



WAWAZONIA BACKGROUND INFORMATION

FOR VOLUNTEERS & TOURISTS

#AMAZONADVENTURE

AMAZON ADVENTURE, SHUAR & KICHWA CULTURE FOR EVERYONE



WHAT IS THE WAWAZONIA PROJECT?

The indigenous Shuar people of the Ecuadorian Amazon hold title to some of the earth's most biodiverse rainforests. Immense tracts of their traditional lands are still pristine rainforests where wildlife such as jaguars and pumas still roam the forest.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Ecuador and the Amazon has struck the Indigenous people hard. In addition to the health consequences, the fragile markets of the Indigenous peoples have collapsed due to the pandemic. Due to the pandemic, the ecotourism industry, which played a central role in many Amazonian villages, has collapsed, and the sales of traditional goods have been severely limited.

The limited economic opportunities put the Indigenous peoples desperate to raise funds for health, education, and essential food items. In the Ecuadorian Amazon, this has left the Shuar with little to no economic activities, and there is an imminent danger that illegal logging or hunting could become the only means of making a living.

Project Wawazonia aims to generate income among the villagers of the Shuar communities through investment in the sustainable production of native tree species such as balsa (called Wawa in Shuar) and other local timber species. In addition, establishing and managing these new buffer plantations and balsa forests will provide employment and enable the Shuar to say no to pressure from illegal loggers.

Furthermore, by producing the balsa and tropical timbers in plantations on previous farmland, the demand for wood is concentrated on a lesser area than current practices, creating a buffer for the undisturbed primary forest, thus eliminating the need for cutting balsa and other timbers in the primary forest.

The project will also establish a Shuar led Climate Fund that will invest in sustainable economic activities in the villages, such as tourism, craft production, fish farming and the like.



THE ARÚTAM COMMUNITY

The headquarters of the Wawazonia activities is located in the Arútam community. Arútam means divine force in Shuar and is a small indigenous Shuar community consisting of 6 households and 40 inhabitants. The community is located in the Amazon rainforest in the Pastaza province of Ecuador at km 47 on the Puyo-Macas road. The villagers in Arútam live a traditional life and are engaged in subsistence farming of especially yuca, plantain, papa china, and camote, as well as hunting and gathering activities. Some have paid jobs as teachers at a bilingual high school in a neighboring community.

The community is also home to a women's group called KURINUA. The name means golden women in Shuar and provides micro-credit loans to women in order to start small development projects and raise small livestock such as chickens, for education or hospital aid.

Since year 2000, the villagers in Arútam has been working with volunteers in order to strengthen the work with the protection of the reserve and to create income-generating activities. Together villagers and volunteers have made Arútam into a small success story, where it has been possible to preserve a huge amount of rainforest, with everything from monkeys to pumas, and orchids to mahogany. The project has also strengthened the culture and traditional knowledge of the Shuar by revitalizing their skills and saving knowledge.

Although the forest enjoys protection it still takes a big effort from the community and the network of volunteers to maintain the project, develop new ideas and expand the activities into the neighboring communities. The long-term goal of this project is to take care of Arútam and the surrounding communities' interests and hopefully lay the foundation for the Shuar to continuously manage the forest where they have lived for many centuries.





THE RAINFOREST

The five communities in the Wawazonia project own and manage huge amounts of pristine rainforest. The rainforest of the project is located at the base of the Andean Foothills at an altitude varying from 550 to 1000 meters above sea level.

The rainforest lies in one of the world's biodiversity hotspots and is connected to another vast area of communally owned forest that melts together with a huge patch of undisturbed forest all the way into Peru and Brazil.

The flora is extremely varied, with everything from podocarpus to mahogany, palms, bromeliads, and an overwhelming variety of orchids. The fauna is just as varied, including species such as Pumas, howler monkeys, saki monkeys, tamarin monkeys, nocturnal monkeys, squirrels, white-lipped and collared peccaries, ocelots, margay cats, sloths, anteaters, armadillos, coatis, agoutis, pacas, otters, caimans and occasionally jaguars and tapirs. The birds are even more numerous and represent species such as military macaws, parakeets, toucans, curassows, guans, hummingbirds, manakins, antbirds, tanagers, tinamous, and oropendolas. Local villagers can name and know more than 220 species of birds in the community's immediate surroundings.

