



**How has the Amazon Rainforest changed in recent years?**

Since 2000, I've noticed many negative changes, especially in the Brazilian Amazon. Down there, they have more deforestation programmes, cattle ranching and fishing, but little sustainable management. Oxbow lakes, once full of fish, are now fished out while exotic birds like hoatzins and macaws have left places where they were once common. In some places, you can't even find katydids or grasshoppers; you see maybe two or three bird species, but that's it. It's all gone.

The Peruvian Amazon is much more pristine. There's far less economic development here and no dams or hydroelectric plants, so the changes are not as severe. Once you get past the small villages above Iquitos [the Peruvian Amazon's capital and last international port], you can easily spot exotic species like monkeys, sloths and pink dolphins.

**What are the biggest threats to the Peruvian Rainforest?**

Illegal logging, hunting and gold mining. If the miners get in here, that will be the end of the forest.

**You're from the small Amazonian village of Huaysi. How is life changing for indigenous Ribeirinhos communities like yours?**

Life there is very hard and simple, but people have always been happy. However, things are changing. Some communities in Pacaya Samiria already have internet - and once technology arrives, there's no going back.

We're already losing some ancient traditions. Fifty years ago, there were shamans [local healers] everywhere. Now, most are gone, and their

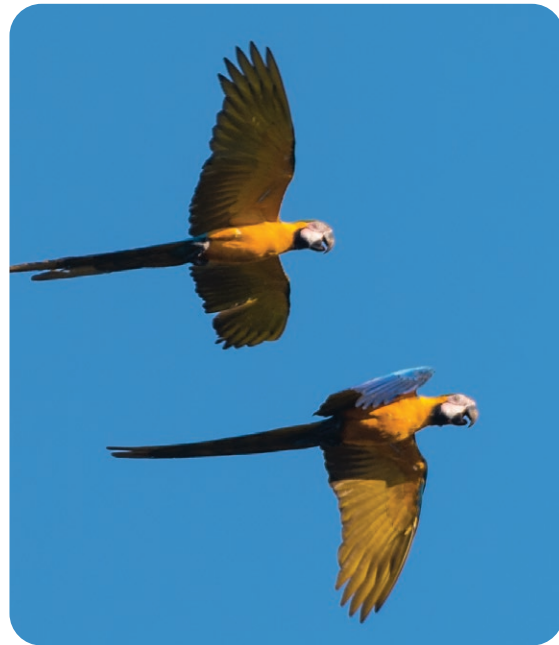


From left: Juan (furthest left) with his Aqua Expeditions team; passengers board the Aria

# THE INFINITE POSSIBILITIES OF THE AMAZON

Born in the Peruvian rainforest, expedition naturalist **Juan Tejada Rengifo** has spent his lifetime exploring the Amazon basin.

By ABIGAIL FLANAGAN



knowledge could soon be lost. People have been using medicinal plants from 'the largest green pharmacy in the world' for over 20,000 years, but kids nowadays aren't interested in learning shamanism. They're focused on getting a better education, moving to the cities and having a different life.

**What about positive changes?**

Looking back 35 years ago, you'd visit villages and everybody would be waiting with animals like monkeys and macaws to sell. Now, many of the hunters work as park rangers, and the forest is regenerating. On a recent trip, I saw 15 troops of monk saki monkeys. Ten years ago, you wouldn't have seen any.

**How does sustainable tourism help?**

Around 20,000 tourists visit Pacaya Samiria National Reserve each year, and each pays an entrance fee [currently US\$60pp]. That money goes directly to protecting the reserve and supporting local conservation programmes. Ecotourism also provides vital employment: Aqua's two Amazon ships employ 166 crew alone. Plus, we work with at least 23 local communities, providing environmental



**What's the biggest misconception about the Amazon?**

That piranhas will eat you alive if you fall in the water. I tell people, "There's only one place in the world where piranhas do that: Hollywood."

**What do you love most about the Amazon?**

That it's a place of infinite possibilities - you never know what you'll find. Each expedition feels like I'm exploring for the first time. I love every bend of the river, but the incredible creatures and giant trees are most special to me. I get excited when I see the huge Ceiba trees; they're so full of energy that I sometimes hug them to recharge my batteries! [aquaexpeditions.com](http://aquaexpeditions.com)



education, hiring villagers as forest guides, renting dugout canoes and buying fresh produce and handicrafts.

**Tell us about Aqua Expedition's paiche conservation project.**

Paiche was once a huge fish endemic in the Amazon but by 2010, overfishing in Pacaya Samiria had seen the population fall to just 500. So, with Aqua's executive chef, Pedro Miguel Schiaffino, we've helped local communities establish a sustainable fishing programme and improve supply and demand. Today, there are more than 10,000 paiche, and quality and price have increased dramatically, too. Now, paiche isn't just consumed locally; it's exported to places like Australia and New York.



**From top left:** Vibrant macaws are a regular sight in the Amazon; guests on a boat excursion; the region's wildlife is easily spotted thanks to guides like Juan; a squirrel monkey; Juan at one of the river's turtle conservation programme sites; every day is different on the Amazon.