impacts on global weather patterns, water cycling, carbon sequestration, and biodiversity, students will see that the triple bottom line transcends cultures and speaks to our global need for a sustainable future for humans and wildlife throughout the world. Bringing this full circle, students will analyze the ecological footprint of their own lifestyles, trace the origin of popular products such as cocoa and palm oil, and investigate ways to participate in conservation initiatives aiming for long-term sustainability of ecological functions and indigenous ways of life in the Amazon.