One hectare (2.5 acres) of rainforest in Ecuador and Arútam can contain over 750 types of trees and 1.500 species of higher plants. In total, in Ecuador, there is an estimate of some 25.000 species of plants alone (compared to 17000 species in the whole of North America), and there are 1600 birds found in the country, which is more than double the species in Europe.

There are 369 known species of mammals and 350 species of reptiles - containing over 200 species of snakes alone. Around 400 amphibians exist in the country, which is among the world's highest number of frog species. More than 800 species of fish have also been recorded in the Amazon waters. The number of invertebrates, especially insects, is unknown, but they are the most numerous living creatures, reaching hundreds of thousands.



BIRDS

A particular characteristic bird and sound of the forest is the screaming piha (*Lipaugus vociferans*) or paipainch in Shuar from its characteristic call – paiiiiiiii.....painch.

A two-week flora and fauna inventory made in 1997 recorded 216 bird species from 37 different families. The most common order of birds found was Passeriformes, with 59,3 percent of all species, next to Piciformes, Falconiformes, and Apodiformes, with 10,3, 6,5, and 5,6 percent, respectively.

Of the rare species, the reserve contains one species of curassow – the nocturnal curassow (*Nothocrax urumutum*) or ayachui in Shuar. There are four species of guans present: blue-throated piping guan, spix guan, wattled guan, and sickle-winged guan, as well as one species of chachalaca, the speckled chachalaca. Many of the birds in the forest are shy and hard to identify in the field. From taped recordings, villagers could identify and name six species of manakins, 17 species of antbirds, six species of tinamous, and six species of parrots. Several species of parrots are present all year round in the reserve, such as the blue-headed parrot, blue-winged parrotlet, cobalt-winged parakeet, and maroon-tailed parakeet. Occasionally, around December, groups of military macaws migrate to the reserve as well, and other macaws are seen in the lower part of the reserve.

The mornings, afternoons, and after heavy rains and around fruiting trees are the best time for observing birds in the forest. You are likely to hear the loud call of the couviers toucan (*Ramphastos tucanus curvieri*) or tsukanka and, with some luck, get close enough for a glimpse or a sighting of one of the other three species of toucans present.

We encourage professional and amateur birdwatchers to visit the forest and help develop our bird list. The bird list is far from complete, and many birds wait to be discovered. If you are interested in studying and identifying birds in the reserve, this could be done as part of a volunteer stay.





MAMMALS

The fauna still represents viable mammal populations that are rare or extinct in more populated areas. EcoCiencia identified 48 species of mammals in a two-week inventory, but numbers are much higher – especially if including the bats.

Among the 48 species recorded in the inventory were opossums (2), anteaters (1), sloths (2), armadillos (3), bats (17), monkeys (3), squirrels (3), agoutis (2), peccaries (2), deer (2), bush dog, coati, Neotropical otter, ocelot, tayra, kinkajou, olingo, paca, Brazilian rabbit.

Although many of the larger monkeys, tapirs, and jaguars are rare due to hunting pressure, there have been regular sightings of jaguars, pumas, howler monkeys, saki monkeys, tamarin monkeys, nocturnal monkeys, kinkajous, squirrels, white-lipped and collared peccaries, ocelots, margay cats, sloths, anteaters, armadillos, coatis, agoutis, pacas, otters.



