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# Prehensile Tales

The official newsletter of *Amigos de los Monos*

**Prehensile tails** are very strong and serve as a fifth limb, which aid in locomotion and feeding. They are unique to some species of American primates like the spider and howler monkeys.



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## How it all started...

*Amigos de los Monos* project catalyst, Katie Mann, studied for her Master's in Primate Conservation at Oxford Brookes University ('04-'05) in Oxford, UK. She carried out a "pilot study to assess the need for primate conservation efforts in northern Punta Burica, Costa Rica" (published by Documenta Naturae), in response to the outreach of Canadian Gabriel Schmerler looking to support a primatologist in conservation efforts surrounding the village of Punta Banco. It was concluded that of the four primate species that reside in this area of Costa Rica, the spider monkey was in clear danger of extirpation, that is, local extinction. Additionally, concerned individuals approached Mann from the Guaymí (Ngäbe) Conte Burica Indigenous Reserve, who share their rainforest home with the elusive spider monkey. They were eager to collaborate on a conservation program.

While developing the project from the States, Mann had the privilege of sharing the project at the June 2006 Society of Conservation Biology Annual Conference. There she took a class with Dr. Robert Horwich and Scott Bernstein MSc called "Catalyzing Successful Community Conservation Projects." This class marked the beginning of a working relationship with Dr. Horwich's non-profit organization, Community Conservation, Inc. A seed grant has been awarded by Primate Conservation, Inc. that is supporting the work of mobilizing the community to form a conservation group whose goal is to prevent the loss of the spider monkey from the forests of the Burica Peninsula. The outlook for the project is hopeful, with a broad network of logistical support, while the project continues to secure much needed funds to realize the long-term goals.

## Species Highlight: Panamanian red spider monkey

The Panamanian red spider monkey (*Ateles geoffroyi panamensis*) is the flagship species for *Amigos de los Monos*. A flagship species is an endangered, charismatic species that serves to attract attention and conservation efforts. The of Río Coco and Río Caña south of Punta Banco, in the estimate that there are 30 extremely vulnerable to status of all animals is directly behavior. In the case of the fruit. This creates hardships reasons. Firstly, their high-great distances and as a result This makes them a preferred numbers have declined a result of hunting. Secondly, depend on occur at low densities, and their home range is large in order acquire adequate food. Consequently, spider monkeys are dependent upon large tracts of undisturbed primary rainforest and are very sensitive to changes in habitat. The settlement cont. page 4



resources to an area for spider monkeys live in the forests Blanca, neighboring river valleys indigenous reserve. The locals monkeys left, making them extirpation. The conservation related to their natural history and spider monkey, they eat mostly for the spider monkey for two energy diet allows them to travel they have well exercised muscles. source of wild meat, and their dramatically in the last 30 years as the fruit trees that spider monkeys

## COVIRENA

*Amigos de los Monos* is working closely with the local group of COVIRENAs (Vigilance Committees of Natural Resources). COVIRENA is a subset of MINAE (Ministry of Environment and Energy). This organization mobilizes volunteers from the local communities to enforce the environmental protection laws. The Río Coco and Río Caña Blanca communities are represented by a group of 12 individuals, comprised of 8 men to patrol the forest and 4 women to prepare meals for the guards. The name they have chosen for themselves is “ngábe münchi ngubuaga,” which is their native language for “the indigenous protect the spider monkey.” Currently this group is waiting for the appropriate paperwork to process, which will afford

them the authority to enforce the laws that prevent illegal activity, such as hunting, extraction of wood, and pollution of the watersheds. These two areas are crucial for protection efforts, not only because they harbor the remaining spider monkeys, but also because they are highly vulnerable to exploitation by non-indigenous outsiders. Río Coco is a mere 6 km from Punta Banco, allowing easy entrance from the north. Additionally, Río Caña Blanca borders Panama, offering easy access by Panamanians from the east. A major problem in this area is that there is no police presence and no form of communication. As a result, illegal

extraction by outsiders has carried on without consequences. The extraction of wildlife for “hobby” hunting excursions not only threatens the wildlife, but it depletes the resources that the indigenous people have the legal right to use for subsistence. Additionally, wood is illegally cut and sold to outsiders. Sadly, this activity is not wholly driven by necessity, but partially driven by the influx of international property owners who have the luxury of purchasing property and building a new home in Costa Rica. However, the climate is due to change once the COVIRENAs become active. Unarmed, the vigilantes will work in groups to confront people engaging in illegal activity.

