Loreto: The Maijuna struggle to reclaim their heritage

Indigenous group succeeds in having its ancestral territory declared a conservation area. The last 500 Maijuna, and their lands, will be protected from degradation.

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The last Maijuna to wear discs in his earlobes died in 1982, and with him went an entire tradition. The ornament was a symbol of dignity, but to be a Maijuna at that time was no honor.

Since 1682, when their ancestors were contacted by the Jesuits, the Maijuna suffered the forced labor of the missions, the slavery of the rubber boom, the impositions of the educational system and the intolerance of society. To survive, the Maijuna decided that they needed to westernize.

So they stopped wearing their traditional clothes, exchanged their blowguns for rifles and stopped building their traditional longhouses. They also forgot their language and let die their most distinctive practice - putting discs in their earlobes.

But sometime during the last decade, when several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the government began to place greater value on ancient cultures, the Maijuna realized the depth of their fortune. “We discovered that we were rich in our culture, and in our nature,” said Romero Rios Ushiñahua, president of the Federation of Native Maijuna Communities.

Degraded Territories
Today there are only 487 Maijuna spread through four communities in the lower Napo River region. The oldest of their new towns was established in 1968. At that time, they lived unprotected at the mercy of loggers, hunters and fishermen.

Mauro Mera, a 48 year-old Maijuna individual, remembers what life was like then. “The loggers took our cedars, the hunters took our tapirs, and the fishermen our peacock bass.”

Degradation wiped out resources, and without resources a population migrates and disintegrates, and culture is diluted.

New Refuge
In 2006, as a federated indigenous group and with the assistance of ethnobotanist Michael Gilmore, the Maijuna began the legal process to declare their ancestral territory a conservation area.

“All in this way could they build the strength necessary to take control of their natural resources, and to restore their biodiversity and culture,” said Jose Alvarez, a biologist at the Research Institute of the Peruvian Amazon (IIAP).
Now, after six years of efforts, on Saturday February 4th, the Maijuna ensured that regional government officials recognized 390,000 hectares of Loreto forest as the Maijuna Regional Conservation Area. Thanks also to the support of PROCREL of the Regional Government of Loreto, the NGO Nature and Culture International, and IIAP.

The opportunity that the Maijuna now have is one that provides protection. They are no longer helpless at the mercy of exploiters. They live in a protected area.

“Will we live better?” asks Hermelinda Mosoline, a 38 year-old mother of 12 children, while sitting in a tree. She wants to protect her heritage. The Maijuna, better late than never, now have an opportunity to protect their heritage.