

**PROJECT REPORT
CUYABENO WILDLIFE RESERVE, ECUADOR
June 18 - 25, 2025**



This was the first volunteer trip organized by Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) to Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve. In recognition of the extraordinary biodiversity of the region and the environmental and ecological importance of the Amazon rainforest, ConservationVIP organized the trip to contribute to biodiversity studies underway in the region, and to assist on projects which will enable safer visitor access. As with our other volunteer trips, we also wished to build local partnerships to enhance conservation efforts and to inspire environmentally responsible tourism. The group consisted of ten ConservationVIP volunteers, including the two trip leaders Mark Hardgrove and Milagros Flores-Roman, accompanied by Katie Beckwith from Rebecca Adventure Travel, the Ecuadorian travel company which helped ConservationVIP set up the logistical arrangements for the trip. Together the group accomplished the goals we had for the trip through 384 hours of volunteer project activity, which is described below in further detail.

The Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve, formally established in 1979, stands as a cornerstone of Ecuador's protected areas. This sprawling Amazonian ecosystem is celebrated not

only for its unparalleled biodiversity but also for its profound cultural heritage. It serves as a testament to the enduring presence of several Indigenous nationalities who have coexisted with the rainforest for centuries. Their ancestral knowledge and sustainable practices are intricately linked to the reserve's unique character and ongoing conservation efforts. Simultaneously, the reserve has emerged as an increasingly vital site for scientific inquiry, particularly in the realm of butterfly research, driven by growing concerns about environmental change.

Indigenous Communities: Guardians of the Forest

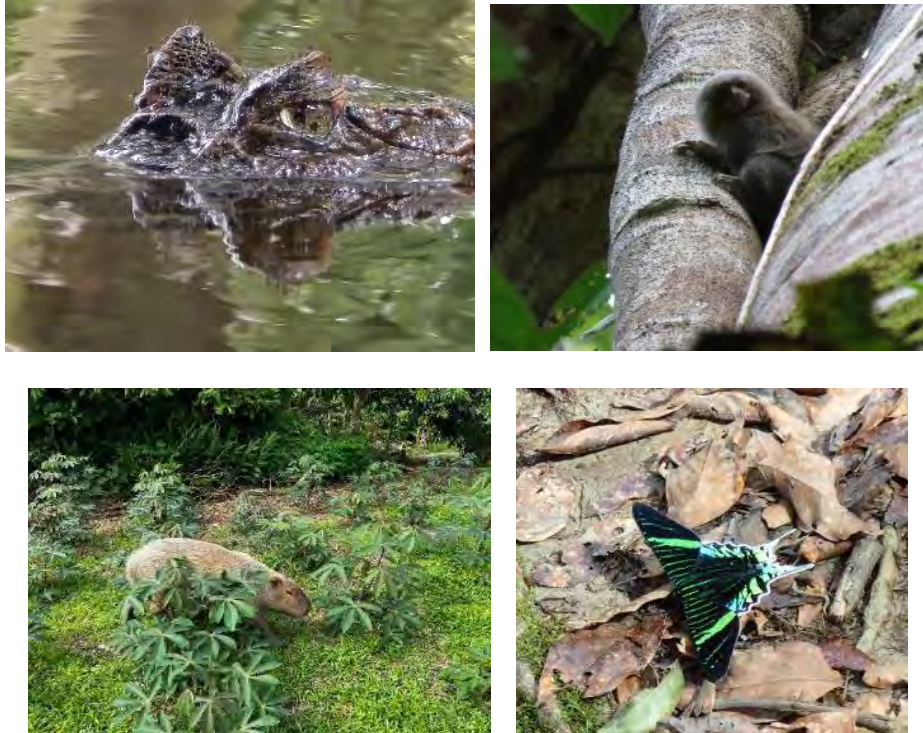
Within the Cuyabeno Reserve and its surrounding areas, the cultural tapestry is woven from the traditions of five primary Indigenous nationalities, each possessing a rich history and deep connection to the land:

