



PLANTACIÓN AMAZONIA EL VITA S.A.
and
RESERVA NATURAL LA PEDREGOZA



February 2010 Trip Report



L-R: Kochurani, Dexter, Michael, Daria, Liam and Vicki

Being out at our tropical tree farm for the end of January and the beginning of February was, as usual, an amazing experience. Besides the things that needed doing in order to prepare for the 2010 planting season, we also oversaw the final stages of infrastructure construction and made new advances with the establishment of our natural reserve. My wife, Dr. Kochurani Dombro, our son Dagan and I always look forward to our almost monthly visits to Colombia. This time the pleasure of the trip was enhanced by the presence of friends of many years, Dr. Vicky Miller and Dr. Michael Rivera and their two children, Daria and Liam, all of Whistler, B.C.. This report is meant to record some of the highlights of the trip, and share the experience with friends, relatives, associates and others.

We all met up in Bogotá, Colombia's thriving capital, with Kochu and Dagan flying in from Edmonton, while Mike, Vicki and kids arrived from Vancouver and I jetted in a day earlier from San José, Costa Rica. I have a good support network of farm dealers and others in both Bogotá and Medellín, so I always make good use of my time. We all went to see the amazing pre-Colombian gold museum in downtown Bogotá, a place that even after 5 or 6 visits never ceases to amaze. The historic heart of the city is *La Candelaria*, where the newbies all got to try rib soup and other typical delicacies of the area, while the kids got to ride on *llamas*. Later in the day we visited *La Gran Estación*, one of the many big and modern shopping malls in the city, where we enjoyed *Juan Valdez* coffee and ate giant burgers at one of Colombia's best hamburger chains, *El Corral*.



Dagan riding a llama and towing an alpaca.



Dagan, Daria and Liam ready to hit the road in Puerto Carreño. The kids were ecstatic to discover that they got to ride in the back of the truck after I fashioned some reins for them to hold while they sat in plastic chairs. As for the weather, February is right in the middle of the dry season, so temperatures were in the balmy high 30's° to low 40's° Celsius (95° to 110° F).

After 2 nights in Bogotá we headed off to *Puerto Carreño*, the capital of the Colombian departamento of Vichada, for the 1:10 hour flight with *Satena*, a local airline. *Puerto Carreño*, also known as the city of mangos, is an eco-tourism Mecca on the banks of the mighty Orinoco, and only 55 km from our tropical tree farm. We checked into the *Hotel La Vorágine*, named after Colombia's famous 19th century novel of love, frustration and scandal. Since our flight only arrived in the afternoon, we made good use of our time visiting some local sites, buying ponchos for the newbies, drinking beer at one of the many little bars along the Orinoco, and getting supplies for the farm. Oscar Azabache, our local farm administrator, had the plantation truck ready for us at the airport.



Looking out over the might Orinoco, with Venezuela on the far shore.



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Our tropical tree farm involves an area of some 2,892 hectares (7,146 acres) of land, with a sizable section set aside as a natural reserve pursuant to Colombian law. A natural reserve is an area set aside by a private donor, in this case the Dombro family, to be protected because of its ecological and environmental sensitivity or importance. The remainder of the land is devoted to a large scale afforestation and reforestation program. We plant tropical trees for lumber and for carbon sequestration, for fruits and nuts, and for expanded wildlife habitat. This makes us a significant employer and contributor to socio-economic development in the region. You can see the *Amazonia Reforestation* web site for our afforestation and reforestation program at <http://www.myreforestation.com>. Our visitors from Whistler were definitely enjoying their first impressions, with the almost zenith sun a real challenge to their snow-bleached skins.



Land waiting to be reforested, with rain forest in the back. We are able to plant a variety of species in the savannah, but because the soil is mostly infertile we start with nitrogen fixing trees like *Acacia mangium* and *Eucalyptus pellita*.



Daria gets a kiss from Poncho while swimming in the *morichal*. The *morichal*'s water is surprisingly cool, as it is shaded by the dense rainforest on both sides of the waterway. Capybaras can dive and swim, and have little feet that are webbed, like a beaver's.

Upon arrival at the farm, Poncho, a young capybara I rescued on an earlier trip, immediately stole everyone's heart. Capybaras, or *chigüiros* in Spanish, are the world's largest rodents. Poncho is also the model on the top of every page of this report. Despite their lovable personalities, they tend to be on the menu in many local homes, so we keep a good eye on Poncho. Just before we arrived, Poncho managed to get into a scrap with one of the wild capybara families in our natural reserve and sported several injuries which required some veterinary assistance. Since Poncho considers himself to be human, he immediately joined us for trips to our favourite swimming hole in the *morichal* and to Turtle Beach inside the natural reserve, much to the delight of the 3 kids. A *morichal* is a heavily forested savannah drainage creek named after the beautiful *moriche* palms that grow along its banks. We have two stunning *morichals* protected inside our natural reserve, one of them with a refreshing, shaded swimming hole full of ornamental fish.