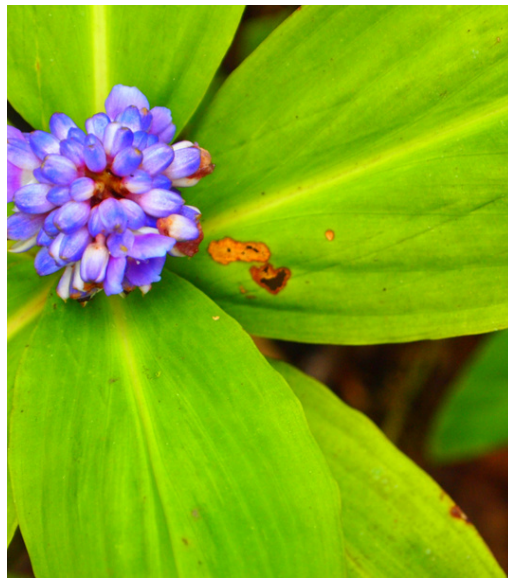


REPTILES, AMPHIBIANS AND INSECTS

The Ecuadorian Amazon and our community forests are home to an overwhelming variety of reptiles, amphibians, and insects. There are some 350 species of reptiles in Ecuador, containing over 200 species of snakes alone and around 400 species of amphibians – with an incredible amount of frogs. There have been no inventories of our forests to this point, but the numbers are high, and each hike into the forest always reveals new species – even to the locals. Especially the insects are numerous. The number of insects in Ecuador is unknown, but they are expected to reach the hundreds of thousands. Reptiles and frogs are often hunted for food; some insects, like the rhinoceros beetle, are often kept as pets or toys by kids.

The most infamous and well-known species are the tarantula, anaconda, and caimans. The tarantula is common in Arútam but is normally quiet if left undisturbed. Anacondas belong to the lower parts of the Amazon, with more swamps and slower-streaming rivers. However, local stories and sightings in the Pastaza River make the myth live in Arútam. Although very rare, smaller caimans live in the larger rivers in the reserve. The caimans are likely young caimans that migrate up the smaller tributaries to the big rivers to find a quiet and safe territory to grow up in.





PLANTS

There are several hundred trees and palm species, many of which are valuable timbers such as mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*), Spanish cedar (*Cedrela odorata*), and huge specimens of a local wood called María. Many palms are also used for food, crafts, or construction.

During a botanical inventory in Arútam, 114 plant species with a breast diameter above 2.5 centimeters were found. This equals 114 species per 1000 square meters. The most common species were the palms *Wettinia maynensis* (called kuunt in Shuar) and *Iriartea deltoidea* (ampakai in Shuar).

The most diverse plant family in the forest is the orchids. From the large Amazonian orchid next to the road to the tiny ones growing on logs and stems and the huge variety in the canopy, they can amaze most visitors with their colors and varieties. After heavy rains, it is particularly good to look for orchids as many branches brake of from the canopy. The branches are often overgrown with orchids, bromeliads and ferns.





THE SHUAR

Until the 1960s, the Shuar were known as the most warlike Indian tribe in South America due to their much-feared tradition of making shrunken heads (tsantsas) of their enemies.

Traditionally, the Shuar lived in small clusters of semi-nomadic households, from subsistence farming to hunting and fishing. However, increased contact with missionaries and settlers from the highlands forced the Shuar to change their lifestyle from nomads to living in a fixed settlement and organize themselves in their common struggle for the land and the forest.

The life of the Shuar is strongly connected to their natural environment, as they consider life an integral part of nature, and dreams and omens are relied heavily upon to plan for the following day. Supernatural beings, gods, and the position of the stars and the moon control the circle of life and wild and cultivated products. The wild is represented by spirits connected to hunting and fishing, like Etsa (the sun) and Nantu (the moon), and the cultivated lands are the place where Nunkui, the goddess of agriculture, is present.

The Shuar still rely on subsistence farming, hunting, fishing, and gathering of different fruits and insects. The Shuar women are knowledgeable gardeners, having different sacred songs (anent) for the welfare of the cultivated plants and calling on the help of Nunkui. The crops grown are mainly plantain, sweet manioc, sweet potato, taro, white corn, squash, peanuts, sugar cane, bananas, pineapples, small onions, papaya, and chonta palm.





THE KICHWA

The Kichwa people are an indigenous group with a strong presence in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Living in harmony with the region's lush rainforests and river systems, the Kichwa have a rich cultural heritage deeply intertwined with the natural environment.

In the Ecuadorian Amazon, Kichwa communities are characterized by their close relationship with the rainforest, relying on traditional knowledge for sustenance and medicinal practices. They have a profound understanding of the diverse flora and fauna, utilizing plants for healing purposes and navigating the intricate waterways for transportation and fishing.

The Kichwa are known for their communal way of life. They often reside in small villages where extended families work together to maintain their agricultural practices, cultivating crops like yuca, plantains, and maize.

Traditional rituals and ceremonies play a significant role in Kichwa life, connecting them spiritually with the environment and celebrating their cultural identity.

