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The Mountain Institute – Huaraz, Ancash, Peru

Report #1

My first two months in Peru working with The Mountain Institute have been an incredible experience, and it is difficult to decide on the best place to start when reporting on my time volunteering thus far.

In my first week, along with members of the Huaraz office and TMI's Peru Director, Jorge Recharte, I outlined what will be my major project during my time here and what makes up the bulk of my day to day work at TMI. Over the past ten years, The Mountain Institute has been working with two campesino communities (CC Huasta and CC Cordillera Blanca) located within the Mancomunidad Municipal de Tres Cuencas (Three Watersheds) - a political entity comprised of provinces and municipalities within the Peruvian region of Ancash, whose territory surrounds the origin of three major Peruvian rivers - the Rio Santa, Fortaleza and Pativilca. Beginning about 5 years ago, the communities and towns within the MMTC have been dealing with increasing problems relating to the quality of their water supply. Some areas have seen a drastic increase in contamination due to the runoff from major mining operations in the area that dispense of chemicals used in the mining process directly into local rivers and tributaries. Others are experiencing natural contamination – as glaciers in the areas recede due to global warming, rain and melt water passing over previously unexposed rocks add significant amounts of minerals to the water making it unsuitable for human consumption and harmful to plants when used for irrigation.

The Mountain Institute is looking into the possibility of creating a bioremediation system in one of the communities, with the end goal of establishing such systems in all of the communities of the Mancomunidad Tres Cuencas to affordably but effectively improve water quality in the area and downstream. Bioremediation utilizes plant species (preferably native to the area) which by their natural processes remove minerals from the groundwater.

My responsibility will be to compile a report – in the format of a grant proposal – concerning the feasibility of creating a bioremediation system in the Comunidad Campesina of Canrey Chico, with the longer term goal of creating such systems in all of the communities of the Mancomunidad Municipal Tres Cuencas. The report will focus primarily on the logistical and financial requirements involved in creating a bioremediation system, and in particular whether or not communities like Canrey Chico have the capacity to establish such a system and, most importantly, maintain it. The research that will go into compiling this report will stem from constant contact and consulting with the actors and organizations involved, such as:

- Frequent trips to the communities of Huasta and Canrey Chico, to participate in meetings of both the local government and the Campesino Community (who have their own leadership) – both to meet all important actors involved and gain a sense of how the local government functions

- Direct meetings with the presidents of CC's Canrey Chico and Huasta, and the mayor of Huasta – to discuss the project and get their reactions and ideas on how such a project might best be implemented
- Meeting with professors specializing in environmental engineering at the local university in Huaraz (UNASAM), primarily Prof. Julio Palomino from the local university UNASAM to learn more about the use of bioremediation and to discuss with them the feasibility of implementing such a system in the watersheds of the communities of the MMTC
- Constant coordination and consultation with Fidel Rodriguez - the technical Secretary of the MMTC, who consults for The Mountain Institute and has worked with the leadership of local communities for many years and understands the political and economic climate well

The above work began my second week in Peru and continues to be the main focus of my day to day activity here. However, I am involved in helping out with many other areas of TMI's work.

- This week myself and two colleagues have been traveling to Canrey Chico each day to help build fences around a new plot of pasture that the community is hoping to rehabilitate using methods used previously by TMI – methods of irrigation and planting which allow the ground to absorb more water and thus support the rapid growth of
- I am in charge of coordinating a visit to Huaraz by another US based NGO, Engineers without Borders, who will be arriving in July to help rehabilitate a water filtration system that was constructed years ago for the community of Huasta but has since fallen into disrepair. My primary responsibility is to help organize within the community a group of residents who will be responsible for maintaining the plant once it is rehabilitated. We hope to organize workshops prior to EWB's arrival to educate the locals about how the plant works and how it can be maintained - and also the huge benefits the cleaner water will have on their daily life especially on the health of their crops and livestock. Also, a team will be formed which will be in charge of maintaining the plant once EWB personnel leave. Understanding the capacity of the community to organize to maintain and repair such a system will greatly help with my primary project relating to Bioremediation and I hope to learn a lot from my work with EWB.
- A small, locally owned startup tourism company based in the community Huasta is trying to create a new trekking circuit which would begin and end in Huasta – which could bring badly needed revenue to the community. A colleague and I, along with a group of locals and a few members of the local press went along for the four day trek and compiled reports on the potential of the hike as a tourist attraction, meeting with local business owners afterwards to discuss the trip and review reports

All in all it has been a great experience so far and I have learned an incredible amount about the work of an NGO like TMI and the huge challenges such organizations face working in the political, economic and social climate of a developing country.

Needless to say I have also had my mind greatly opened getting accustomed to life in an entirely new country, amongst different people with a culture completely distinct from my own. I would like to sincerely thank the Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation for supporting me and allowing me to pursue this opportunity.