Shuar Solar Project

ECUADOR RAIN FOREST

Goal: To create a safe and sustainable light source using the energy of the sun.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to spend some alone time with my beautiful Shuar goddaughter and her family deep in the Amazon Rain Forest. The hike to the longhouse was filled with chatter about our families, and I especially enjoyed the challenging crossing where two rivers meet. The purity and moisture of the jungle air felt like incredible medicine to my skin and lungs. We swam, played, and picked fruits and yuca from the jungle garden nearby. Because I was a special guest, several friends were invited to join us in the evening for a meal and chicha (the staple drink). As darkness fell, I noticed my compadre gathering little wiked bottles and filling them with kerosene. About six of them provided the light for the evening gathering. The foul smell along with the sooty smoke was a startling contrast to the outside air. When I asked about the little lamps, I discovered that many of the Shuar families have adopted this method of extending light into the evening. Traditionally the Shuar would sleep and awaken with the natural rhythm of the sun. As "modern" methods of extending light have been introduced, they have embraced the extension of their evening activities which include socializing, homework, crafts, etc.

A year later while attending the all night party following my goddaughter's wedding, I once again experienced the little kerosene jars placed in the community room. Again, the air inside was unclean. It was during that community gathering that my Shuar friend Vicente said to me, "Mary, is there any way you could help us to get solar light for our community building? This kerosene is so bad for us and I worry about the children." He explained that many Shuar homes and all of the community buildings are using the kerosene bottles now. I told him that I would do what I could because it was definitely a concern of mine as well. It was Vicente's request that sent me into action. It is important that any project be desired by the Shuar community and not just be

a well-intended gringo intrusion. I found out that many of the families were unhappy with the smoke, but did not know of any alternative. Also, the kerosene was not free. Anyone who has been blessed with a trip to the jungle community knows how the Shuar all value a flashlight and batteries!

At home in California, I checked with my friend Chris who is an expert with solar power. He is a licensed electrical contractor who specializes in solar off-grid stand-alone solar systems which are becoming a more popular way to create sustainable energy sources. Chris was the perfect person because besides his expertise in this area, he was a part of the sound crew in the jungle when we produced the Shuar CD Anent. The Shuar loved him and he was invited back for a visit. Chris traveled back to the Shuar within a year and shared in a community celebration. He too noticed the kerosene lamps and was interested in creating a solution.

We have one! During a meeting recently, Chris and I calculated the complete cost of not only creating solar lights for the five or six POLE communities, but also creating battery charging stations for each community complete with waterproof flashlights and batteries. We know that an exchange of energy is necessary to keep a balance, so Shuar participation has been written into the project. The Shuar would need to construct a simple pole holder for each solar panel as well as charger box at each station. This construction could be done entirely with natural materials. Following the solar installation, which would have community participation, certain Shuar would be trained to do future installations. Chris would create a kit for future use if funding is available.

Five or six communities would each have three simple fluorescent fixtures and a set of sixty waterproof flashlights with one hundred sixty rechargeable batteries. The estimated cost of the completion of this project for all of the

communities is $12,000. Chris and I have decided to volunteer all of the time and labor needed to complete the project.

All donations are tax deductible and need to be made out to: Sierra Nevada Deep Ecology Institute (SNDEI), a non-profit organization. Make sure that donations are directed to the Shuar Solar Project. A full progress report will be made to all donors as well as a gift from the jungle.

It is important to note that while many of us would like the Shuar to go back to the pristine ways of the past, they have already accepted the extension of their awake time as our ancestors did hundreds of years ago. We are merely offering a healthier and safer alternative to the existing kerosene lamps. And it is at their request.

Mary Tendall has worked closely with the Shuar community for over ten years. She has established an intimate and trusting relationship while working on educational and sustainable projects. She is a Dream Change trip facilitator, taking groups on powerful experiences with indigenous cultures.

Chris Amson has traveled worldwide as a sound engineer, production manager, and production electrician. He is currently working in his own electrical contracting business which specializes in off-grid and grid-tied solar electrical systems. He is also a friend of the Shuar.

If you would like to share in this experience you may:

[1] Join us on an expedition.
[2] Offer a tax deductible donation through SNDEI and receive a gift from the Shuar.

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