



Eight months ago, Panama was on a national lockdown to contain the coronavirus. Indigenous communities were under quarantine, travel throughout Panama was halted, and schools and businesses were closed. Indigenous families were having a hard time putting food on the table and like the rest of us, learning how to minimize their risk of contracting Covid 19.

By early June, Panama began to re-open. Predictably, the spread of COVID-19 rose. It spread into Indigenous communities that had been spared for months. Many got sick and recuperated, some are still feeling symptoms months later and, most sadly, family members and friends have passed on.

Eight months ago, Native Future decided we had to help, and we are very thankful to our donors for enabling us to do so. Scholarship funds were broadened to support families and students. And we raised an additional \$8,200 for Coronavirus Response. Because of you, to date:

- **104 Ngäbe Buglé families** received direct financial support to help them weather this crisis.
- **900 meals** were provided to Ngäbe Buglé COVID-19 patients and family members who needed to quarantine in the Buenos Aires Catholic Mission.
- **550 Wounaan families in 4 communities** received food, masks, and health and hygiene supplies to help alleviate suffering and reduce the risk of infection.
- **COVID-19 educational materials** were developed and sent to Indigenous leaders and communities and Panamanian partners.
- From April to July, **Wounaan leaders' cell phones were periodically topped off** helping them communicate with each other and coordinate the delivery of humanitarian assistance while travel restrictions were in place.

The pandemic continues and Indigenous students, families, and communities are still adapting to new realities. Business and school have resumed but in new ways, such as online or via radio. Although safer, telecommunications and technology are costly and out of reach to most Indigenous families. Native Future is helping to alleviate this burden where possible.

Scholarship funds are helping students get online to continue their education. Wounaan are developing ways to remotely monitor their territories to protect it from deforestation. And the Wounaan birders, *Oropendolas Negras* and *Tangaras Azules*, still plan to carry out the 2020 National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count in Puerto Lara.

Thank you so very much for your caring and generosity during these trying times.

Marsha Kellogg
President, Native Future

IN MEMORIAM



This year, we very sadly said farewell to former Wounaan Cacique (Chief) Rito Ismare Peña who passed away July 22, 2020. A natural leader, orator and organizer, Rito was committed to the survival of Wounaan culture. He had tremendous knowledge of Wounaan traditions and history that he passed along to others. One of the last traditional flute players, Rito was adept at playing any of the multiple traditional instruments and songs hallmark to a Wounaan gathering. He instructed Wounaan dance troupes, and was vital to the translation of Wounaan Bird Count educational materials and bird lists into *Wounaan meu*. A beloved husband, father, grandfather, pastor, Chief, and linguist, Rito's passing is a profound loss to his family, his friends and his people.



Photo by **Dr. Julie Velásquez Runk**

WOUNAAN BIRD COUNT 2020

Three years ago we launched the Wounaan Bird Count to bring international attention to the biodiversity conservation Wounaan have practiced for generations.

Before the pandemic, the program was providing Wounaan of Puerto Lara, Rio Hondo, and Platanares training and resources in bird identification, ecotourism, and habitat restoration. All this while documenting the cultural connections to their birdlife in their native language. This helps them protect their territories and birdlife from destructive practices while conserving their language and culture. Furthermore, ecotourism and birding provide an alternative, ecologically sustainable source of employment in a region that has few opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic shut down travel and tourism in Panama. The necessary public health measures have hindered the work of the Wounaan Bird Count and Wounaan capacity to protect their tropical forests. (See *Wounaan Have New Forest Monitoring Tool.*) Training and reporting the results of counts is almost impossible without adequate communications technology. Telephone and internet service in most Wounaan communities is weak and costly; in other communities, there is no access at all.

Therefore, we are working to strengthen telecommunications in partner communities. A stronger signal, or a closer one, will improve their capacity to:

- Continue their training in bird identification and guiding during the pandemic.
- Communicate count results to the National Audubon Society and report sightings to eBird.
- Develop and manage future bird surveys.
- Share electronically and with each other their traditional knowledge about their birdlife.
- Receive training critical to providing safe ecotourism services during this pandemic.
- Communicate more directly with ecotourists and trusted tour providers when tourism resumes.
- Communicate safety protocols and emergencies related to COVID-19 with the communities and authorities.
- Quickly and safely report territorial invasions and deforestation to the authorities.



Photo by **Scott Hecker**



Photo by **Scott Hecker**

Can you help? This year, donations to the Wounaan Bird Count and Land Rights and Stewardship programs will be matched up to \$6,000, thanks to the support of a generous donor. Please consider donating so that Wounaan can continue their training and protect their tropical forests and birdlife while we all await a return to more normal times.

The *Oropendolas Negras* and *Tangaras Azules* are still planning to hold the Christmas Bird Count on **January 5, 2021**, following National Audubon Society guidelines utilizing the official RPPL (Republic of Panama Puerto Lara) Count Circle. They will follow the four main routes (Sendero, Camino, el Rio, and Quebrada de Nanchú) and the community route to include the homes of the *Tangaras Azules*. Nando Quiroz, a local professional guide will be assisting one of the routes. All participants will wear masks and social distance as they count birds. Take out breakfast, lunch, and snacks will be provided to participants.



WOUNAAN HAVE A NEW FOREST MONITORING TOOL

By Clay Mosolino, GIS/Mapping Technician

Since 2016, a team of Wounaan forest technicians have been monitoring twelve Wounaan territories to protect them from deforestation. Their work consists of collecting geo-positioned data and compiling detailed reports which are submitted to Panama's government when legal action needs to be taken. But the data the technicians collect isn't just about forest loss. It captures territorial conflicts, threats to culturally important plants and animals, and the status of community points of interest. The condition of these areas and the data these technicians collect is key to the wellbeing of Wounaan communities and their forest landscapes.