1. **Siona:** Primarily inhabiting the Putumayo River basin, the Siona in Cuyabeno are found in communities such as Puerto Bolívar, often near the upper Cuyabeno lakes network. Their Western Tukanoan language, Siona, reflects a culture deeply intertwined with the forest. Traditional life revolves around subsistence farming (cassava, plantain, corn), hunting, and fishing, all performed with reverence for the ecosystem. Shamans (*yachak*) are pivotal figures, guiding spiritual ceremonies, including the ceremonial use of *yagé* (ayahuasca), for healing and maintaining ecological balance. Siona communities actively participate in sustainable tourism and intercultural education to preserve their unique heritage.
2. **Secoya (Siekopai):** Known as Siekopai in their Paaikoka language, the Secoya have communities in Ecuador and Peru, with settlements like Eno, San Pablo de Katitsiaya, and Secoya Remolino situated along the Aguarico, Shushufindi, and Cuyabeno rivers. Historically part of the "Encabellados," the Secoya are famed for their profound knowledge of medicinal plants, including *yagé*, used in shamanic rituals for purification and spiritual guidance. Despite enduring historical pressures from disease, exploitation (like the rubber boom), and contemporary impacts from oil activities, the Secoya tirelessly advocate for the titling of their ancestral territories and the preservation of their cultural identity.
3. **Cofán (A'i):** The Cofán historically inhabited the upper watersheds of the San Miguel and Aguarico rivers. In Cuyabeno, the Zábalo community is a significant Cofán settlement along the Aguarico River. The Cofán are distinguished by their profound spiritual relationship with nature, rich oral traditions, and potent shamanistic practices. They have been at the forefront of Indigenous-led conservation, securing rights to substantial ancestral territories within and outside protected areas, which they actively manage. The Cofán Lodge, an ecotourism initiative, exemplifies their commitment to cultural preservation and economic self-sufficiency.

4. **Kichwa (Quichua):** As one of the most numerous Indigenous groups in the Ecuadorian Amazon, Kichwa communities are widespread within and around Cuyabeno, notably along the Aguarico River in areas like Playas de Cuyabeno and Zancudo. They are primarily agriculturalists, cultivating staples such as yucca, plantains, coffee, and cacao, supplemented by traditional hunting and fishing. Many Kichwa communities have embraced community-based ecotourism as a sustainable development strategy, enabling visitors to engage in their traditions, participate in daily activities, and support their efforts to protect their culture and lands from external pressures.
5. **Shuar:** While traditionally concentrated in the southern Ecuadorian Amazon, some Shuar communities also live within the broader Cuyabeno region. Known historically as a resilient and warrior people, the Shuar possess rich traditions, including intricate facial tattoos and ritualistic practices. Their way of life, too, is deeply connected to hunting, fishing, and agriculture, enriching the reserve's diverse cultural landscape.

These Indigenous communities are more than mere inhabitants; they are the ancestral custodians of Cuyabeno. Their traditional ecological knowledge, sustainable resource management, and profound spiritual connection to the land are indispensable assets for the conservation and protection of this unique Amazonian ecosystem. Collaborative efforts between eco-lodges, tour operators, and these communities often facilitate cultural exchange programs, allowing visitors to learn directly from the Indigenous peoples, thereby fostering mutual respect, supporting livelihoods, and contributing to the preservation of their invaluable cultural heritage.





Day 1

Our trip began in Quito Ecuador. Volunteers were picked up at Quito International Airport and transferred to the Ilatoa Lodge about a 20-minute drive from the airport towards Quito. The lodge is located high on a ridge, providing a quiet place to rest from travel and also allows us to provide thorough orientation for the team.



We met at 6:00 p.m. for introductions. The trip leaders provided a one-hour orientation to the upcoming trip along with an overview of all of ConservationVIP's programs, mission and history. We enjoyed a typical Ecuadorian meal together and spent time getting to know each other.

Day 2

After breakfast we transferred back to the airport from the lodge to catch our flight from Quito to Coca. Flying over the Andes Mountains to Coca saved us a 10-hour overnight trip on a bus.

Arriving in Coca we boarded a small bus, and with our luggage we drove 3 hours to the bridge at the entrance to the Reserve, where we met our guide Fabricio. After lunch, in pouring amazonian warm rain, we hiked to the nearby Visitor/Orientation Center where we all learned about the unique flora and fauna we were about to experience. We also learned more about the Indigenous tribes that still thrive in the reserve.

We then hiked back to the bridge where we boarded a 35 ft. fiberglass canoe, powered by a fifty hp outboard motor. Over the next 2 hours we slowly traveled, in the warm rain, observing the unique plant life along the river, stopping frequently to see monkeys and many bird species. At each stop Fabricio would identify the unique flora and explain about the birds and monkeys we saw.



Arriving at the Cuyabeno Lodge, which is the first lodge established in the reserve, we were met by Over, one of the two employees who supported our team. Over greeted us with freshly made lemonade as we organized our shared rooms and took our luggage out of the large trash bags provided by ConservationVIP which we had used to keep our valuable luggage dry during the canoe trip.

Our first meal together at the lodge demonstrated what we were about to experience. Our Chef Humberto and Over demonstrated their culinary abilities which continued throughout the trip. The rain had not stopped, and we quickly moved into the lodging where we would stay for the next 7 nights.

Our excellent guide Fabricio gave an orientation and safety briefing specific to the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve. Safety issues discussed including the flora and fauna of the region and camp and the ground rules which we developed to protect us all during our stay.



