



# NATIVE FUTURE

Protecting Cultures • Conserving Threatened Lands

December 2019

## The Majé Mountains Project

### *New Partnership Brings Critical Aid*

*Native Future teams up with International Conservation Fund of Canada (ICFC) to conserve threatened land.*

In the last ten years the Majé Mountains in eastern Panama, home to three Wounaan communities, have lost 26,000 acres of tropical forest to deforestation. An abundance of biodiversity in over 50,000 acres of Wounaan territory is at risk. The Wounaan way of life is threatened.

This new partnership, which includes the Wounaan National Congress and Foundation and long-time partners Rainforest Foundation US and Ecological Anthropologist, Researcher, Dr. Julie Velásquez Runk of the University of Georgia will:

- **Defend Wounaan Territories from Deforestation and Degradation** Local Wounaan will be trained to monitor their forests using technologies such as drones (see adjacent picture) and GPS. Documentation of invasions and deforestation provides evidence for filing complaints to Panama’s environmental authorities.



Photo by Chenier Carpio

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## SCHOLARSHIPS : Who is Best Served?

### A LITTLE HISTORY 2000-2020



For twenty years, with the help of an amazing committee in Maine and you, generous donors, we have been diligent in efforts to support the indigenous educational needs of the extremely underserved indigenous people we serve in Panama.

**In 2000, Peace Corps granted a young woman in El Jacinto \$100 to go to high school.** I was a volunteer working in the co-op farm at the time and implored US relatives to sponsor two more worthy students. Post service, the words of El Jacinto farm president, Basilio Perez, were haunting to me.: “Sara, no nos abandona!” He died in 2002 from aplastic anemia. His doctor said it was a result of spraying chemicals on sugar cane fields without a mask.

*Continued on Page 4*

## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Happy holidays to you and yours!

As we wrap up 2019 and look to 2020, I want to share with you some numbers about our indigenous partners in Panama.

Although Panama is one of the fastest growing economies in Central America, poverty prevails in Panama's rural areas, which are mainly inhabited by indigenous people. Poverty rates can reach 70% and higher and are exacerbated by abysmal educational attainment rates. According to the 2015 World Bank report, *Indigenous Latin America in the Twenty-First Century*, based on Panama's 2010 census data:

- 76%** of Panama's indigenous people live in rural areas.
- 34%** of Panama's rural indigenous complete primary education.
- 4.2%** of Panama's rural indigenous peoples attain secondary (high school education).

**Less than 1%** of Panama's rural indigenous peoples attain tertiary (e.g. university) education.

For indigenous girls and women, these rates of educational attainment are half as much. Yet, with your support, Iris of el Jacinto is moving the needle. She's an indigenous woman who will receive a higher education against all – so many – odds. (pg. 4)

*“Poverty is not a natural trait of indigenous peoples, but a by-product of a protracted history of external aggressions on their values and economies.”*

This statement, from the same 2015 World Bank report, jumped out at me. For decades, three Wounaan communities have been trying to stem the tide of the destruction of their tropical forests in the Maje Mountains. We've partnered with them since 2004 with the same goal: to protect, conserve, and restore



**50,000 acres** of an unfathomable diversity of trees, plants, birds, animals, fish, fungi – ecological relationships and processes - on which Wounaan culture and way of life depend.

Today, while much closer to the goal than 15 years ago, these communities are still untitled and **4,000 acres** of their forests have been cut down in the last ten years. *The Maje Mountains Project (pg.1)* is our renewal of our commitment to Rio Hondo, Platanares and Majé.

Thank you for renewing your support!

**Marsha Kellogg**  
**President, Native Future**

## Introducing Our Newest Volunteer – Zach Bauer

Communications Team, Newsletter Editor



Zach Baur is a new member of the Native Future family and recently returned from his Peace Corps service (Panama 2016-2018). Zach worked in a small Ngäbe village called Cerro Mesa, nestled in the hills above Chiriquí province. His projects focused on improving profitability and marketing techniques for the local farmers cooperative. He also worked with the local artisans to organize a community fair as a selling opportunity. Zach's true passion during service however was to make the grandmothers laugh at his jokes, and spend each evening drinking cacao with his host family. Zach joins Native Future as the Newsletter Editor and a member of the Communications team. Native Future's mission called to Zach as a way to continue being of service to vulnerable populations in a place he sees as his second home.

Welcome to the Native Future Team, Zach!



A recent analysis of satellite imagery by Native Future volunteer Research Ecologist, Julian Dendy, tells us that the Maje Mountains have lost 26,000 acres of forest in the last ten years. The light browns in this satellite imagery show the degree of deforestation moving in on three Wounaan communities. Rio Platanares, Rio Hondo, and Maje, have lost 4,000 acres.

