

# The Joy of Living in Ecuador

Oliver Utne  
July 24, 2014

*Imagining other worlds, you end up changing this one.*

Umberto Eco

The first time I went to Ecuador was in December of 2007, during my last year of university, during a moment of transition, when I was wondering what to do with my life. On that trip, I had the opportunity to visit Achuar territory, and to be present during a ceremony for the transfer of the ownership of Kapawi Hotel from Conodros, its previous owner, to its current owner, the Achuar people. There, deep in the jungle, I met people with a vision for the world in which human beings and nature can exist and prosper together. That experience impacted me.

Eight months later, as a volunteer for Fundación Pachamama, I accompanied Luis Santi, a mechanic, and Danilo Orbe, a pilot, both employees of the Achuar aviation company *Aerotsentsak*, to Canada. Luis was the first Achuar professionalized in that line of work. I served as a translator as they trained on a new plane that we then returned to Ecuador aboard. That was an amazing adventure... but is a story for another time. On arrival in Ecuador, I went to live in Puyo to translate the plane's operation instructions. I gave English classes to the pilots and other employees of *Aerotsentsak*, and stayed, working with Kapawi Hotel.

This time and work shared with the Achuar community ignited in me a commitment to that place and to the Amazon. In September of 2009, I had the opportunity to live for two months in the Achuar community of Yutsuntsa. Despite the considerable cultural differences, I was able to form strong friendships with members of the community. Patricio and Juan, teachers at the school, were the first to reach out to me and integrate me into the community, and with time the youth also opened the doors to their world, and we had a lot of fun.

This coexistence allowed me to be amazed by Achuar culture and to understand a little of their *Penker Pujustin* or "Good Life" and also to see the challenges and difficulties that they face, like the lack of access to basic services and the scarcity of opportunities for the young people who do not want to leave their communities.

After that experience, I returned to the US to continue my studies. In the beginning of 2011, I returned once again to Ecuador to accompany a long process of discussion and collaboration with the Achuar leadership. The idea of implementing a system of solar-powered boats had begun to develop awhile beforehand, but working closely with my friend and colleague Pascual Callera, the economic development leader, we were able to find viable paths to make the project real.

Transportation is a complicated issue in the Amazon. Gasoline is very expensive in this particular zone because it is transported by plane or on a very long boat trip. Furthermore, the use of fossil fuels generates severe environmental impacts. On the other hand, river transport can make roads unnecessary, and roads are an open door to the loss of ancestral territories and deforestation, which is one of the leading causes of climate change, next to the use of hydrocarbons.

Through Fundación Pachamama, we were able to get financing from the government of Finland, which allowed us to work, in collaboration with ESPOL University of Guayaquil and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, on the navigability study of the rivers and the technical design of the boats. Simultaneously we created an operation plan, while the communities organized a management committee to supervise the project.

When construction was set to begin on the solar river transport system, destined to benefit one thousand people living in nine Achuar communities along sixty-seven kilometers of rivers, Fundación Pachamama was dissolved and the financing was lost. This happened on the same day that the down payments to begin the project were to be made, December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

When it became clear that the plan would be interrupted, everyone close to the project went to work looking for other sources of funding. This innovative idea, conceived communally and with so much good work already completed, could not and cannot disappear. Unfortunately for me, my enthusiasm was again interrupted when immigration authorities obligated me to leave the country on July 18, 2014, after a very disturbing experience the night before.

But these events have not dampened my desire to continue living in Ecuador, the country that has given me so much and taught me so much, where my friends are, where my work is; it's the country I love. I want to return because I feel a commitment to the Achuar communities; to my friend Pascual and to everyone who has shared the dream of seeing these boats working. I have a commitment to the jungle and that energy that connects us, motivates us, and inspires us to continue dreaming of other possibilities. I want to return because this country has taught me to love diversity, to value and respect the abundance of the jungle, because I am convinced that we can begin to build a different world and move towards a *Penker Pujustin* in harmony with nature. I want to return because Ecuador long ago stopped being a country that I am simply visiting. Ecuador is also my home, the people who live there are my family, and this solar project is both the energy and the motor to keep me dreaming...