

**AMAZON VOLUNTEER TRIP
CUYABENO WILDLIFE RESERVE, ECUADOR
January 11 – 19, 2026**



Executive Summary

This was the second Amazon 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 conservation trips, we also wished to

build local partnerships to enhance conservation efforts and to inspire environmentally responsible tourism. The ConservationVIP group consisted of eight people, including the two trip leaders Mark Hardgrove and Dr. Milagros Flores-Román. Together the group accomplished the goals we had for the trip through 440 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.



The lodge where we stayed is named “Macaranga Lodge”. It is the only lodge in Cuyabeno National Wildlife Refuge operated through a Co-op agreement between tribes. So, our stay directly impacts tribal capacity. The few staff perform all the tasks from generators, pumps, cooking, cleaning, boat captain, chef but they make us feel at home while at the same time making each of us feel special.



Daily Recaps

Day 1: Meet in Quito, Ecuador

The group met for orientation and dinner at the Airport Courtyard by Marriot Hotel. The dinner in the hotel was very nice, and we enjoyed getting to know each other. We are excited about the trip.

Day 2: Transfer to Cuyabeno Reserve

After a good night's rest, we met for breakfast and walked across the street to the airport's domestic terminal where we easily checked our bags, went through security and quickly found the VIP Lounge, where together we had enough guest passes to get us all in! We boarded our flight at 9:30 a.m. landing at 10:00 a.m. in Coca, Ecuador. We met our guide Fabricio Tapia, boarded our air-conditioned bus and off we drove towards the reserve. After one hour we stopped for fuel, pit stop and snack opportunity.

Onward another hour we stopped for lunch, picked up final supplies at the hardware store and drove to the bridge, where we boarded our motorized canoe.

At the bridge 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 Macrolobium Lodge, which is the first lodge established in the reserve operated by the Indigenous tribes, we were greeted with freshly made lemonade.

Our first meal together at the lodge demonstrated what we were about to experience. Our Chef demonstrated his 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 guide Fabricio Tapia 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: Trail Project

After breakfast we met the 2 Park Rangers, Nilo and Janina, who were assigned to lead and support our teams during the next four full days volunteering on unique trails.

We divided into two teams, quickly named the *Dog Fish* and *The Sloths*. The groups volunteered at the Palma Rosa Trail along with a park ranger. They started opening the trail, removing large, downed trees which had fallen blocking the trails. Each person

was provided new hand pruners which cut up to ½ inch brush. We opened the path to a width of 5 ft. and also removed the large sections of downed trees. We cleared one and a half miles of trail, removing 8 large, downed trees.

Day 4: Butterfly Survey

After breakfast we met the park rangers and traveled together by boat to our trailhead at Palma Rosa Trail. We unloaded the gear and hiked along the trail following the park rangers. They knew where they had left the strings in the trees hidden off the main trail. We installed and baited each of the traps, one with rotten banana paste, the next with rotten tilapia fish paste. We elevated one net to head high and the other to 60 ft. We hiked in and out for about 2 miles.



Group heading to volunteer project stations at Palma Rosa Trail



Supporting Park rangers on Butterfly Survey

Day 5: Butterfly Survey

The group returned to check the butterfly traps with the park rangers. There they:

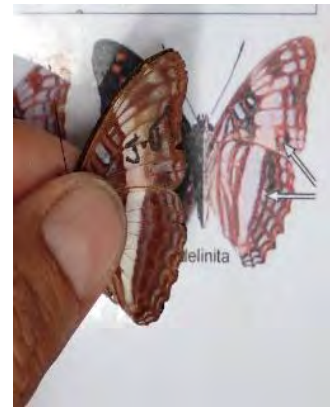
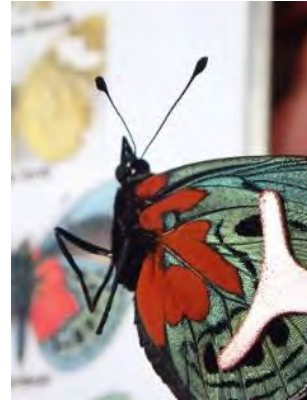
- Removed the butterfly.

