

Palms and People

Studies in the Colombian Amazon

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The sun sets early in the tropics, and even earlier under the dense, diverse forest of Amazonia. With so little time left in the day, we quickened our pace in pursuit of a very rare palm. Our local Bora guide had seen what we sought near El Zafire. But it was our last day together as a team, and we still hadn't found it...

Months earlier in the dark Swedish winter, we planned and prepared this expedition – a scientific endeavor to study a remote palm, *Geonoma macrostachys* variety *acaulis*. Data from this palm could illuminate the process of plant speciation, as these palms seem to be separating at this very time. We arranged schedules, hired guides and a cinematographer, and together formulated a plan.

Later in Colombia we rode overloaded trucks down the sole regional road to meet our guides. Now 18 strong, we backpacked two weeks of supplies, equipment, and materials eight hours deep into the Colombian Amazon to the Brazilian border. For two weeks we collected hundreds of plant samples, soil samples, and seeds, recorded hours of film, took hundreds of photos, strengthened our international collaborations with Colombian, Bora, and Uitoto partners – and made unforgettable memories.





While documenting over 40 palm species, we found this petite, blue-fruited *Geonoma stricta*, also highly variable in leaf shape. The species is widespread across the Amazon region and beyond.



This maloca made of *Lepidocaryum tenue* (caraná) palms was our home base in Zafire. The traditional maloca is considered the center of the universe by indigenous communities of the region.

Experts from the Bora, Uitoto, and Mirafía communities invited us to discuss threats to their forest home. We shared our palm study – and they too noted how leaves and stems vary depending on where a palm grows. These local leaders highlighted how bringing scientific and traditional knowledge together can better preserve this forest and its palms. We realized their knowledge is of exceptional value, as they have known this forest for much longer than anyone.

And as dusk fell on the forest on that last day, we finally came upon our first *Geonoma macrostachys* variety *acaulis*, with shiny leaflets and fruits gleaming in the final rays. Like the seeds we sow in botanic gardens, we will continue to foster these collaborations, and connect with the broader community through our outreach. We look to see both palm seedlings and new researchers growing in the future.

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Ana Ospina, Christine D. Bacon, and Sara Carvalho on the border between Colombia and Brazil, a few kilometers from Zafire.

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