

Recorded in Waita Lodge, July of 2023.

Bianca

Please tell us your full name and a little about your life. Where were you born, how was your childhood, why did you start to be a guide, and all that?

Diego Prado

Well, my name is Diego Prado. I was born in Quito and I grew up in an environment related to tourism and history. My main passion began with history, with my grandparents, since they descend from a place or come from a place in the north of Ecuador, where there were ruins and they always told us stories. And I think that was drawing my attention to the archaeological, biological, and natural.

When I grew up I think the part that helped me to continue that inspiration was the Indiana Jones movies. So I used to watch those movies a lot, and it's like they caught my attention. When I finished school I wanted to study anthropology, but more than being a teacher, it was more like discovering things. I was very interested in discovering things and traveling, but at that time archeology could only be found in paid universities.

That is why I was looking for another option and found one of the first universities in South America in tourism, called the Central University of Ecuador. At that university, I found a degree called Tourism, which was new. In that career, there were things like archaeology, history, and biology and it caught my attention. So I went in to see if I would like it, and I liked it, I liked learning about the history of art. Later we began to travel to different parts of the country and it caught my attention. After finishing studying tourism, I was looking for a job, but at that time there was no work to be able to continue in a master's degree in History or Archaeology, which was my goal. So I had an opportunity to come here to the Jungle because the uncle of a friend of mine owned a lodge here in Cuyabeno.

Well, the first time I came to the Jungle it shocked me. The first time I came, I was greeted by heavy rain like the one we have had these days. But I liked it. I liked it a lot and I came. I just met the guy I was talking to, Andrés. I met him, he was super cool, and he taught me what we had to do. So, I came to the jungle only as a helper, to wash dishes and make beds, for 13 days.

I was a guide, I had studied at the university, but I did not know English, which was essential to be a guide. So in that, the first time I came, I stayed for 33 days, not 13, as agreed, and I liked the Jungle so much that I stayed. I started cooking, and I started working as an assistant, but little by little I saw that tourists are interested in talking with the people who work there.

So I began to study English, and I began to take out words from a dictionary and I only had words at the beginning, without sentences or only words in form, as we use it in Spanish, because it was literal. I had only the words in English, without the grammatical structure of English. And I liked it a lot until I started guiding and I liked the experiences that tourists had visiting other places.

I also liked how excited they looked when they saw nature. And that made me love the Jungle a lot. After several years of working, I felt that I needed to give something in return, or in a way payback for all those years that I got something from the Forest, so I found this project that is Waita Lodge, which is aimed at helping to protect the forest.

And I liked the idea. We started this project three years ago and well, we had the pandemic that went badly for us, but despite being a new Lodge, for all the work, I think we are doing well. It has become very popular and now several people are already looking for us to visit the jungle and we try to do a different tourism, not the conventional one, which only shows the good. Maybe in a certain way, we show the other side of tourism, but in a good way, a way that doesn't discourage you, but rather helps you to continue supporting projects like that.

Waita Lodge is the base of different projects. In the beginning, we tried to create several projects so that people do not need to obtain economic resources by destroying the forest. So, for example, we started with several projects like these, how to teach them to make biodegradable soaps and to sell them in the different hotels, because in Cuyabeno there are around 17 hotels now. So these projects are to give local people other options instead of oil exploration, palm oil plantations, and logging.

So we started with that, but COVID came and stopped all these projects. After the time of COVID we began to have tourists and what we began to do is something a bit more accessible, such as reforestation, with the help of the Ministry of the Environment, who know what we want. We have donations of trees, there is an organization from the United States that also helps us to cover some expenses that are needed for this reforestation.

We also help a Shuar group and a little school, which we help so that the children have the same opportunities in their studies. If they ever want to go out to the city, have the same opportunities, and have the same knowledge as the children of the city, then by educating the children in this way, we know that the awareness of caring for the forest will continue for many more years.

Lina

And how is the situation with environmental education here?

Diego Prado

Environmental education is not very taken into account, even though we are a country that has great potential in reserves, National Parks, I think it is not very taken into account. So all governments have good and bad things. And one of the bad ones is that every time we change governments, the president, the new one, tries to take things away from the other, even the good ones, so they don't worry much about something that can serve us in the future, but rather they try some immediate economic benefit so that their period in government has a good image.

So, I don't see that there is a good environmental education. To reach the local people is very difficult. Sometimes you can put together a project that, for example, researching in books, seems very, very good for an indigenous group. When you do it, maybe you are not helping, since the reality of each group is different and the way of connection you have with each client is different.