Despite the challenges posed by external pressures and environmental changes, the Kichwa people strive to preserve their unique way of life. Local initiatives, supported by international organizations and Ecuadorian government programs, focus on empowering Kichwa communities, promoting sustainable practices, and ensuring the protection of their rights, culture, and ancestral territories in the face of modernization and threats to the Amazon ecosystem.





CULTURAL GUIDELINES

When visiting or volunteering with WAWAZONIA it means that you will be living in an indigenous community in the Amazon. To most people, this is a new and exciting opportunity to get to learn about a different culture. To the local villagers, this also means that they will be sharing their private sphere with visitors from a different culture, and they are as curious to learn about Western culture as the volunteers are to learn about theirs. In order to make the cultural exchange a good experience for both parties, we have written down a few general guidelines for the visitors as well as some information about the important aspects of the Shuar culture. If you follow the guidelines and normal, respectful behavior, we guarantee that the villagers will do their best to make your stay an unforgettable experience.

First of all, the community is located in the countryside. As in any rural setting, villagers and neighbors generally know each other very well, and it is considered polite to always greet everybody with a hello at all times of day. You might be invited to lunch or dinner with a Shuar or Kichwa family or to try some of the local foods. It is considered somewhat rude not to accept the invitation (even though you are full or going to eat somewhere else). Try always to accept the invitation and use it as an opportunity to get to talk to people. It is better to eat a little bit than to refuse the invitation. In the community, villagers are aware that some volunteers are vegetarian or do not eat certain food items, so just let the family know if you are on a special diet.

It is part of the Shuar culture to joke a lot, especially when working. Males are most often the target of jokes or are given a Shuar nickname. The joke is never personal or meant to harass people; it is just a way of making work more fun. Try to give them some back, and you will soon be popular!

Public nudity is considered inappropriate in Shuar culture. So always bring a swimsuit if swimming in a river or wear underwear when taking a shower.

Drinking is allowed in the community, and volunteers can buy beers at the community store. Male villagers do like to get a beer once in a while. However, local women normally don't drink and can feel intimidated if you insist.

In general, always try to remember that villagers are poor and live insecure lives in terms of income and health. Therefore, be aware of not intimidating people with knowledge (scientific vs. traditional), expensive gifts, or continuously trying to "improve" their ways in terms of work and organization. At times, norms and practices can seem backward and irrational but are almost always finely tuned to their livelihoods or culture.

Most importantly, have an open mind, talk to people, and ask questions, and you will have an excellent opportunity to learn about contemporary life in the Amazon and meet many new friends.

THE AMAZON REGION

CLIMATE

The best way to categorize the weather in Arútam is that it is warm, humid and unpredictable. Located at latitude 1.75°S, Arútam is located only 190 kilometers south of the equator. This means that there are little seasonal changes in rainfall and temperature as well as the length of the day. The sun gets up around 6 am and goes down 12 hours later. This only varies 30 minutes around 6 am and 6 pm during the whole year.

The temperatures are high but vary quite a lot even within the reserve. Day temperatures are high and around 27°C / 80°F. This varies very little throughout the year. Night temperatures are normally around 15 to 21°C / 60 to 70°F. This can, depending on wind conditions and rain, feel somewhat cold when you have gotten accustomed to the tropics, and it is a good idea to bring a long-sleeved sweater, trousers and a sleeping bag.

The altitude also influences the temperature. The community is located at 940 m. However, only 3-4 hours walk you will be at 650 m. The 300 m difference can easily be felt both in terms of humidity and temperature.

The wind conditions are quite stable. There isn't much wind in the Amazon in these parts except when it rains. Heavy rains often bring short storms, but normally don't last for long. It can be quite dangerous to be in the forest when such a heavy rain storm comes by. Due to the rain, all the epiphytes in the tree become filled with water. The tree canopy then becomes heavy and they easily fall down due to the wind or large branches break off.

Annual rainfall from nearby weather stations is 4537 mm. This is more than 4-6 times the annual precipitation in the UK and Wales and New York City. The rainfall is distributed evenly throughout the year and varies from 300-430 mm per month. However, rare, but the longest drought experienced can be as long as 2 weeks.