Since the coronavirus pandemic began public health measures that keep individuals safe from COVID-19 have affected how forest technicians perform their jobs. Many of their responsibilities require community and government meetings to investigate territorial disputes and forest disturbances. Traveling is required to report their findings, do special patrols, and attend capacity building trainings. However, with travel bans and restrictions on group size, the technicians are limited in how much they can do.

Realizing that limited mobility and communication was affecting forest monitoring efforts, Native Future began searching for alternative ways to support Wounaan to monitor their territories while decreasing their risk of contracting COVID-19. This year another tool has been added to the forest technicians' toolbox - a territorial alerts web map.



The territorial alerts map helps Wounaan authorities and technicians remotely detect forest loss and active fires in or near their territories. It uses publicly provided data provided by Global Forest Watch. Forest cover loss data comes from the Global Land Analysis and Discovery (GLAD) alerts system from the University of Maryland. Fire alerts come from the new VIIRS active fires data system as part of NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management System (FIRMS). Both GLAD and VIIRS data use advanced satellite imagery technology and sophisticated forest loss and fire detection algorithms.

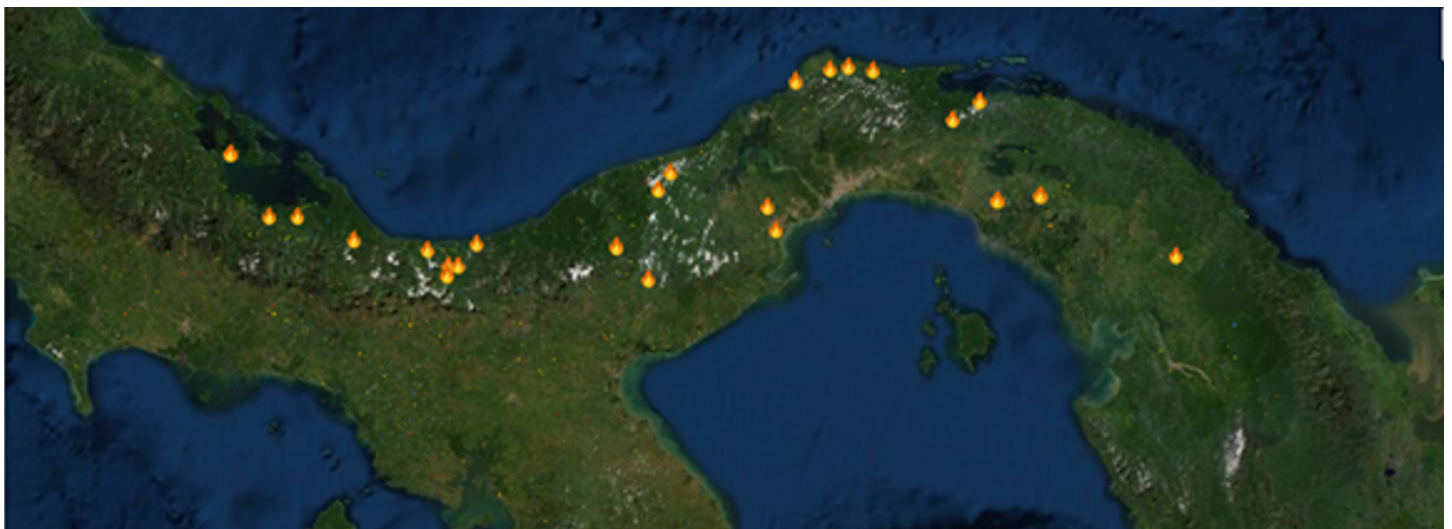
Technicians can use this near real-time data in combination with local reports from residents to investigate cases and reduce the time and travel it takes to discover when and locate where deforestation and fire occur. And the map may eventually highlight the status of the cases of deforestation that have been reported to the government.

The territorial alerts web map is one way we are helping Wounaan to monitor and bring attention to the threats to their forests during this pandemic. Thank you US Forest Service International Programs for supporting this important work.



Forest technicians walking through a cattle pasture to investigate reported forest loss.

Photo by
Donalds Negria Membache



The extent of the web map with VIIRS active fires and 2020 GLAD forest loss alerts displayed.

EDUCATION DOLLARS SPENT CREATIVELY

During the 2020 academic year (March - December), Native Future education grant recipients were given the option to use their scholarship funds to assist families to cope with the COVID crisis. Below are two October reports from our five projects.

Buenos Aires Mission Project

The boarding facility in Buenos Aires, usually housing our funded high school students from distant villages, was used to quarantine patients and accompanying family. While the local health service provided medical care, our \$6000 education grant provided 900 meals through October to these folks. A chicken-raising project added nutrition. Padre Ricard Canto, who administers the grant, also provided Panamanian Ministry learning materials to 34 primary students who came to the mission. You see him here, checking their completed work.



Higher education funds were used by several secondary and university students. Meet **Wilfredo Vasquez**, 18, who has received NF scholarship funds since 2014, seen here with his diploma from the *Agropecuario* school in Atalaya last year. He is now studying *Ingeniería Agronómica Zootecnista* at Panama's national university. He comments that studying virtually from Buenos Aires is difficult: no lab or field experience, and the cell and internet reception is spotty.



El Jacinto Basilio Perez Scholarship

This newly configured program has gone from serving 11 farm co-op families in El Jacinto to serving all eligible students in the village who apply. The new committee chose 16 secondary and university students to share the \$6500 grant. As you can see from our student photos, it has proven to be a great success. Right now, it's all about access to cell phone and internet coverage.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!



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— Maya Angelou



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