So there are people who get used to money and only receive you because they know they are going to have money and if they stop having that money they stop taking care of the Jungle. What we try to do is help them by showing that the better their forest is the better their life will be. In some communities, they believe that in life outside the jungle everything is good, everything is easy, since we have things like microwaves, refrigerators, the internet, and TV, and they believe

that all these things are the most necessary. They don't know that here in the life they have, if one day they stop depending on money and only take care of their forest, they will perhaps be much happier than us in the city.

Bianca

What can you tell us about the indigenous populations that live here?

Diego Prado

Well, here we have five indigenous populations, which have been changing. At first contact with the outside world, there will always be a change. It is a cultural evolution that makes people if they don't have their rules well established, lose their language, medicine, and clothing.

It is very difficult to prevent people from changing, and from evolving, but it is very important to have these groups of indigenous people, who at the beginning had a strong love for the Jungle. So what has happened in the indigenous groups that had contact with the exterior world, including with tourism, is that they have been changing and even though they say they like the jungle, they want their jungle, I don't know, you can't see it. It's more focused on money, the opposite of appreciating what you have.

Lina

Could you mention what are the names of the indigenous communities?

Diego Prado

We have five indigenous nationalities and around 14 communities. I don't remember all of them, but we have the Sionas in the tourist area, which have communities called Puerto Bolívar and San Victoria. They, for example, are dedicated to tourism, but the bad part of that place is that there are about 15 tourist companies, but due to poor organization, there are only a few who benefit from this large number of people.

We also have the Quichuas, who are the ones to begin working with tourism. Most of the tourism community was very small, 30 years ago, but when the tourism company that was here moved to another place, they began to look for other options, and one of those options, which was very strong, was oil exploitation. So in the beginning, due to a large amount of money offered by an oil company, they believed that it was the best option, but later they saw that it is not always like that, that if you want the money you have to work and also in the place where there is the oil company, they see that not all that glitters are gold, there is always a spill, or the number of animals decreases or they do not always use the local people, since they need certain workers who perform a little more. They realized that maybe tourism, even though it doesn't make a lot of money, is something constant, it's something that will help them maintain their Jungle. So they have an oil company outside the reserve in their territory and they have about two or three tourism groups that try to take care of this area.

The other group is the Shuar group. This group moved many years ago when they were at war, they came looking for a new lifestyle, calmer, without war, and when they moved, being away from their relatives, being away from their land, they began to change their habits. They maintain the language, which is something very beautiful, but they gradually adapted customs and eat food from other (indigenous) nationalities. They want to rescue their culture because they know that they have lost a lot of it. So that is why we are happy to work with them and that focuses a lot on the children because they know that if the child grows up with a good education, life in the community environment will be much better.

The other group is the Cofan group, this group has a better organization. They are organized by different NGOs, which have a leader. This person is a person who is half Ecuadorian, half American. Because of that, this man knows what indigenous people need and also how the world moves outside. So, using these two worlds, he made his community grow with different projects. They know that there are people who want to help the communities, they know that they can make a profit and so they try to put their community on the right track.

From there, we have the Secoya group, the Secoyas (also called Siekopai) who live outside this reserve. They have a small territory within the reserve where we visited. They, for example, do not work directly with tourism. It is one of the groups that lived in these places for a long time and were nomads. Upon the arrival of the missionaries, they began to settle in communities. They also work with different organizations that help keep their language and culture going, even though they are the ones who have the most contact with the outside world. Within Cuyabeno, they maintain themselves, they maintain a good percentage of their culture.

Lina

These missionaries, what missionaries are you referring to, the Jesuits?

Diego Prado

The missionaries who came to evangelize various groups were those from the Summer Institute of Linguistics, they were the ones who reached the Waorani group. And well, you can find a video on YouTube where there is a massacre that took place. Do you remember that I mentioned that someone took a photo (of the Waorani) and when they saw the picture they thought their soul was stolen, so they killed the person who took the picture? I think they were Catholics, capuchins.

There is a Priest, who is well known, who was killed by the Waoranis, Priest Labaka (Alejandro Labaka), and the nun was called Inés Naranjo, because they were well known and I know from people who have lived here, including the mother of the man who drove the other canoe, that man's mother was the one who moved with the missionaries where the community is from.

I think they were Capuchins. You can search for Monsignor Alejandro Labaka and you will see from which order he is from. If I'm not wrong, he is a Capuchin, he is a Spanish missionary with a nun, she was a nun from Colombia, who was in those places. They were very loved by many since they tried to teach, not to impose, a different religion. They were also trying in a certain way to help people.

From what I have heard from several people, they tried to teach them things, more than a religion, it was to teach them what can come with all this that they were living through, with the oil companies and the great change that was coming.

Lina/Bianca

Thank you sir, thank you very much.