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## PROJECT UPDATES

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### SPIDER MONKEY PROJECT

The next stage in our Spider Monkey Release Project finally arrived this month for our group of six Spider Monkeys (*Ateles Chamek*). We completed work on the Spider Monkey's new, pre-release cage on the other side of the reserve and were able to move them, without any problems, to their next temporary home.

Our project began out of necessity: along this stretch of the Madre de Dios River there are no longer any Spider Monkeys; it is an area of local extinction. Over-hunting and destruction of habitat has pushed the monkeys further and further back into the rainforest. Our Release Project aims to repopulate this area by introducing small groups of Spider Monkeys back into the area, enabling a larger, more stable population to build up over the years.

Before the monkeys could be released they needed to be moved away from the lodge to an area that would meet all their needs in the wild: food, water and long-term protection. The area where we have built the pre-release enclosure is near the edge of the reserve, nearly an hour's walk away from the lodge and near the creek. Behind our reserve is the National Tambopata Reserve and so this area seemed a suitable place for release.



On moving day, our mammal biologist, Raúl Santa Cruz and Vet, Maria Aguirre Aysanoa, were up early to get the Spider Monkeys ready for the move: taking some final blood samples and giving some vaccinations. Staggered groups of volunteers and staff members were to carry two monkeys each throughout the morning to the pre-release cage. The monkeys were to be carried in tough net bags secured at the top on a pole supported on our shoulders so we needed to make sure we paired up staff and volunteers of similar heights so the monkeys didn't end up feeling too dizzy! Big black eyes looked up at us, wondering what was going on as we set off, but the monkeys seemed fairly calm. We carried them along the trails, carefully lifting them over logs and branches and covering them with a blanket if they seemed to be getting distressed. Despite a few alarmed calls towards the end of

the trip, however, the monkeys seemed to handle the situation well and, relieved, arrived at their new cage and scampered off high up into the branches and ropes above our heads as soon as they were able to.



Previous volunteers will remember spending many hours observing the behaviour of the monkeys while the group were in their cage in the Rescue Centre. These observations enabled us to collect data concerning the interaction and hierarchy within the group before they were released and was one of the very first stages of the project. Similarly observations were then planned to be undertaken during the time the monkeys spent in their pre-release enclosure, before they were released, to see how they handled the move. Following on from this, the ideal plan was to release the monkeys one by one, beginning with the least dominant animal. In theory, this monkey would stay near the cage because its group would be inside. We would provide additional food as necessary, but the free monkey would be able to begin to explore the surrounding area. The process would be repeated until all the monkeys were released and would then hopefully explore further and further afield together.

Events, however, do not always go to plan, especially when working with animals. About a week after moving the monkeys, they managed to make a hole in the netting at the very top of the cage and released themselves a little bit earlier than planned! We accelerated the programme to the next stage rapidly, as initial observations seem to show no need to try and recapture the monkeys. They were seen eating fruit from trees and of the six monkeys, five were still together. However, as we had suspected one of the more recent additions to the group, River, had left and gone his own way.

The plan now is to follow the five monkeys, Chamek, Mati, Balu, Sambo and Abi, as much as possible, mapping their positions to get an idea of the area they use and observing their behaviour and interactions as they face life in the wild together. I will update you next month on their progress.



*\*\* Another piece of exciting news concerning the Spider Monkey Project is that, during October, Raul was also able to present the important work that he and others have been developing here with this release project at a Symposium: "Primateology in Peru: History, Current State and Perspectives" that had been organized by Yunkawasi, the Natural History Museum of San Marcos Higher University and the German Primatological Centre. It was an event that enabled professionals and students from Peru and beyond to share work and investigation in this area that had already taken place as well as identify gaps in investigation and promote interest and understanding of primates and their conservation. We are very proud to say that Raul's presentation was recognised as one of the best of the Symposium and so a big thank you to everyone, volunteers and specialists, who have made this work possible.*

## RESCUE CENTRE UPDATE

Back in the Rescue Centre itself, there have also been one or two changes. You may remember a couple of months ago I wrote about the building of new cages for our trio of Margays. Alongside the Jaguarundi cages, three larger cages have been built to accommodate them. The cages are connected by windows which we can open and close, enabling the cats to move freely between all three spaces; interacting, or seeking solitude if they prefer. Branches and tree trunks have been arranged to make different levels and platforms for the animals to explore.

We have an adult male and female Margay, Ron and Sandy, as well as Lucky, a younger female who arrived earlier this year as just a kitten. Margays are vulnerable to hunting in this area, as their beautiful patterned fur can be sold to provide another possible source of income for local families. If we are able to initiate a captive breeding programme with these animals, we may be able to help the wild population by releasing the offspring when they are old enough to survive. Now that the adult male and female are together in one cage, we hope that they may produce offspring in the not too distant future.



## TURTLE PROJECT

It seems like many months ago now that we spent our first night out on “Turtle Beach”, hoping we would find the first nest of the season. The Yellow-Spotted Amazon River Turtle, or the *Taricaya*, as it is locally known, is the focus of our Turtle project here. Our project to collect eggs, relocate them in our artificial beaches to hatch out safely and release them back into the wild has been going for quite a few years now. We have been able to collect information to enable us to begin to see trends and changes and we have released nearly 6,000 baby turtles back into the wild. This month the eagerly-awaited time came around again for release.