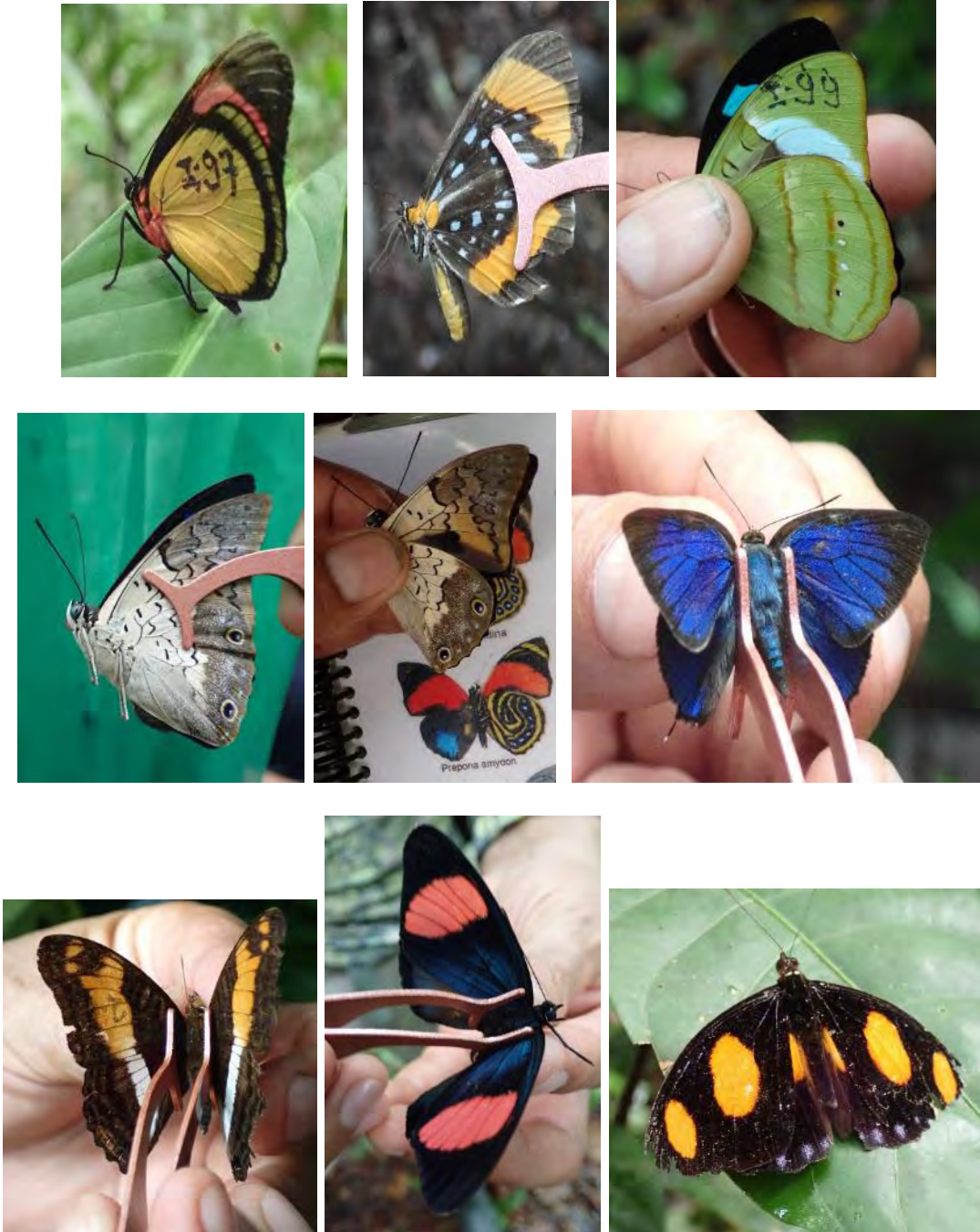
- Identified the butterfly.

- Tagged the butterfly.

- Released the butterfly.

They performed this for each of the specimens that were captured overnight in the traps over the one mile research area.