Day 3

After an early breakfast we met the 4 Park Rangers who were assigned to lead and support our teams during the next two full days working on two separate and unique trails.

We divided into two teams, quickly named the Piranha and the Pink River Dolphins. Each team of 5 Volunteers took a boat and traveled to the Large Island inside Laguna Grande, starting at the trailhead.



Team Pink River Dolphin



Team Piranha

Each Team split into two smaller groups. The first group of three volunteers along with a park ranger started opening the trail, removing large, downed trees which had fallen blocking the trails. All of the volunteers were provided new hand pruners which cut up to ½ inch brush, opening the path to a width of 5 ft. and also working to remove the large sections of downed trees. The second group of 2 volunteers, working with another park ranger started at the trailhead, measuring with a 100-meter tape, marking trees every 50 meters and entering the GPS coordinates to allow the reserve to develop a trail guide and trail map in the future. The Pink River Dolphins measured and collected data along the first 1000 meters of their trail. The Piranha measured, cleared and collected data on the first 2200 meters of their trail.

Day 4

After another early breakfast we met the park rangers, and our two groups changed trails, which gave each team a new experience doing the exact same work as the day before.

The Pink River Dolphin team cleared, measured and provided GPS coordinates each 50 meters totaling 5,200 meters and the Piranha team cleared, measured and provided GPS coordinates for 4,200 meters. Both teams became more efficient on the second day, and the Pink River Dolphins came out ahead but were later eaten by the Piranhas (just joking, of course!).





Volunteers Group starting the day with standard safety briefing.



Team Pink River Dolphins

Day 5

The park rangers ended their 20-workday schedule and were ready to enjoy their well-earned 9 days off, so the volunteers turned their efforts towards supporting the local community.

Trip leaders and our guide Fabrizio organized the supplies and materials necessary to paint the interior of one room in Puerto Bolivar. Once we arrived, we were met by the children of the village who had heard about our donations and were very excited to see us all. Donations of school supplies were given out to the children under the direction

of their teacher and after a small ceremony we all went to work preparing the school classroom for painting. Volunteers scraped, cleaned, swept and prepared the surfaces for two fresh coats of off-white paint. The classroom was brought back to new conditions, at least the walls. Two more large classrooms remain for future trips in Puerto Bolivar.



After completion we traveled by boat to the village of San Victoriano where we were again greeted by children, their teacher and some parents. After another small donation ceremony, we were treated to a nice lunch by the village residents offering fish and chicken along with yucca and other fruits of the Amazon.





Day 6

Trip leaders and our guide Fabrizio again organized the supplies and materials necessary to paint the interior and exterior of a small school and classroom in the village of Tarabeaya. Again, we were met by the children, teachers and some parents, mostly the women. After a significant amount of work to clean, sweep, scrape and remove some plants we applied two coats of paint to the exterior of the structure and repaired the roof drains to eliminate mold from the walls in the future. After we completed the exterior, we moved to the exterior painting. There was not enough paint

to complete the exterior, but we did paint three sides of the building, leaving more work for our next trip. The staff of Cuyabeno Lodge prepared a huge pot of arroz con pollo which we took to the jobsite and enjoyed after completing our work. The Day ended with a traditional Shaman ceremony of *Limpia* (spiritual cleaning) for any of the Volunteers who wished to participate.



Day 7

Another early start after breakfast, we all traveled again by boat to a small island with a trail system which needed us badly. The volunteers opened the vegetation on both sides of the 2-kilometer trail as we slowly hiked. Reaching the end of the trail we were treated to our ninth species of monkeys, leaving only one species yet to see on this trip, the night monkey.

The day ended with a well-deserved swim at the Laguna Grande.



Day 8

We had an early start, loading the canoe at 4:00 a.m. and heading off into the dark. Two- and one-half hours later we reached the bridge where our bus was waiting.

After transferring the luggage from the canoe to the bus we headed to Coca to catch our flight to Quito.

At the Quito airport we shared our goodbyes and safe travel wishes to a new family that came together in the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve.

Acknowledgements

Conservation Volunteers International Program thanks Park Superintendent Dr. Luis Borbor and the staff of Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve, Professional Guide and biologist Fabricio Tapia, and the Tribal leaders and their families for hosting our conservation projects and for allowing us the opportunity to volunteer in Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve.

Conservation VIP also thanks Katie Beckwith and Rebecca Adventure Travel for their assistance in setting up this inaugural volunteer trip to Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve and the staff at Cuyabeno Lodge who provided an enjoyable and comfortable base for our stay in the Reserve.

Last but not least, Conservation Volunteers International Program appreciates our intrepid volunteers for their willingness to participate in this inaugural trip to Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve and their contributions to making the trip a success.