

My field research season in Ecuador was a truly unforgettable experience. The opportunity to work in two different coastal communities was so special and caused immense personal and professional growth. I was able to further improve my Spanish, my interviewing skills, my confidence in conducting research, my critical thinking skills, and am now more capable of putting theoretical knowledge into practice. I was also blessed by the friendship of many amazing Ecuadorian people.

In total, I conducted 19 official interviews and had even more 'spur of the moment' discussions over the kitchen table, out in a canoe on the estuary or else while watching a pick up soccer game. I also created 14 maps and had several discussions with the map-making groups about what information they would like included. It was such an incredible learning experience in both intellectual and hands-on capacities (I learned to fish!).



Below is a quick synopsis of the two communities in which I worked and lived as well as information about the maps made by them this summer.

### Portovelo, Manabí

Portovelo is located in the province of Manabí, near the Isla Corazon and Bahía de Caraquez or San Vicente. The community is made up of nearly 200 families, many of whom rely on fisheries as a source of income. The shrimp farming industry has had a large impact, as has the 1998 El Niño phenomenon which devastated the community. Their maps were made in an attempt to catalogue important information, with a special focus on the use of the mangrove ecosystems, fisheries, and knowledge from the initial settlers from the area. The majority of the population is involved in subsistence fishing and agriculture, while the

women primarily work at home. The main source of income for many individuals and families is the removal of shrimp heads for export to Europe and North America which usually occurs once a week.

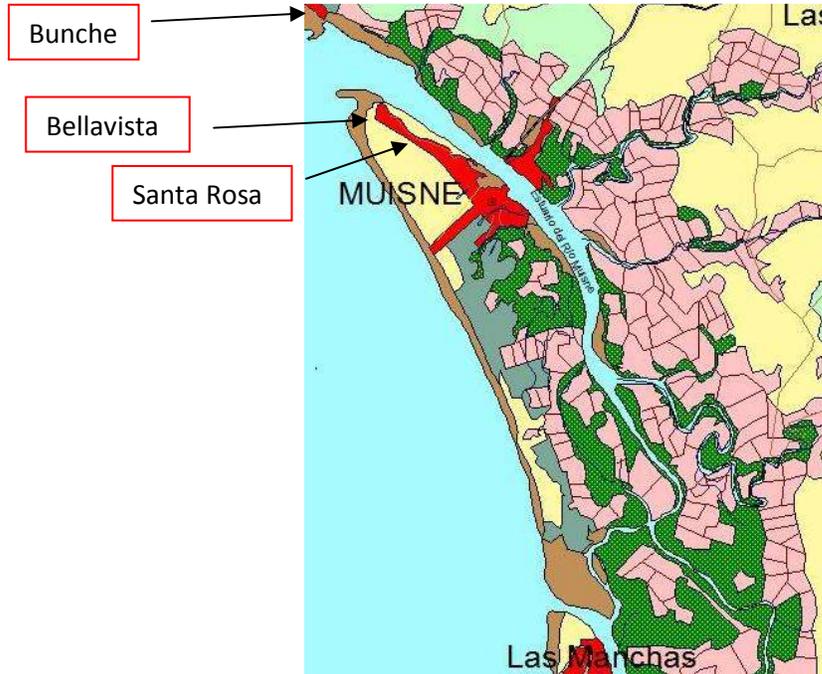
June 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2009	Grupo de Mujeres de Portovelo (2 maps)	9 women
June 13, 2009	AsoManglar/Guías de la Isla Corazón (2 maps)	10 men
June 17, 2009	Asociación de Pescadores (3 maps)	25 men
June 20, 2009	Grupo de Mujeres (final touches)	



### Muisne, Esmeraldas

The island of Muisne is located in the northern province of Esmeraldas, just off the pacific coast. There are several neighbourhoods within the island and the focus was mainly on the Northern communities and their surrounding environment. The map was created in Bellavista, Santa Rosa and across the estuary on the mainland in a community named Bunche. The women in the Asociación de Concheras de Bunche created the first ever organized fisherwomen's group in the area.

