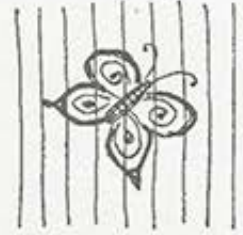


AMAZANGA

A Scientific Research Institute in the Ecuadorian Amazon



In 1992, as a response to negotiations with oil companies attempting to expand their operations into the Pastaza region, the AMAZANGA institute was formed. Since then, it has been on the forefront of new attempts to incorporate and protect Indigenous knowledge of the environment. We recently had the opportunity to speak with Leonardo Viteri, director of the Amazanga Institute, and Quichua Indian from the Pastaza region of Ecuador.

Interview With Leonardo Viteri

Can you tell us about the Amazanga Institute?

Since the 1970s, a number of Indigenous organizations in Ecuador, like OPIP (Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Pastaza), CONFENIAE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorean Amazon), and CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador), have come together, making important political and organizational advances. However, we have overlooked the very important areas of technology and scientific investigation. These would permit us to consolidate and strengthen our ability to negotiate and plan for the future of Indigenous peoples in terms of economic development, territorial protection, education, health and everything that an autonomous development really means.

In this vein, OPIP, an Indigenous organization in Pastaza, has worked to legalize Indigenous territory. Fifty-two percent of the 2.5 million hectares comprising that territory were legalized in 1992. This has given greater security to Indigenous communities, giving them more harmonious lives and assuring their future. Another 48% of Indigenous territory has yet to be legalized, so we're continuing our effort to have traditionally Indigenous territory recognized and legalized by the government.

Having legalized territory does not automatically solve Indigenous problems. It gives us many more commitments and challenges. We must manage the territory, protecting it and managing the natural resources in order to live there. In response to these challenges, in 1992 OPIP decided to create the Amazon Institute of Science and Technology (AMAZANGA). Indigenous knowledge which has developed over centuries is a fundamental pillar of

this Indigenous-run organization. This institute has been put in charge of the environmental planning of all traditional territories, focussing on their use and management in harmony with the existing natural resources. The research, application and development of Indigenous knowledge is necessary to achieve a level of autonomy. All the work of the institute leads to designing and planning a program of development for the Indigenous people of Pastaza. Our concept of development guarantees a harmonious advance of our people, both nationally and internationally. We want to prepare for the future of our people, to assure a dignified autonomous life beyond this century.

Basically, over the last 30 years we've been losing our autonomy, and that is what we want to regain and strengthen. We want to project ourselves before the country and international community with our proposals, our contribution to society, our technologies, our discoveries, and our knowledge.

What is the basic Indigenous knowledge that has allowed your people to live for thousands of years in harmony with the Amazon?

We Indigenous people have vast knowledge; this is what has allowed us to survive up until the present. First, holding of land is fundamental; based on our land, we can identify what we have as a people within that territory. Territory is the foundation that allows for unity among peoples. It guarantees the strengthening of cultural identity and allows us to be really autonomous. It also gives us validity as Indigenous people on this planet, providing us with natural resources which allow us to live in dignity without being overly dependent on others. The biodiversity which exists in our territory is so great that



Two thousand Quichua people from Pastaza marched to Quito in 1990 to assert their rights to control their territories and natural resources.

"We're trying to stop the proliferation of groups that have come to Indigenous communities lately to steal knowledge of medicinal plants, technology of forest and river management, etc."

only the knowledge we've attained over time lets us manage it equitably.

At least 80% of the resources the Indigenous communities of Pastaza have are from the rain forest and the rivers. A plan for the management of at-risk species is already established through AMAZANGA. We are also facing continuing pressures from economic interests such as logging, petroleum companies, and tourism. These economic development projects necessitate environmental impact studies. We should also develop contingency plans for salvaging deteriorated areas and for disasters such as floods, illness, and contamination.

Have you done research on the resources in your territory, such as its biodiversity?

Yes, we're starting those activities, especially inventorying our resources. Right now in the lower part of Pastaza we're inventorying flora and fauna, including fish, different wood species, medicinal plants, and pond-dwelling species. This research will direct proper management of these resources.

Is there community participation in these plans for research, resource management, and development?

Without community participation, there is no research. Although AMAZANGA technicians are systematizing Indigenous knowledge, they can't invento-

ry all of it. Community participation is the backbone of the project, and communities should manage the natural resources. All the information comes from the community and is returned to the community to be applied.

There are currently projects for collecting Indigenous genes for scientific purposes. What stand does AMAZANGA Institute take on this issue?

The creation of the AMAZANGA Institute responds precisely to the need to prevent any project that would harm or control biodiversity or genetic resources of any kind. We oppose any kind of aggression against or appropriation of Indigenous knowledge and integrity. We're trying to stop the proliferation of groups that have come to Indigenous communities lately to steal knowledge of medicinal plants, technology of forest and river management, etc. We're working to develop respect for our knowledge, and our communities are well aware of the danger that this theft of genetic resources represents.

Lately we've heard about more complex projects like the Human Genome Project. For us, this is nothing less than an inhumane, insane project which assaults our peoples' dignity, the natural order, and goes against our beliefs and religion. Our job is to stop this type of project. ☺