

Students conduct research in Peruvian Amazon

— by Dottie Barnes

The days were hot and the mosquitoes were relentless as five Grand Valley students trekked through heavy vegetation in the rainforests of Peru. The students spent July studying the distribution and economic value of several palm species. The local residents use palms for fiber, fruits, thatch and other materials.

Jim Penn, assistant professor of geography and planning, has traveled to the Peruvian Amazon since 1984. He takes groups of students each summer to track growth and take inventories of the forest. “We work directly with the local people and the government,” said Penn. “It’s a cooperative effort. They understand that through the data collected, we can better help them manage the forest.”

The 30-day trip was spent in the rainforests and villages of the Tahuayo River and Quebrada Blanco, located about 80 miles southeast of Iquitos, Peru. Two students from the university in Iquitos also helped conduct research.

Joe Burns, a junior from Grand Rapids studying international relations, said the daily rains suspended their work for a time, but they collected valuable data. “We gathered information on the different palm species that have an economic value for the locals,” said Burns. “We tagged trees and documented whether they were adult, mature or seedlings, in order to track growth. We presented our findings to the villagers to help encourage conservation and a sustainable harvest.”

Anel Guel, a sophomore from Grand Rapids, said the research was labor intensive, but worth

the long hours spent getting sweaty and sticky. “We would travel five miles into the forest in a straight line to see what kinds of palms were growing,” Guel said. “We also assessed area gardens to see if villagers were getting the fruit they need.”

Students studied the distribution, abundance and population characteristics of the palms and conducted forest censuses, measured and marked trees of different age classes and mapped the census quadrants with the help of local residents.

Penn said researchers and villagers continue to be concerned about the amount of Chambira being harvested from the rainforest. “Women rely heavily on fibers harvested from the Chambira palm to weave hammocks, handicrafts and artwork that they sell to help support their families,” said Penn. “We gave our results to people in the rainforest communities, because without precise knowledge of the population density and harvest levels in the forest, they cannot manage the use of the species or sustain their trade.”

Grand Valley students had down time during the trip to catch and eat piranhas, watch monkeys in the forest canopy, and sample local dishes such as grubs from the rotting trunks of dead palms.

Students also brought back crafts made from Chambira palms. In October, they set up a table at the Kirkhof Center on the Allendale Campus where the items sold quickly. The money raised benefited the Rainforest Conservation Fund of Chicago, which helps support Peruvian women and funds conservation projects in Peru.



photos courtesy of Jim Penn

Top, Jim Penn and students examine native plants in the rainforests of Peru. The field course group relied on a common form of travel in the area: boat.