

Lauren O'Connell  
Peru, ETW  
Summer 2016

The sound of moto taxi drivers overwhelmed me from the moment I left the comfort of the Tarapoto airport in the San Martin region of Peru. Of course, in hindsight, I am able to laugh at how nervous I was, never having seen a moto taxi prior to that night, but I am also able to appreciate how much personal growth and experience I gained during my six weeks in the Peruvian Amazon. The six weeks felt simultaneously like a year and one day; each day was filled with new people, new ideas, and new culture. Researching and living in Peru was incredible, and I was able to expand my horizons while enhancing the education I receive in the classroom at Notre Dame and as an International Scholar.

Before leaving for Peru, I struggled to pinpoint exactly what I wanted to focus my research on. I had read plenty about a new clinic and Peruvian NGO Rios Nete that was combining the medical approaches of medicinal plants and modern “western medicine” for the first time in an institutional setting. As an anthropology and pre-health studies major, I was intrigued by this combined approach of healthcare that was rooted in larger goals of forest conservation and Guayusa production. Narrowing my specific research interest was indeed a great challenge, but I knew (and can now confirm) that even after choosing one topic to focus on, I would be able to experience a little of everything.

Medicinal plants are very abundant in the Peruvian Amazon among other regions around the world. However, the information about medicinal plant use in everyday life is inconsistent and often incorrect among the communities that have access to them. The idea that the plants can be institutionalized in the same way as “western medicine” is often unrealistic due to the importance of history, culture, and community that cannot be separated from medicinal plant use.

As a result, I expected to find that only designated medicinal plant experts would be knowledgeable about them. But, what I found during my time is that among the people in Lamas and Huapo, having experience and personal encounters with local plants is the norm. And, for those who are familiar with the identification and use of this health approach, there is a specific mentality that categorizes medicinal plants as a way to bridge the gap in public health, a way to provide accessible and sustainable healthcare in the instances when more advanced scientific medicine cannot be obtained, accessed, or afforded. Shedding my previous expectations about “alternative” medicine was difficult at first, especially having arrived to Peru as an aspiring doctor. But as I had the opportunity to learn about the plants and visit the Rios Nete garden and clinic, it became easier to understand the mentality of proponents of medicinal plants.

I was able to visit several gardens at and near the Rios Nete clinic while in Peru and interviewed those who own and maintain them. From my conversations I learned about how the information regarding medicinal plants is passed along as well as information about favorite plants and proper preparation. The most important theme I noticed was the strong belief in the effectiveness of using natural medicine. It was clear among those I met and spoke with that medicinal plants are seen as a natural relief in a society that is trying to push advanced “scientific medicine” into the culture. The urge to hold onto the use of the plants often stems from the desire to remain connected with nature and to minimize artificial drug use as much as possible. While often there is a perceived rift, a daily battle, between the “competing” health approaches, there remains a profound belief that an opportunity for collaboration is right in front of our eyes. This optimism and belief in the health approaches of the region was ultimately what stuck with me the most.

From my conversations I was afforded the opportunity to create and work in a garden at a coffee and cacao cooperative ecological center Oro Verde. The garden was requested in order to be used as a teaching facility for the farmers and partners of the cooperative Oro Verde. The ecological center is typically used as a site for social justice and sustainability workshops, but in the past there has been a demand from the partners to learn more about the scientific background of the medicinal plants they encounter while working in fields. In order to appropriately create this garden, I had to use my preliminary research and interviews to select the best plants for the designed space, based on size, propagation, uses, and utility. This was a great way to better understand the lifestyle of those who work in the field of traditional healthcare. I was able to meet many people throughout my search for seeds and ultimately created a garden that will be maintained and used in the future.

Another eye opening experience during my time in Peru occurred when I spent the day in a *chakra* (the local term for farm) with a group of high school students. I met these high school students after I visited the local hospital to assist with a “charla” on various public health topics. The students were very interested in what I was learning and graciously invited me on their class outing to a peer’s *chakra*. On this day, we left at five in the morning to congregate at a local waterfall called *Chapawanki*. From there we walked for several hours through the Peruvian jungle until we arrived at a large clearing and a small *chakra* home. The walk was difficult but we turned to the oranges, coconuts, and other Amazonian fruits for relief. We spent the day on the *chakra* - one very representative of *chakras* where the majority of the Lamas community works - playing soccer, eating from the cultivated land, and listening to our favorite music. It was an unforgettable experience to see what a typical weekend day is like in this region and to see the beauty of the *chakras* which provide the food and sustenance for the communities. Not

only was this day interesting from a cultural perspective, but it was also a way to establish friendships with students who were eager to share their ideas about intercultural healing.

Despite the initial struggles with adjusting to the local Spanish accent and establishing connections with people from the community, six weeks in the San Martin region was enough for me to fall in love with the culture, the kindness of the people, and the nature. The ETW fellowship provided me with an unimaginable experience in which my understanding of medicinal plants and intercultural healing not only changed and increased (after shedding my prior expectations) but also sparked a chain of other related interests. The connection between nature and health and the importance of cultural and environmental sustainability are themes that I look forward to further exploring with the knowledge gained uniquely through my experiences and adventures.