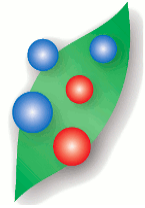
Everyone's eyes popped when they saw the rapid growth rate of the trees we planted in mid-rainy season in 2009. Only 6 months old, many of the trees were already 3 meters or 10 feet tall. Our amazement was shared with other friends from Alberta who dropped by towards the end of the week, Greg Workun of Millet, Alberta and Jim Sikora, formerly of Edmonton, but now a several year resident of beautiful Medellín, Colombia. Greg and Jim were there to check out their tree farm and to do some fishing. Since Greg is 6'5" tall, he is a great reference point for the growth of our trees. The other thing that really caught everyone's eye was the sheer magnitude of what we have already planted, and the vast spaces still waiting to be planted. I will eventually get more pictures posted of tree growth on our web sites, in my Facebook page, and in my blog at <http://co2tropicaltrees.blogspot.com>. All I can really add is that every day you put off getting some tropical trees with us is another day lost collecting at the back end in 10 year's time.



L-R: Jim Sikora and Greg Workun, with planted trees as far as the eye can see behind them. These trees will be pruned in April for better wood quality in the future.

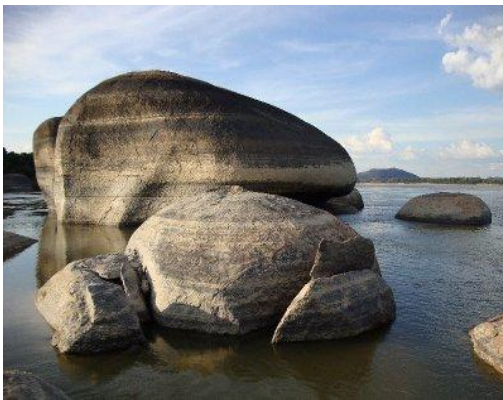


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Dagan with the catch of the day, a very heavy 12lb payara. Standard rods with 10lb test line and big deep sea red and white spooned lures work best for trolling the Orinoco.

Part of the program included taking Vicki and Michael fishing on the mighty Orinoco River. We rented three boats in Puerto Carreño, one for Vicki and Kochurani, one for the kids, and one for Michael and me. We headed upriver, with the girls getting a thrill by stopping on the Venezuelan side of the river for a quick bathroom break in the rocks while the rest of us cast lines here and there. The sun was blistering, so everyone was wrapped in tropical ponchos, long sleeved shirts and hats despite the heat. Any time things got too hot, we would stop for a piranha, crocodile and anaconda swim, providing the kids with a non-stop thrill. Our son Dagan was the first to land a large, 12lb payara (pronounced pa.ja.ra), followed quickly by the rest of us. Everyone marvelled at the payara's vicious teeth, but then again it's a tough life in the Orinoco. We did lots of catch and release, keeping 2 fish, expertly prepared for lunch with plantain fritters on a campfire by our boat captains.



One of the attractions on the Orinoco are magnificent rock formations, reminiscent of Group of Seven paintings in Canada.

We are pretty sure Liam hooked a crocodile, as something took off with his lure, taking the entire spool off the reel and breaking the line, without ever surfacing. We stopped at some of the gorgeous rock formations along the river, but of course no photo can do them justice, so you're just going to have to come and see them for yourself. And try the rum and beer...



Liam and Michael showing off the teeth on their catch. Payara are the fish that eat piranha.



This little guy got right into the water and caught a small fish just 1 or 2 minutes later. I almost felt maternal... Yellow-bellied caimans will grow to be about 6 feet or 1.85 meters in length.

As many of you know, us Dombro's have a natural reserve called *Reserva Natural La Pedregoza*, a place like a provincial park. The web site is <http://www.pedregoza.org>. One of the things we do is wildlife rescue. This trip was blessed with two major releases. The first was the release of an endangered water turtle into the *Rio el Bita*, the second was the release of six little caimans that had been poached from the wild. I told the poachers, who were trying to sell them, that if they didn't release the caimans into my custody I would be showing up with the police right away, at which point they gave us the box they were in and ran. The kids all got to cuddle with the little fellers before we released them in a river inlet at the natural reserve. We were gratified to see them immediately hunt and catch some small fish. One of our plans for *La Pedregoza* includes a turtle egg hatchery and release program.



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River turtle eggs are regularly stolen by poachers who can sell them for more than chicken eggs, as local custom believes they provide all sorts of virility and other nonsense. This means that many of the turtles in the Orinoco river basin are endangered. Our plans call for some boats to go up and down the river during egg season to collect the eggs, hatch them at the hatchery in the natural reserve, and then release them into a protected river inlet inside *Reserva Natural La Pedregoza*. We are using some of the money from the sale of carbon offsets in our **CO2 Tropical Tree** program at <http://www.co2tropicaltrees.com> to help fund this endeavour, with the technical assistance of the renowned *Omacha Foundation's* Orinoco division at <http://www.omacha.org>. We accept all kinds of donations, of course, and would appreciate your help.



