

My name is Jeff Sires and I am engineer-in-training from Conway, New Hampshire. I just returned from an incredible trip to the community of La Libertad, where I met with Ben and some of the villagers the Amazon Pueblo Project has been working with. The purpose of my trip was to become acquainted with the community, its people, and to investigate a defunct water filtration system similar to one I worked on for my senior project in civil engineering at the University of New Hampshire. My only regret is that I had just three days to spend in La Libertad.

After completing a project in Peru for Engineers Without Borders, I took a short flight from Lima to the amazon region and Iquitos, Peru. There, I waited one day for the fast boat (barco rapido) that would take me down the Amazon River to the area known as Tres Fronteras -- where Peru, Colombia, and Brazil all come together. The 12-hour boat ride took me through the heart of the Peruvian Amazon to Santa Rosa. After arriving in the late afternoon, I took a short water taxi across the river to the city of Leticia, Colombia where I stayed the night before taking a morning boat to La Libertad.

Upon arrival to the village, I was met by Ben on the newly finished balsa, or dock, along with a strong rainstorm that made us happy to have shelter for an hour or so. As the rain subsided, Ben and I discussed recently completed projects, future possibilities, and eventually made our way to the guest house where I was impressed to find remarkably comfortable accommodations for such a remote location. I was happy to have my own bunk fitted with bug netting, along with use of kitchen and bathroom behind the house -- both with functioning water systems.

As the first afternoon went by, I was introduced to some of the neighbors, including Gustavo. Despite relatively basic living conditions and a strong motivation for their improvement, the villagers were very friendly and generally happy. I felt welcomed by everyone, especially Gustavo and his family who live in the house adjacent to the project guest house.

Tired from travel, I fell asleep around 8PM and woke up early the next morning. I took some time to walk around the site of the water filtration system installed by an NGO several years prior. According to locals, the system had not been functioning for about seven years. It had been designed to use slow sand filtration as means to remove particles and contaminants from the local water source. Many of the components are still in place, but some have been removed and used for other purposes in town. In looking at the system, and with my knowledge of how slow sand filters operate, it appears that the system could be rehabilitated fairly easily. The challenge, though certainly possible, would be to ensure its sustainability through education of local caretakers and the village in general.

For the rest of my time in La Libertad, I helped Ben to work on walkways surrounding the guesthouse, asked as many questions as I could, and practiced my Spanish with Gustavo's son, Hector. In meeting some of the locals, it is clear that there is great motivation for improvement and a wealth of knowledge and commitment to the Amazon Pueblo Project.

Overall, I was very impressed with the work that has been done in the community so far, and excited by the idea of returning to do more myself. Over the next couple of months, I hope to apply for funding through grants and other sources to help repair the town's water filter, as well as to send students from the University of New Hampshire (from academic departments such as Engineering, Sustainable Agriculture, Nutrition, Anthropology, etc.) to the village for other potential projects. I will be sure to post updates as these things develop!

I want to thank Ben, the Amazon Pueblo Project, and the community of La Libertad for giving me the opportunity to visit and work with the village. I hope to return soon!

Jeff Sires, USA