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Report for trip started 11/06/2007 to Amazon CARES

By ***Elizabeth Cook***

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Annie Cook MRCVS writes about her experiences on a trip to Amazon Cares

What is a successful business woman with an insect phobia doing in the middle of the Amazon? For Molly Mednikow the Amazon is therapy from a fast paced career and for the street dogs and cats of Iquitos, Peru she is a blessing. Molly first started visiting the Amazon twelve years ago to bring books to underprivileged school children and it was during these early visits that she realised the desperate plight of animals in the region. Her initial venture into animal rescue involved smuggling two dogs into her hotel room, bathing and treating them for fleas and feeding them. She now runs a well established charity with a clinic, jungle shelter for dogs eight employees.

Veterinarians, Annie Cook and Liz Dobson and veterinary nurse Tina Kemp spent three weeks working with Amazon Cares in June 2007. In that time they sterilised 114 animals in Iquitos and surrounding villages, performed a fracture repair and rescued 7 more dogs to the shelter.

Iquitos is in the middle of the Amazon rainforest. There are no roads and the only way to reach the city is to fly or take a boat along the Amazon River. The first thing that hits you when you step off the plane in Iquitos is the heat, humidity and the light. The air is heavy with moisture and it's not long before your clothes and belongings feel damp and sticky and everything that stands still too long grows a blue fungus. The heavy moisture in the air plays incredible tricks with the light so you feel encased in a big blue and green bubble. The

brilliantly blue sky and the vibrantly green vegetation are not only reflected in the river water but the air seems to reflect these colours as well.

The mesmerising heat and colours might be the first things to seize the senses but as we were thrust into motortaxis (motorbike richshaws) we began to learn the realities of life in the jungle. The heavy rainfall turns the mostly dirt tracks into bog holes making them impassable which we appreciated as we bumped and weaved to the Amazon Cares jungle shelter at Cabo Lopez. There are insects everywhere craving sweet white flesh and this is particularly so at twilight when any bare flesh is targeted. The jungle is never quiet; there are monkeys, rodents, howling dogs, crowing roosters and music from the night clubs. It was a sleepless first night!

We spent the first 2 days at the jungle facility in Cabo Lopez examining local dogs, spaying and neutering and generally getting used to the facilities and the Amazon Cares team. Esther the head vet is a very good surgeon and we were very impressed with the facilities and organisation. This is thanks to Bethjane, one of those unique veterinary nurses who is very neat and organised and has the ability to pre-empt your needs. Despite the language barrier we quickly learned the Spanish words for scalpel, swab, drape, gloves and vicryl!

Later in the first week we spent time at Amazon Cares clinic in Pevas, Iquitos. The clinic is as you would expect in the UK with a consulting room, surgery and kennel area for pets. The clinic does not have an anaesthetic machine and so general anaesthesia is performed intravenously. The dogs receive a xylaxine/atropine premedication and are put on intravenous fluids. They are induced with diazepam/ketamine and this is topped up throughout the procedure. There are no laboratory facilities in Iquitos for but the clinic has a microscope and Amazon Cares is very grateful to **Worldwide Veterinary Service** for their donation of a refractometer this year. Whilst at the clinic Liz assisted Esther with a fracture repair and although the equipment was rudimentary it was a great opportunity for Esther to learn the techniques.

On Saturday we were back at Cabo Lopez where we saw a very sad

but interesting case of a 2 month old puppy that had not defecated since he was born. Being sceptical vets we assumed the puppy had defecated without the owners knowledge and suspected the puppy had constipation and "of course he has an anus". Closer inspection revealed that the puppy in fact had atresia ani. The lesson - always listen to the owner!

Most of the second week we spent in Belen markets for a mobile neutering clinic. The markets are crowded and busy and there are all sorts of weird and wonderful things in the stalls. As we drove through the markets we passed vendors for fish, chickens, vegetables but the most eye opening was the reptile and guinea pig meat for sale. A trip to the darker parts of the market found us in the herbal remedy section, we didn't have long to ponder the wares but the snakes heads in jars and jars marked oso (bear) were enough to give us an idea of the type of produce marketed in this part of Belen. We also had the opportunity to watch the boys (Ricardo and Harry) catching dogs in the market. Although there are many dogs in the market a lot of them are owned and the owners are not keen to neuter them and the stray dogs can be very aggressive and difficult to catch. It is not an easy job for Ricardo and Harry in the narrow market pathways to catch these vicious dogs.