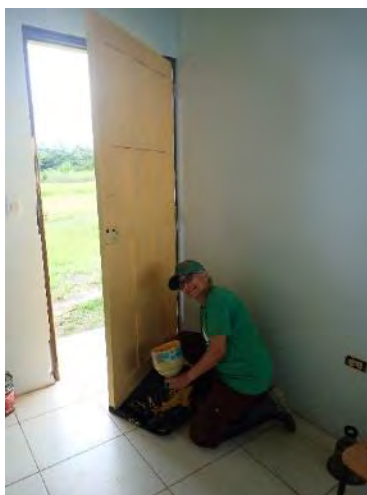
The park rangers ended their tour of duty and returned to their headquarters to report their success.

Day 6: Community Service Project in Tarapoa

Trip leaders and our guide Fabricio Tapia organized the supplies and materials necessary to paint the interior of one room in Tarapoa Village School. 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 started preparing the school classroom for painting. We 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 Tarapoa Village. The staff of Cuyabeno Lodge prepared a huge pot of “arroz con pollo” which we took to the project site and enjoyed after completing our project.





Day 7: Community Service Project in Puerto Bolivar

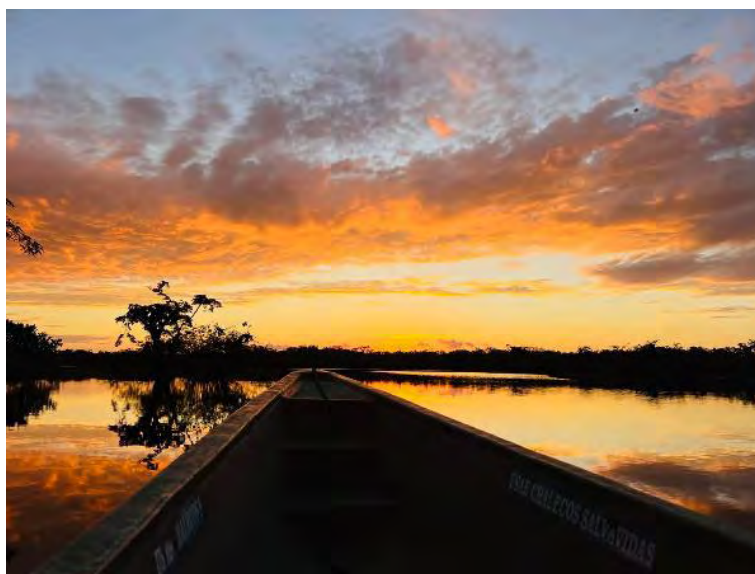
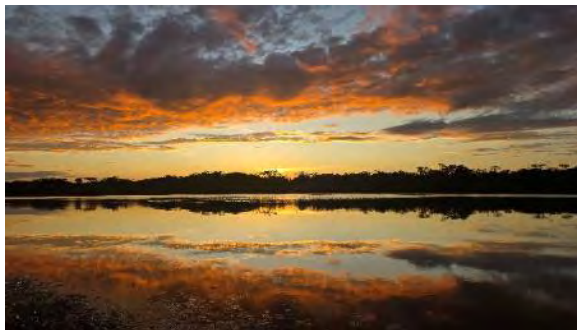
Trip leaders and our guide Fabricio Tapia again organized the supplies and materials necessary to paint the interior and exterior of a small school and classroom in the

village of Puerto Bolivar. Again, we were greeted 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. The day ended with a traditional Casabe preparation demonstration followed by a Shaman ceremony of Spiritual cleaning for any of our travelers who wished to participate.



Day 8: Travel to Tarapoa

Another breakfast, we all traveled again by boat to the bridge, from where we drove by bus to the town of Tarapoa for our last night and farewell dinner.



Day 9: Travel to Quito

We had an early start, loading the bus and heading to the Coca Airport 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, the park rangers of Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve, Professional Guide biologist Fabricio Tapia, the staff of Macrobium Lodge and the Tribal leaders and their families for hosting our conservation projects and for allowing us the opportunity to volunteer in Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve.

Last but not least, Conservation Volunteers International Program appreciates our intrepid travelers for their willingness to volunteer on this second trip to Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve and their contributions to making the trip a success.

Until we meet again,

Mark Hardgrove and Millie Flores
Trip Leaders to Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve, Amazon, Ecuador