July 22, 2009	Asociación de Concheras de Bunche (1 map)	11 women
July 20, 2009	Grupo de mujeres de Bellavista (2 maps)	17 women
July 24, 2009	Asociación de Carboneros de Bellavista (2 maps)	20 men
August 2, 2009	Asociación de Pescadores de Santa Rosa (2 maps)	17 men



I arrived in Muisne in July and spent the first week meeting with C-CONDEM’s partner organization called Fundación Defensa Ecológica (FUNDECOL). They are very similar organizations as many of the founders of FUNDECOL are also founders of C-CONDEM. While C-CONDEM works in Quito at the political and legislative level, FUNDECOL focuses more on local issues in the county of Muisne. The office is located on the island of Muisne (where I was working) but FUNDECOL also works with communities on the mainland. In total, they work with around 10 communities such as Bunche, la Tortuga, Bellavista, etc.

I spent the first week living in the centre of the island “downtown” getting to know the place, meeting with FUNDECOL to describe my project goals and how they complement the work FUNDECOL does. It took a few discussions with much of the staff as their scope was much larger than mine could possibly be during my 5 weeks stay on the island. FUNDECOL wanted me to conduct my research in as many of their partner communities as possible whereas I thought one or two at most would be the most beneficial. I am looking to compare Portovelo with Muisne so I had to think about how to adequately focus this comparison. As we debated in which communities I should stay, there were several important considerations, the main one being safety. The island has had a bit of a negative history with regards to

thefts and violence on women and tourists- especially on the beach alone or at night. I had been warned about it before going but planned on taking necessary precautions and didn't like to idea of having someone from FUNDECOL accompany at all times to conduct the research. They are already busy enough and it would have taken away from my ability to use the same participatory methods and to really get to know the community members without the influence and association with that specific NGO. In the end, we chose to focus the main portion of my time on Bellavista, which is a community in the northernmost area of the island, located at a 20 minute walk (or 7 minute "mototaxi ride) to the centre. FUNDECOL and Bellavista have recently constructed an "eco-tourist" cabin and are trying to promote its use. They wanted me to support this endeavour by being the first tourist to christen the cabin! I was happy to help out in such a way and quickly fell in love with the community and its surrounding environment. Little by little, the other neighbourhoods grew used to seeing me and I often stopped to say hello and explain to them what I was doing. Furthermore, as I worked with several fishermen's groups, I was informed that they had all sent out their "warnings" that I was a friend and was to be protected. In the end, I ended up feeling safer in this "unsafe" area and never had any issues whatsoever. I also realized that my homestay family's two dogs loved to run along the beach and quickly made two best friends and guardians that followed me everywhere! The choice of my second community to research ended up being the biggest hiccup of the research period and I was able to overcome it by speaking to my thesis committee, especially Tony Charles, my supervisor, and by listening to my common sense and intuition. It was comforting to know that the Trust allowed me the flexibility to make small changes to my research project and was supportive of my decision. I felt like my safety was indeed the first priority and I really appreciated that.

Though most of my research time was spent in Bellavista, I soon learned of a nearby community called Bunche, which is located on the mainland just North of Muisne Island. The first ever women's clam-digger group was formed there (and is still active) to improve their livelihoods in the face of environmental changes. I decided that it would be wonderful to speak with them and to get a different outlook (from women) on the natural resources in the area. I ended up spending a few days in Bunche making `green maps`, treading through the mangrove swamps, learning how to dig for clams, and hearing stories about the area. I was even brought over to the community's eldest member, a wonderful 98 year old woman who lives on her own behind her sons house. She still cooks for herself too!

In Bellavista I conducted interviews and mapping as well with the Asociación de Carboneros and some of the women. I also took advantage of their amazing culinary skills and incredible seafood and tried to learn how to cook coconut fish and shrimp. Many discussions were had while cooking in the kitchen and I learned much about the history of Bellavista while listening to them share their stories. My homestay mother and her daughters also taught me to cook delicious Ecuadorian specialties. They have many coconut trees and are always making delicious dishes with the `coco`. One of their specialties and sources of income are `cocada` treats which are made up mainly of coconut, sugar and cooked into a

chewy treat which is sold in town for only \$0.25! They also own a farm which brings in the plantains, bananas, tomatoes, fruit such as maracuyá (passion fruit), naranjas (oranges), limones, etc. The cabin was in the backyard of this families' house and it was a peaceful and beautiful place to be and to reflect (while in a hammock!). The eco-tourism idea there is a great one and I hope that they are successful in it.

