

Amazon Rainforest Tribe Utilizes Modern Technology to Map 3.7 Million Acres of Ancestral Lands

Matsés Indigenous People of the Peruvian Amazon Complete Historic First Mapping of 3.7 Million Acres of Ancestral Lands

IQUITOS, LORETO, PERU, February 18, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- On the 50th anniversary of sustained contact with the outside world, leaders of the Matsés tribe of the Peruvian Amazon assembled to unveil the first completed maps that demarcate their ancestral territories. The gathering, held on August 28 and 29, 2019 at the village of Remoyacu, in the remote frontier divide of northeast Peru and Brazil was the culmination of an extraordinary indigenous-led initiative that required five years of work to complete. The resultant maps, written in their language, are comprehensive cartographic records of their ancestral territory, history, land use, and culture.

The ancestral lands of the Matsés in Peru comprise an area of 3.7 million acres and contain among the most intact, biodiverse and carbon-rich forests in the world. Their communities shield some of the last remaining uncontacted tribes from unwanted encroachment by the outside world. With the accelerated rates of deforestation and fires in the Amazon Basin, this vast area of intact primary forest that generations of Matsés have fought to



Matsés woman with traditional facial tattoos, piercings, and face paint. ©Alicia Fox



Matsés mapping team from Nuevo San Juan meets with Acaté staff to review maps. ©Acaté

protect is of global significance.

Before the Matsés Indigenous Mapping Initiative, the few maps of Matsés lands were those created by non-Matsés that depict an empty landscape. A few scattered dots along the large rivers that represent their present-day settlements are the only evidence of Matsés inhabitation. Only the principal rivers are named in Spanish. To the Matsés, the caretakers of these lands, the blank areas on these maps were not voids but the living heart of their territory.

At the initiation of this project, the Matsés rich knowledge of their lands and ancestral history resided only in the memory of their living elders. The Matsés recognized the urgency to complete this initiative as the remaining elders were reaching an age where it is increasingly difficult to walk to remote cultural and historical sites. The loss of this knowledge would sever their timeless ancestral connection to their lands.

With support from [Acaté Amazon Conservation](#), the Matsés received training in basic computing and in the use of GPS units. In an undertaking of immense scale over five years, teams of Matsés, led by elders, traveled throughout their land and deep into their headwaters to record thousands of culturally-important mapping points including locations of ancestral longhouses, sites of frontier skirmishes with Peruvian soldiers and areas of ecological importance. All of the waterways in their territory were recorded for the first time with their original Matsés names.



Clay pots mark the site of a longhouse that was hastily abandoned following a skirmish with Peruvian soldiers over 70 years ago. ©Acaté



The Matsés Communal Reserve is an integral part of an even larger bi-national area of intact rainforest that holds among the highest densities of stored carbon, record biodiversity, and protects isolated tribal groups. ©Acaté

As most of the participants had never used a computer prior to the start of the project, the training began with basic computer usage, followed by word processing and spreadsheet lessons. Over time, classes advanced to use of the GIS (Geographic Information Systems) mapping software. Through capacitating the Matsés with the ability to use the complex mapping software, the project took a major step forward from prior participatory mapping initiatives undertaken with other Amazonian indigenous groups. The ability to create and generate maps for themselves will aid the Matsés in governing their territory and protecting its resources. For centuries, the Matsés have been locked in conflict with outsiders encroaching on their lands set on resource extraction, from the rubber barons of old to modern-day multinational petroleum corporations. The maps will be a powerful tool for present and future generations of Matsés to protect their lands from extractive industry and from future attempts to dispossess them.



Headwaters of the Matsés territory are refuge for endangered Giant River Otters. ©Acaté

Acaté Amazon Conservation is a non-profit organization based in the United States and Perú that operates in close partnership with the Matsés people of the Peruvian Amazon to maintain their self-sufficiency and cultural identity as they adapt to the outside world. Operating at the frontlines on the leading edge of conservation, our initiatives have included the [first indigenous medicine encyclopedia](#) as well as projects with original methodology in sustainable economic development, traditional medicine, medicinal agroforestry, nutritional diversity, regenerative agriculture, biodiversity inventory, education, and native language literacy.

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