Turtle egg nest, with up to 40 eggs in it on turtle beach.



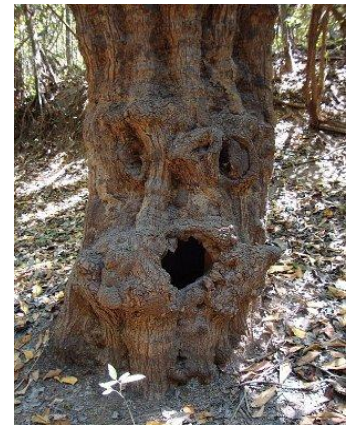
Daria getting ready to release a river turtle that had been taken by some people in Puerto Carreño.

One of our favourite activities in the natural reserve is visiting Turtle Beach. We have a beautiful walk through inundation forest to get to the *Rio el Bita's* golden sand beach during the dry season. The river is warm, though one has to be aware of sting rays. Poncho, piranhas, crocodiles, and anacondas add to the thrill of a swim in the river.



Michael and Poncho cooling off at turtle beach, typical of where large river turtles lay their eggs. We routinely hide turtle tracks to prevent poachers from finding their nests.

Dr. *John Spence* of the University of Alberta's *Faculty of Agricultural, Environmental & Life Sciences* at <http://www.ales.ualberta.ca>, who are partnered with us for the purpose of conducting a number of studies, has a Colombian grad student in his lab called *Jaime Pinzon*, who will be of assistance with local universities. Jaime's wife, *Claudia Castillo*, is another grad student at the U of A interested in mammals, specifically primates. Virtually all of the monkeys in our natural reserve are on Colombia's vulnerable or endangered lists, so we are looking forward to contributing to their protection and study as well. Michael went to take a whiz against a *Saladillo blanco* tree in the natural reserve, and was shocked when a small *mico* monkey jumped out of the tree, nearly taking his "you know what" with him. You can imagine the jokes about trying to explain that one to the doctors. Or to Vicki for that matter...



Disney couldn't have done a better job on this old tree in the natural reserve.





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I guess some of you are wondering when I will start boring you with tropical tree stories again, but I can't help the fact that tropical hardwood trees are what make all of this possible. We have ambitious plans for this year which include planting cashew trees, mango trees, almond trees, avocado trees and coconut trees, as well as putting in some fields of yucca (*cassava*), plantain and banana. I had some jackfruit seedlings that were doing quite well in our experimental nursery, but Poncho took a shine to them and nibbled them down to the stalk, so we are trying to rescue what we can. We are also planning on planting our first major area of Congrio (*Acosmium nitens*), an extremely dense hardwood. Of course, large areas will once again be devoted to *Acacia mangium*, *Eucalyptus pellita*, *integración* and *ocarpa*, as well as *Pino caribe*. The first two are important NFT's (nitrogen fixing trees) for soil building, while *Pino caribe* does well on rocky hillocks. My farm hand Bernardo thinks he has figured out how to collect Sassafras seeds (*Ocotea cymbarum*) before the parrots get to them, so I am really excited about that.

Left: Vicki and Kochurani in a 6 month old Eucalyptus plantation.

Infrastructure at the farm is almost complete. The bunkhouse, with room for 30 hammocks, together with the camp kitchen and dining area is just about done. All the buildings are getting concrete floors, to keep things dry during the wet season. Our two casitas or cabins are close to ready for visitors. I suspect some of the folks from the *University of Alberta* and the *Omacha Foundation* will be our first guests in them. We have running water all over the farm thanks to a really nice well with good drinking water, and showers and flushing toilets. Poncho has his own little pool. The tractor and equipment sheds are up, and the new nursery facilities will go up soon. We now have a better generator, though I am still looking at various options for power generation. The farm, which is also known as *La Pedregoza*, or *Rocky Place* in Spanish, is becoming a little village. At peak times as many as 35 to 40 people will be living and working there.



Lunch is served under a mango tree at the farm, prepared by Bernardo's wife Ana (standing beside me at rear of table). The kids gave me a run for my money chowing down.



Dexter and Kochurani Dombro in a mixed plantation. We'd like to invite you to get some tropical trees with us and then come and hug them for yourself.

Perhaps the best compliment of the trip came from Vicki and Michael's 10 year old daughter Daria. She looked at me and said: "*I want to come back in the rainy season. This place is so much fun!*" Our previous visitors and tourists were Susan and Holly Greaves of Edmonton, who visited *La Pedregoza* in the rainy season in July 2009. I know that Susan is still telling everyone she meets about canoeing in the inundation forest. Colombia has changed so much in the past 10 years. Vicki and Michael realized they had barely scratched the surface of things to do and see in Colombia. "*The only risk in visiting Colombia is wanting to stay*" is the country's tourism slogan. Please feel free to pass this report on to friends, relatives and associates. If you would like to contact me, call me at Edmonton local 780-628-7281, which rings in Costa Rica, or my cell at +506-8879-7932, or e-mail me at:

trees@myreforestation.com.

DEXTER DOMBRO

The End