The humidity is normally around 50 to 80 percent. After heavy rains it can be as high as 95-97 percent. Due to the high temperatures, much more water can be contained in the air and it thus feels much more humid than on northern latitudes where humidity can be just as high. This means that leather easily gets moldy and dirty clothes start moldy if not washed and dried quickly.





THE PASTAZA PROVINCE

The Pastaza is the largest province in Ecuador and the one richest in biodiversity (species richness). To the north of Pastaza are the provinces Napo and Orellana, to the south is Morona Santiago, to the east is Peru, and to the west are the provinces Tungurahua and Morona Santiago. The population is about 62,000 inhabitants.

The region is named after the Pastaza River, that runs through the region and makes up the boundary of the province with the Morona Santiago province in the south. The Pastaza River has its headwaters in the province of Tungurahua, flowing south-east towards the Amazon Basin and passing through the popular town Baños. From here it meanders on to the Napo in Peru, a tributary of the mighty Amazon.

In Tungurahua and some parts of Pastaza, the Pastaza River is a very fast whitewater river with class 4 rapids, and is often used for whitewater rafting.

The road from Quito to Baños and Puyo "The Troncal Amazonas highway" parallels the Pastaza River from Baños to Puyo, passing through seven tunnels, and four major waterfalls. The waterfalls are touristic destinations for many Ecuadorians.

The landscape in Pastaza is mostly mountainous in the western part of the province and becomes relatively flat toward the east as it nears the Peruvian border with rivers and plains characterizing most of the province.

The highest elevation is 1,820 meters (5,970 ft). The climate is warm and humid due to the almost 4-6 meters of annual rainfall closest to the western mountains, but with significant amounts of rainfall throughout the province. The flora of the region is absolutely spectacular. A few local parks have been developed with myriad natural orchids from the area and admittance to these parks is relatively inexpensive



PUYO

Puyo is Ecuador's largest jungle town and the provincial capital of the Pastaza province. The town was founded on November 10th, 1899. Today, Puyo has a population of approximately 35,000 inhabitants and is a fast-growing city. Puyo is the commercial, cultural, and political capital of the region.

The city is connected by road to Ambato, Tena, and Macas and from there to the major urban areas of Ecuador. The town is located at an altitude of approximately 950 meters (3116 feet) by the Puyo River (Rio Puyo), which is a tributary of the Pastaza River.

The climate is warm and humid but pleasant. The daytime temperature typically ranges between 24-27 °C, with sun and generally short but heavy periods of rain daily. The seasonal changes in the climate are relatively small.

A small airport is located in the small town of Shell, approximately 10 kilometers northwest of Puyo. Small private and commercial aircraft depart daily to small airstrips in the Amazon and occasionally to Quito.

The name Puyo is derived from the Kichwa word for "cloudy" as the local climate is wet and the weather is often overcast.

It is often used for whitewater rafting.

There are two bus terminals in Puyo. The main terminal where the buses from Quito and Baños arrive is about 1 km southwest of town. The other bus terminal is located near the Mariscal market (Mercado Mariscal). From there, buses leave to small communities.

There are buses via Baños (1½ hours) to Ambato (2½ hours). Buses to Quito (5 hours) leave about every hour and go either via Baños or Baeza. Buses to Tena (three hours) also leave hourly. Flota Pelileo has one bus daily to Guayaquil (five to eight hours). Buses to Macas (four hours) leave every hour.

In recent years, tourists have noted Puyo for its natural beauty. Surrounded by mountains, forest, rivers, and natural depressions, the abundance of surrounding wildlife and scenery is absolutely breathtaking. The city also has a good infrastructure, providing visitors with good accommodation and a variety of activities. It is a friendly town with little crime, and you feel safe when walking the streets.

There are several ATM machines in Puyo where you can use Visa MasterCard and several other credit cards.

PRACTICAL STUFF

WHAT TO BRING?

ESSENTIAL ITEMS

- Sleeping bag/ blanket
- Raincoat or poncho
- Rubber boots (can be purchased in Quito or better in Puyo)
- Flashlight with spare batteries
- Insect repellent
- Water bottle - Preferable a LifeStraw Go Filtration Water Bottle
- Basic first aid kit
- Toilet paper
- Towel
- (biodegradable soaps/shampoo)

OTHER PRACTICAL ITEMS

- Mosquito net
- Sunscreen
- Binoculars
- Camera
- Swimsuit
- Pocket knife
- Sunglasses
- Hat
- Working gloves
- Washing powder (for clothes)
- Long trousers (lightweight and quick drying)
- Dry-bag or plastic sealable bags (for protecting the camera)
- A good sense of humor, compassion for people, lots of energy and a flexible attitude..