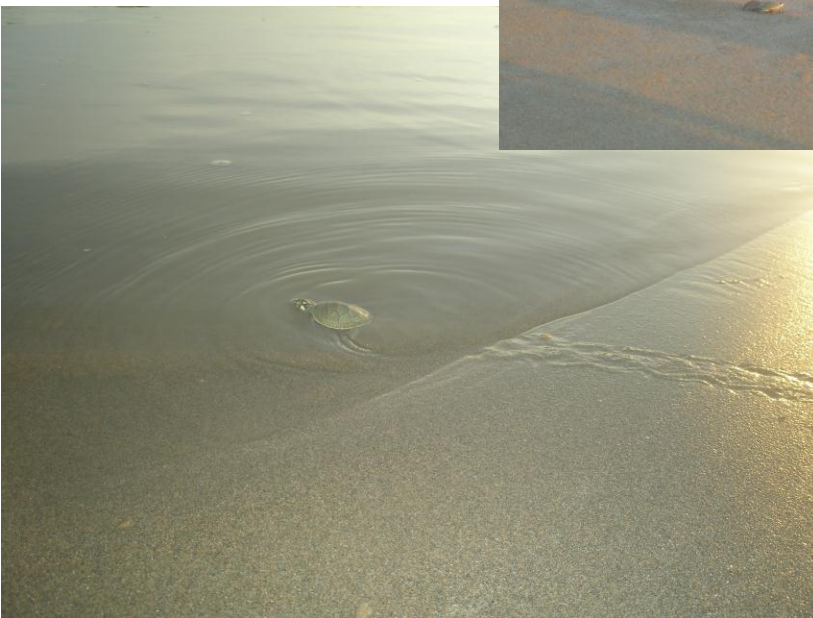
It takes around sixty to eighty days of incubation before tiny baby turtles start to scramble their way out of their nests. Daniel Neira, our resident Herpetologist in charge of this project, accompanied by volunteers, began to check the nests daily to see if any new turtles were emerging. It all began as usual; the first ones hatched out, were measured and were transferred to a temporary home in the pools of our Turtle House. However, quite soon it became apparent that we had a problem: ants were found to be attacking some of the nests. Of the three beaches that we had one, at least, looked to be under threat. Eggs were quickly relocated to one of the other artificial beaches and although this worked for a time, it soon began to be apparent that the ants, and also now occasionally lizards, were not leaving. Towards the end, we had to transfer the remaining nests to plastic bottomed containers to prevent the ants from entering.

Such a major attack has never occurred since the beginning of this project. Previously, despite yearly variations, we have always had a healthy percentage of turtles successfully hatching out in the artificial beaches. In 2009 we had our best year, with around 1600 turtles hatching out. Last year, due perhaps to some cold weather spells during the laying season, the number was around 600. This year we collected a similar number of nests to last year, but with this attack by the ants, only 170 turtles successfully hatched out. It was a very sad result. However, we are always learning and this event will help us to rethink and rebuild our artificial beaches before next year, so that we can prevent such a reoccurrence.



Undeterred however, release day was still an exciting time for everyone. To see the baby turtles running down the sand towards the river, with the sun setting behind them, was an unforgettable experience. At around half-past four in the afternoon, we carried the plastic containers with the turtles carefully down to the boat and we set off towards Playa Alta, the beach where all the eggs were collected. Daniel Neira found a suitable area of sand, which was not too wet or uneven and sloped gently down towards the river. Standing in a semi-circle behind the turtles, the volunteers

got ready to tip over the containers: one....two....three....go! A multitude of turtles began their scramble to the river. Some lost no time whatsoever and shot off straight away, others needed a little more encouragement: which direction was it again? Are you sure about this? It was a lovely sight as one-by-one they disappeared into the river to begin their young lives. Each baby turtle is marked with a small triangle on its shell and so, in years to come, we will be able to identify which turtles we have released and begin to see if we are having a positive impact on the population here.



## EXTRAS

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### TARICAYA'S ANNIVERSARY

The Turtle Release Day and anniversary of Taricaya on the 5<sup>th</sup> November, usually coincide. Releasing the turtles on this day is one of the ways we like to celebrate our birthday. This year, however, Taricaya's 10<sup>th</sup> birthday fell on a Saturday and so, as most volunteers tend to go into town on this day, we decided to celebrate on Friday 4<sup>th</sup>, instead: turtle release, Taricaya Games and an evening BBQ set the agenda for the day.

In the afternoon, the teams faced up against one another and the events began. Classic sack racing, wheelbarrow racing, passing-the-rope and the ever-popular egg-throwing games took place, with staff members heading the teams of volunteers. Points were given for finishing first, second or third the title of Taricaya Champion was up for grabs.



Passing-the-Rope: Each team is timed as they try to pass a rope as quickly as possible up through their shorts, and out through their t-shirts...not as easy as it looks!

Sack Racing: Jump as fast as you can and try not to fall over!





Egg-Throwing: throw the un-boiled egg to your partner, if they catch it successfully, take a step back and throw it again. If the egg breaks you're out!

The Taricaya Champions: Alejandro Vigil Padilla, Shaffy Roell, Charlotte Lucas, Blandine Rapin and Sam Lievin.



Hi,

If you would just like to send a note, we would love to hear from any of you who have volunteered at Taricaya, it doesn't matter how long you were here for or how long ago, we're always interested in what you're doing or where you are now.

We welcome your feedback for the newsletter as well, what would you like to see or hear about here every month.

Also if you have any queries about the rainforest (or Peru), we have a number of qualified biologists on the team who would be very happy to answer any of your questions.

For quick updates or information about Taricaya, check out our website at [www.volunteer-conservation-peru.org](http://www.volunteer-conservation-peru.org), or you can reach us through the Projects Abroad website at [www.projects-abroad.net](http://www.projects-abroad.net).

Have a good month, and we look forward to hearing from you.

Catherine Turner  
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Reserva Ecologica Taricaya