Finally, after so many trips through town to and from FUNDECOL, I learned of a fisherman's group in Santa Rosa and arranged to meet with the president. Don Manuel Sabando is a motivated and inspirational leader who hopes to improve the safety and the quality of life of his friends and fellow fishermen and was very interested in my project. In my final week, I arranged to do a mapping activity with the Asociación de Pescadores 7 de Febrero (Santa Rosa) and it was one of the most enriching experiences of the summer. They were so gracious in sharing their wonderful lives and stories with me and I truly enjoyed every minute spent with them. I am hoping that the research and the maps we created can be used as a tool for their organization to move forward and to share its plight. In a perfect world, it would work as a catalyst for them to secure funding to improve their boats and to create a centre where they are able to sell their catch at a fair price, without the intermediary.

I was able to return to Portovelo, Manabí in August after finishing up in Muisne. It was wonderful to see everyone and the kids hoped I had come back to organize another race! Unknowingly, I got there just on time for a birthday party which became a community gathering and I was able to catch up with almost everyone. I shared some of my experiences in Muisne with them and they told me what they had been up to in the last 5 weeks. One of the surprising additions to the community was a new roadside restaurant where they served amazing shrimp, cheese and clam empanadas!

In Portovelo, we had previously met and collaborated with local government officials about the park. We discussed boundaries on that land, and what areas could be used for the park based on their official data. They were interested in the project and promised to donate native trees and plants to support Portovelo. We then invited them to a father's day lunch at the "comedor" which is a small building/kitchenette used by the seniors who meet daily (when the government can subsidize it) for lunch together. It was a really special afternoon as many of the seniors took a turn singing a song or reciting a poem as we all shared laughter and smiles. There was recently a local election and the new mayor has been settling into his new responsibilities and hasn't yet had a chance to discuss Portovelo. For that reason, some of the planned developments and tree planting in the community park have been postponed as they await the mayor's decision. For the time being, the area is fenced off, lines are drawn and we're awaiting the trees!

I really appreciated the portion of the budget (\$1200 CAD) dedicated to a community gift and enjoyed spending time brainstorming and discussing with them what it could be used for. It was nice to be able to offer something in return for their time, knowledge and welcoming arms and for it to be something they chose, something THEY believed they needed. In the end, it was used in Portovelo for a community park;

in Bunche to fix up the columns and walls in their community centre; in Santa Rosa to fix up some fishing gear; and in Bellavista to purchase materials that would build their first community centre!

In terms of money spent, I was slightly over budget (\$500), especially in terms of communication and from the conversion rate of Canadian dollars to American dollars. Looking back, I am still unsure about what the best way to accommodate that would have been as each of them has benefits and drawbacks. I looked at opening a local bank account and transferring the money, using PayPal to send it to an Ecuadorian friend to put into a local bank account, or simply withdrawing as needed (which I did) which includes a \$400 limit as well as a \$15 bank and withdrawal fee or else simply arriving in Ecuador with the total amount (which may have been the best idea but I was too nervous about being robbed).

The community was also thankful for my return visit in 2010 and I believe it made them more trusting to know that I had a plan to return and that it was part of my thesis itself. I'm finding that it is very motivational to have worked so closely with communities in Ecuador and that my thesis no longer feels like it's an individual pursuit. The people of Portovelo and Muisne were such giving and instrumental parts of my research experience and I feel like I owe them so much. I plan on finishing the first version of the maps by the end of 2010 and have arranged for a co-worker from C-CONDEM to print it off and bring it to the communities for review, corrections and additions. When I return in April, I want to be able to give them their finished map (as well as the ones that they drew initially) and also hope to have preliminary findings and some conclusions for them. Ideally, I can give them a type of executive summary about what I have come up with (in Spanish) that they can then use. When I finish my thesis, it will also be available to them electronically, though I'm unsure about whether I will be able to translate the whole document. I want to make sure that the information is given back to the community and I believe that the map is a unique and interesting way to do so. There is also a great sense of pride involved as their time and effort pays off in a finished product that they have designed and created. They will then be able to use it as they chose. For example, in Portovelo, the primary interest was a promotion of eco-tourism and a description of how things have changed in their area; in Bellavista, the focus is on education and the final products will be put in the community centre as well as the school; in Bunche, the women plan to use it in the community centre and in their own houses; and in Santa Rosa, the association would like to raise awareness about the current situation they are in and to look for support.

I was very thankful to have met with Robin's parents before leaving for Ecuador and felt a sense of pride when I explained what the award was to the communities and how the Robin Rigby Trust supported my research in Ecuador. It was beautiful to have the connection with Mary and Doug and to know that my wonderful experience and thesis research were thanks to them and to Robin. It was definitely an extra support and helped me through some of the tougher times this summer. I am really looking forward to seeing them again soon to be able to catch up about our summer experiences.