DISEASES AND HEALTH

Check with your local doctor at least three months before departure on what vaccinations are recommended. The risk of malaria and other contagious diseases in Arutam is quite low. There have been no documented cases of malaria in the community. However, there have been a few cases of malaria in the region, and malaria tablets are recommended.

In general, most travelers will sometimes experience stomach problems when traveling in a foreign country. Although conditions are simple in the communities, hygiene is good, and there are few cases of diarrhea in the community. However, some volunteers get sick (diarrhea) when they leave the community on personal weekend trips to nearby Baños. So try always to drink bottled water and avoid exotic street food. A piece of equipment is the LifeStraw bottle that filters water.

The nearest town with normal commodities, internet, international calls, hotels, restaurants, hospitals, etc., is Puyo, which is located 47 km from Arutam. The trip to Puyo takes around 1 hour by bus, and there are several buses every day. The popular town of Baños is only 3 hours away from Arutam, and some volunteers go there on weekends.

DANGEROUS ANIMALS

The surrounding rainforest near our communities contains some of the world's highest levels of species richness. Most flora and fauna are harmless. Although both pumas and jaguars have been recorded close to the village, none of these big cats are known to be man-eaters.

Some insects (especially ants) can be annoying and painful as they can both bite and sting but are rarely dangerous. The best rule is never to touch insects (or other animals) unless villagers tell you that it is safe. Although tarantulas are big and scary-looking, they are not harmful if left alone. A good rule is always to check your boots before putting them on.

You will likely encounter snakes if you stay a couple of weeks in one of our communities. Although only a few are dangerous, we always recommend that volunteers take the general precautions of watching where you step and put your hands. Always wear rubber boots when walking in the forest and use a flashlight when walking at night.



PERSONAL SAFETY

Concerning physical safety (from robbery, assault, kidnapping, etc.), the communities and region are some of the safest places in Ecuador and Latin America in general. Arútam is a small community where everybody knows and looks out for each other - especially for the volunteers.

It is a good idea to bring basic first aid equipment. Even if you do not use it, you can help less equipped people.

If you are on specific medication or permanent treatments, it is advisable to bring sufficient supplies for the duration of your stay, as you may not be able to encounter specialized medicines in Puyo. Access to shops, chemists, banks, post office or medic is possible in Puyo. Here, you can also buy the most common consumption goods, so there is no need to panic if you have forgot some items.

MONEY

When you have paid the volunteer fee, you will be provided all meals and water in the community. However, there are small shops where you can buy Coca-Cola, candy and beers, etc. Therefore, you might want to bring some additional cash (also for the trips). In general, when traveling is best to bring small bills, 5-20 USD bills, as few will be able to provide change for larger bills.

You will be able to find several reliable ATM machines in Puyo for the most normal credit cards. Moneygram or Wester Union can also be used in one Puyo, but is more difficult than credit cards. In general Visa is easier to use than Mastercard.





ELECTRICITY

All of our communities have electricity, although power failures can occur. The plugs are flat (US style), and the electricity is 110V.