During this week we examined all the shelter dogs and house dogs and gave their yearly vaccinations. It was great to see them all and appreciate the difference Molly and Amazon Cares have made for these animals. On Thursday we had a mobile clinic in Bellavista Nanay on the Rio Nanay another tributary of the Amazon. We were in the bottom level of a house near the river. It was very small and dark but we still managed to neuter a number of dogs and cats and had a captive audience of residents the entire day. Annie's surgery table was closest to the window and she was a little shocked when one spectator started taking photos of the dog she was spaying.

On Friday 22nd June we had the opportunity to visit INRENA, a government facility for confiscated wildlife. The facility has previously been described by visiting vets "as a fate worse than death (for wildlife) imprisoned by INRENA". It was wonderful to see the improvements that Miguel (one of the Amazon Cares vets) has made

over the past year. Miguel was originally a production animal vet but over the past year he has learnt a great deal about wildlife and is making a huge difference to the facilities at INRENA. We were impressed to see that new larger cages have been built and that all the animals had fresh food and water. We also discussed the plans for rehabilitation of wildlife and hope that Miguel can continue to implement change in this establishment.

On Friday night we had the opportunity to meet other vets in Iquitos and Liz and I gave powerpoint presentations to the veterinary society. Liz spoke about fluid therapy particularly for kidney failure and parvovirus. Kidney failure is a big problem for animals in Iquitos as the bacteria *Leptospira* is very common. Liz discussed the importance of vaccination for control of this disease. Annie gave a presentation on the rescue and rehabilitation of wildlife. Although owning wildlife is illegal many people in Iquitos have wildlife pets and seek veterinary attention. It is a hard balance for the vets to provide good quality care for the animals, continue to make a profit, and work within the law. The veterinary society was very grateful to Amazon Cares for organising the presentation as there is no continuing education programme for vets in Iquitos.

The final week of our trip was spent on a boat journey along the Amazon. The Amazon River is indescribably immense. It is six kilometres wide in places and the depth varies seasonally. We were travelling at the beginning of the drier season (surprising considering how much it had rained) and we were amazed by how high the water mark on the trees was above the current level. The first village we visited was Las Palmeras. The **WVS** team from last year has also worked in this village and it was great to see some healthy spayed animals wandering through the village. All the surgeries were successful and Molly ran a number of classes on animal welfare for the children in the village.

The next day we worked in Yanamono in an open rondavel with waist high tables. It was one of our first opportunities to do surgery standing up and was a welcome relief for our backs. During one of the surgeries we noticed a swelling on the dog's leg and to our horror further investigation revealed a large fly larva inside the wound.

Apparently these are common in this region! We were shocked to learn that there are few stray dogs in the jungle because the puppies are eaten by snakes. A new method of population control!?

The last village we visited was Pucallpa. As we came upstairs to breakfast there was an overwhelming aroma of garlic and we were concerned what might await us at breakfast but we soon realised the smell was coming from Molly who was a few paces away. The insects on the boat were uncontrollable. Despite long trousers, long sleeved shirts, layers of DEET, citronella and burning mosquito coils we all had numerous bites. Poor Molly was suffering immensely and had refused to come to dinner the night before. In desperation she had bathed herself head to toe in garlic!

Our final day on the boat was a day of rest and tourism. We rose before sunrise to go bird watching and then visited an island for a forest walk. The forest was amazing, strangely quiet and serene, very dark and thick and we got to see poison arrow frogs. On our return to Iquitos later in the afternoon a large group of pink dolphins put on a display playing and catching fish in the turbulent waters between the Amazon River and the Itaya River. It was an excellent finish to a wonderful trip.

The 3 weeks we spent in the Amazon was an incredible and unforgettable experience. We are indebted to Molly, Esther, Miguel, Bethjane, Ricardo, Harry, Wilfredo, Merlene, Vladmir and Danilo for their hospitality and friendship. Esther and Miguel are both exceptional veterinary surgeons and the Amazon Cares staff are hardworking and dedicated. It was a pleasure to work with this exceptional team of people and they have our admiration and continued support.

Thanks to **WVS** for organising this trip. Please visit their website www.wvs.org.uk for further information regarding their work and member charities. For more information regarding Amazon Cares visit www.amazoncares.org