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## Inaugural Meeting

*Amigos de los Monos* had their inaugural meeting on February 23, 2007 at the community school *La Laguna*. This was an introductory meeting and was attended by 50 Guaymí adults in addition to Dr. Robert Horwich, Gabriel Schmerler, and Peter and Liz Beth Aspinall, the founders of the Tiskita Foundation, a flagship conservation organization in the area. The community conservation strategy was shared with the group, stressing the imperative role that the community plays in designing and carrying out conservation efforts. It was explained that the role of project catalyst, Katie Mann, is that of a bridge connecting the community with external funding agencies and international collaborators to support community initiatives. The community expressed concern for investing effort and energy to outsiders, whose participation is usually short lived, leaving people with false hopes. In response a number of people spoke on behalf of the integrity and character of Mann, who has demonstrated the ability to follow through with commitments.



Gabriel Schmerler, project sponsor; Katie Mann, project catalyst; Santos Watson, principal guide; and Santos Miranda, local COVIRENA coordinator, addressing the community at the inaugural meeting of *Amigos de los Monos*.

Photo: Dr. Robert Horwich

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*“Rather than viewing local populations as obstructions in conservation efforts, the philosophy of community conservation views local populations as the solution.”*

## Community Conservation

Community Conservation (CC) is a new-school approach to conservation that has responded to the failures of the exclusionary approach to conservation that dislocates local populations in order to form protected areas. This old approach to conservation has often fostered contempt in local populations and has created enemies of conservation efforts. Rather than viewing local populations as obstructions in

conservation efforts, the philosophy of CC views local populations as the solution. CC takes a grassroots and adaptive approach to conservation, working directly with the resource users in order to identify problems and locally appropriate solutions for conservation. A series of training objectives developed by Scott Berstein aids external project catalysts and community groups in co-managing projects to ensure project sustainability.

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## Photos for Education

Kimberly Nickoson, a freelance photographer, visited the site in October 2005. She joined Daniel Hurley, who was studying at the site with some Guaymí families for his undergraduate degree through Prescott College. He conducted his senior project at the site in order to complete his double major in Latin American studies and Adventure Education. During their three-week stay in the indigenous reserve, the pair lived with indigenous families. While Dan was assessing the feasibility of eco-tourism in the Río Coco valley, Kimberly was taking photos of the family members with which they were staying. While there they were approached to help complete a school for the community. Kimberly took the initiative to start a fundraising campaign with the sales of the photos that she took, in addition to stunning coffee table books produced with the photos. She had two shows in the Pendleton Arts Center where she raised funds to contribute to the school.



Kimberly Nickoson and Daniel Hurley pictured with a host Guaymí family.  
Photo: Kimberly Nickoson

## Mentor Visits

In February 2007, Dr. Robert Horwich, the director of Community Conservation and project mentor, visited the conservation site. During his stay he was able to assess the site and project first hand. He met a variety of project collaborators in addition to traveling widely in the area. He trekked to Río Coco, which hosts the spider monkey population. During his visit to the forests, known only by locals, he was fortunate enough to see the elusive

canopy acrobats. He spent a few nights with a collaborating indigenous family, in addition to visiting *La Laguna*, the community school where the inaugural meeting was held. Dr. Horwich was present for the meeting, where he shared with the Guaymí community his 25 years of experience with communities working to protect their natural resources. Experiencing first hand the logistic realities of living

and working in the remote reaches of southwest Costa Rica, Dr. Horwich was able to reflect on his past experiences to identify potential problems and to inform appropriate actions and strategies for moving forward. He left the site confident with the foundation of the project and has continued to advise and assist in preparing grant proposals since his return to the United States.