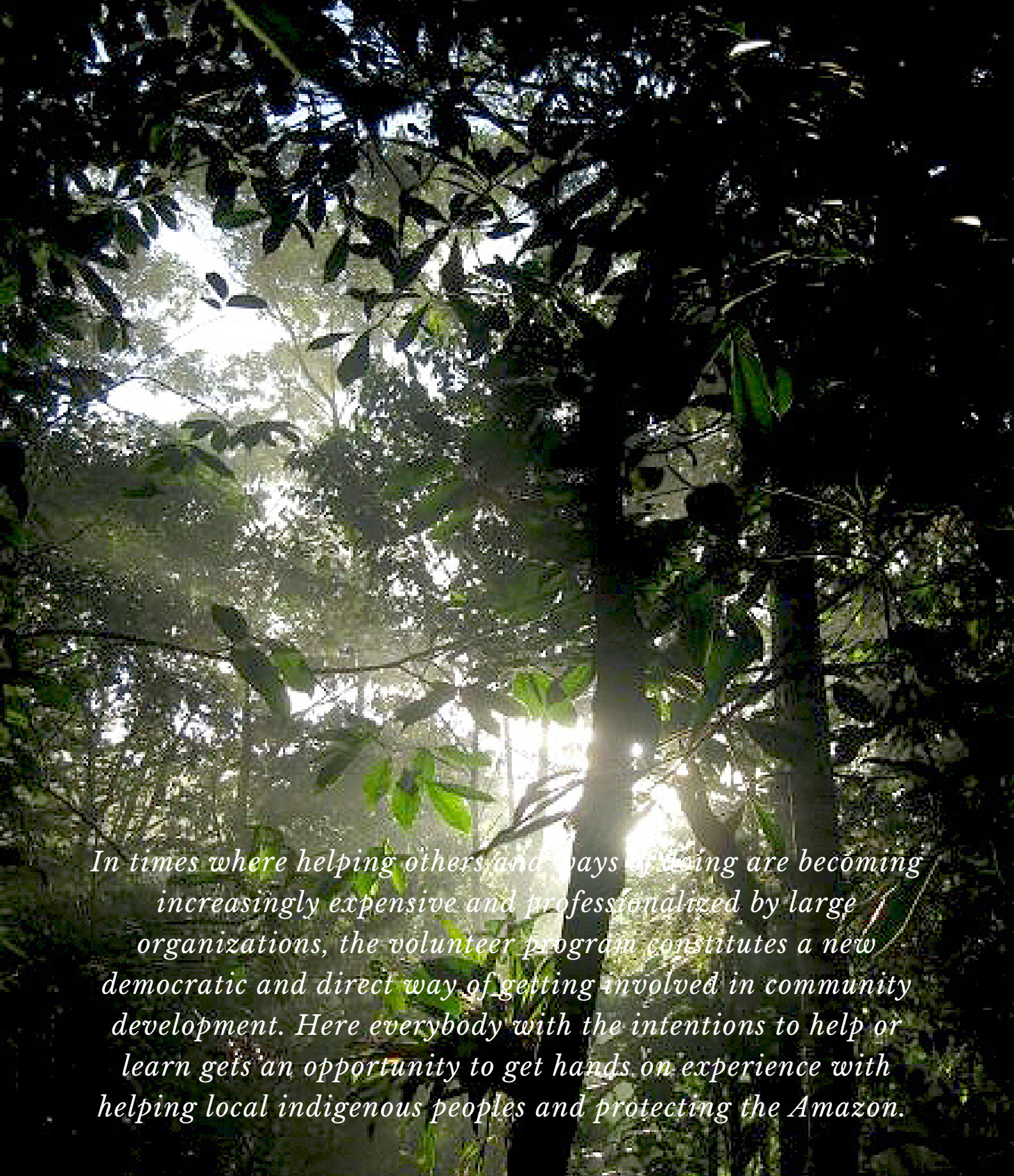
COMMUNICATIONS

In case of emergency, cellular telephone is available from the community. If you have a cellular that work in Ecuador, you can also get a signal in most of the community. .

HOW TO GET THERE?

WAWAZONIA has its main activities in the Arútam community. The community is situated in the Pastaza province of Ecuador. To get there you must take a bus from Quito (or anywhere else in Ecuador) heading to Puyo (the provincial capital of Pastaza). The trip takes about 5 hours. From Puyo you need to take a bus heading towards Macas. You have to get off the bus on the way to Macas (approximately 1 hour from Puyo). Tell the driver to drop you off at kilometer 47 ("kilometro quarenta y siete") on the Puyo-Macas road or at Arútam (Bosque Protector Arútam). The community is situated next to the road. Details of how to get to any other of our communities are provided when getting to Arutam.





In times where helping others and ways of doing are becoming increasingly expensive and professionalized by large organizations, the volunteer program constitutes a new democratic and direct way of getting involved in community development. Here everybody with the intentions to help or learn gets an opportunity to get hands on experience with helping local indigenous peoples and protecting the Amazon.

WAWAZONIA

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