*Majé Continued from Page 1*

- **Restore Degraded Forests and Habitat** In recent years over 1,000 trees have been planted near Wounaan communities, thanks to efforts by Native Future and the US Forest Service International Programs working with local Wounaan volunteers. 2020 will bring training in tree nursery construction and maintenance. The goal: 3000 more trees planted over the next two years.
- **Document and Monitor Wounaan Birdlife** With a United Nations Development Program Global Environment Facility Small Grant, the learning and practice of the **Wounaan Bird Count** was expanded to two more communities. Thirteen more Wounaan have binoculars, bird guides, and are receiving training. Valuable ecotourism skills are being taught, along with helping Wounaan select and plant trees that will restore bird habitat.

## Why Do Birds Matter?

Isais Puchicama says  
*“Birds are part of our culture.”*

Wounaan imitate birds in dance, carvings, weavings. They’re part of a strong oral tradition. Like all animals and plants in rainforest environments, birds are critical to Wounaan traditions and knowledge.

**Losing forests means  
 losing local and  
 migratory birds.**



Photo by Scott Hecker

# Iris of El Jacinto

The eldest of eight, born into a troubled family, Iris Vasquez has had a tough time. When she was young, her mother had a nervous breakdown and spent months in a mental hospital in the city. Her father struggled to support his family, but his many personal challenges prevented him from even participating in the cooperative farm. They were the poorest in a village of beleaguered families.

***“At first, after my mother died, I just couldn’t go on. I wanted to return to El Jacinto, care for my family there.”***

Iris, 27, pictured here with her son and two of her younger siblings in September 2019, stood out from the get-go. Very bright, an endearing smile and manner, hard worker, she was determined to succeed. Because this program only supported farm co-op kids, roundabout ways were made to help Iris attend senior high in the city of Santiago. She met a guy, had a child, and he abandoned her. Her classes were put on hold during the most challenging times. She wanted to become a teacher, and after receiving her HS diploma, signed up for university classes. Iris’s sister Gloria now lives with her in the city, works as a maid, and babysits her sister’s child as Iris pursues her studies and her career. Iris’s mother died four months ago in El Jacinto (unknown cause), leaving her eighth child motherless at age 4, the same age as Iris’s child.

In September Iris, shedding tears, shared that she was so devastated by her mother’s loss that she wanted to give up on her education. But seeing how dependent her siblings were on her, she chose to continue. She is now student teaching home economics in a junior high school in the city. She is sure her teaching degree will lead to a position that will help her support her family.



***Iris Valdez, age 27, with her son and two of her younger siblings.***

## ***Scholarships, continued from Page 1***

From those three students in 2000, the **Basilio Perez Scholarship** program has grown. We’ve helped hundreds of El Jacinto farm co-op children attend school with shoes, uniforms, supplies, fees. Fundraising was so successful, we branched out to include other worthy local groups, only asking that recipient families be active volunteers in a local community program (boarding school, agriculture group, artisan cooperative). In 2005 we joined with Native Future and fundraising expanded to include scholarships for worthy Wounaan students, in the Darien of Panama.

The Panamanian government has made strides in assuring attendance for young students. However, little or no aid is available for those who want to go beyond Jr High. They must travel to the city, find room and board, pay tuition and other fees to pursue studies that might gain them a well-paying job and produce income for their families.

### ***DILEMMA – El Jacinto Cooperative farm struggling***

Forty years ago families could survive on personal plots. Sadly, single family farming on small plots is no longer sustainable. Co-op farms produce some food for member families and a few dollars from sales to local markets. Medicines, food, essentials exceed income. Several co-op families in El Jacinto were not doing their fair share in recent years. Resentment grew between those who were working 400 hrs/yr versus those who worked 150 hrs/yr. All families received an equal scholarship grant to be used as they saw fit for all their children’s education.

### ***SOLUTION - The New El Jacinto Scholarship***

Starting in 2020 this scholarship will be separate from the cooperative farm. Education aid will be available to all El Jacinto students who wish to continue to high school, pursue a trade, and/or enter the university. A committee has been formed, chaired by the local pastor. Applicants must fill out a simple form to be considered.

Farm Co-op families are disappointed, although most have eligible students who can apply. The scholarship has never covered all expenses; it is an incentive, helping the transition to a working life that will benefit their family and community. Many thanks to our donors for helping rural students take the next step in their education.

Sara Archbald  
Native Future Education Coordinator

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# NATIVE FUTURE

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## Iris is Making A Difference!

### Can you help others do the same?

Indigenous cultures are at risk. Protecting native lands, educating Wounaan and Ngäbe Buglé are critical to their survival.

#### Count me in!

Land Rights  Education  Wounaan Bird Count

Where Needed

\$50  \$100  \$250  \$500  Other

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