## In the News

The April 27, 2007 edition of the Tico Times reported on the front page that the four species of monkeys in Costa Rica have experienced drastic declines since 1995. University of Costa Rica biologist Ronald Sanchez, and geneticist Gustavo Gutiérrez, informed much of the article, written by Dave Sherwood. It is estimated that spider monkey populations have experienced a decline of 72%, the squirrel monkey and capuchin monkeys each losing 43%, and the howler monkeys losing 65%. Numbers are based on extrapolations from studies in the protected areas of Costa Rica. Those animals occurring outside of protected areas are suffering from habitat loss due to deforestation and the development of the country. However, even protection in parks does not guarantee the survival of the monkey populations. As development continues outside of protected areas, monkey populations are becoming increasingly isolated in their habitats. The result is an increase in inbreeding that compromises the genetics of the populations. With compromised genetics, the populations are more susceptible to disease. Some reported sicknesses include eye and dental problems, in addition to the presence of malaria. The spider monkey is at the highest risk of extinction, followed by the squirrel monkey, both of which are considered endangered by the Red List of threatened species. With increasingly smaller populations these species are especially susceptible to natural disasters. For example, in Corcovado National Park, where both species have a stronghold, there was a 40% decline in monkey populations in 2005 due to heavy rains and cold weather that led to a food shortage and a massive monkey die-off.

The grim outlook reported in the Tico Times article demonstrates the urgency for overcoming apathy and securing a future for the monkey populations of Costa Rica. Northern Punta Burica, which hosts the nation's four species, is an important area for conservation efforts exemplifying the imperative work of *Amigos de los Monos*.

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### We're on the Web!

See us at:

[http://www.communityconservation.org/CostaRica\\_000.htm#cr](http://www.communityconservation.org/CostaRica_000.htm#cr)

### cont spider monkey

of Punta Burica in the last 40 years has dramatically altered the habitat of the spider monkeys, fragmenting their original habitat with cow pasture and human settlements. In order to protect the remaining spider monkeys, there must be enforcement of the anti-hunting laws, their current habitat must be protected, and corridors must be

enforced to improve forest connectivity. Finally, the multi-cultural community of northern Punta Burica must work collaboratively, especially since there have been recent and surprising sightings of the spider monkeys in the forests of Punta Banco, outside of the indigenous reserve.

### cont COVIRENA

*Amigos de los Monos* is currently waiting to hear the results of two grants that will provide capital to support the COVIRENAs in their noble efforts. In order to introduce the grant procedure to the group, as a training exercise, a workshop was held where the group learned the realities and complexities of completing grant applications. Together the group decided that if the monies were received they would go towards supplying food for workdays, communication and field equipment,

training for conflict resolution, data collection techniques and computer literacy. It is hopeful that by providing the appropriate training, the COVIRENAs will acquire the appropriate skills to manage the project with increased autonomy to ensure project sustainability. Additionally, it is anticipated that these skills will transfer to other aspects of life for the community members who are increasingly integrating themselves with the non-indigenous society.

### The Spider Web

The Yoga Farm: [www.yogafarmcostarica.org](http://www.yogafarmcostarica.org)

Community Conservation, Inc.: [www.communityconservation.org](http://www.communityconservation.org)

Primate Conservation, Inc.: [www.primate.org](http://www.primate.org)

MSc Primate Conservation, Oxford Brookes University: <http://ssl.brookes.ac.uk/primate/home.htm>

Tiskita Jungle Lodge: <http://www.tiskita-lodge.co.cr/>

The Amistad Institute: <http://www.amistadinstitute.net/>

Pavones Local: <http://www.pavoneslocal.com/index.php>

Venus Surf Adventures: [www.venussurfadventures.com](http://www.venussurfadventures.com)

### Join the Spider Web

All donations are welcome to support *Amigos de los Monos*. Tax-exempt donations can be made to Community Conservation Inc. All funds will support efforts to build a socially sustainable conservation program and will be acknowledged in *Prehensile Tails*.

A special thanks to community members Gabriel Schmerler, Paolo Berti, Jerry Rapp, Lisa LaManga, Sassy Fioriglio, Hadas Menakerman, Malcolm Miles, Laura Pecoraro and Dean Fujioka for contributing time and resources to *Amigos de los Monos*.