

**ACT Field Notes #1**  
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## **Guaymi *curanderos* of Costa Rica**

Looking back we could just see the sea shimmering between the trees, the Golfo Dulce or "sweet gulf" on the southern Pacific coast of Costa Rica. Ahead lay a muddy track winding up into the forest-covered slopes of the Guaymi Indigenous Reserve, the last visible range of hills marking the border with Panama.

### **Traditional Medicine Recovery Program**

We had started out before first light, driving around virtually the whole Golfo Dulce, in order to visit three of the five Guaymi healers or *curanderos* taking part in the Traditional Medicine Recovery Program financed by the Amazon Conservation Team and jointly managed by ACT and a local organisation, the Fundación TUVA. The program aims to reverse the loss of traditional knowledge regarding the use of medicinal plants, hopefully improving both local standards of health and biodiversity conservation in the process.

After ascertaining that the road was impassable by four-wheel drive vehicle we proceeded inland by foot with the local project coordinator, Luis Atencio. Luis' horse carried a solar panel, truck batteries and other paraphernalia intended to provide radio communications between his house and the main project office as well as a vital link for emergencies.

### **Local remedies for local ailments**

Gustavino Montezuma greeted us from the shade of his rickety tin roofed house, which also served as his clinic. His wife, dressed in a colourful traditional dress, distributed fresh fruit drinks while Gustavino politely inquired after our trip and complimented us on not attempting to drive up the road. It having taken four strong men to get the truck out of a ditch I decided to move swiftly on to the purpose of our visit and asked how his work was progressing.

Gustavino had long lamented that many Guaymi were beginning to forget traditional remedies, and instead travelled for almost a day to the nearest government clinic. "It's not that the clinic is no use, no, sometimes it can save your life and it is important to know when to go, but other times it is better to use the traditional plant medicines". Two examples he gives are stomach upsets in young children and snakebites. "I have many remedies here" says Gustavino, gesturing towards the forest "that cure stomach problems quickly, but by the time the children reach the clinic they are dry and much sicker, besides they react badly to the food and medicines of the whites".

The situation with snakebites is intriguing. Poisonous snakes are very common in this part of the world, constituting one of the highest causes of accidental death. "I have cured hundreds of snake bites and never lost a patient that followed my instructions..." Luis added that both his daughter and granddaughter had been cured of snakebites by Gustavino. Snakebite victims often either die before they can get to the hospital and even if they arrive alive they may still die or lose a limb through gangrene. Gustavino, who is renowned for his snake bite cures, uses a variety of locally occurring plants to treat the specific type of snake bite he diagnoses and other plants for possible secondary complications such as gangrene.

### **The apprentice and medicinal plant garden programs**

One of Gustavino's greatest worries is who will continue to treat his people when he is gone and the knowledge is lost. With this in mind, one of the things that Gustavino is doing, along with the four other locally recognised Guaymi *curanderos*, is teaching a select group of young people about diseases and traditional plant remedies. Gustavino has four apprentices who spend one week a month working alongside him, this includes looking for plants in the forest, diagnosing and prescribing remedies for patients and the preparation of the remedies themselves.

Another concern is the ever-increasing distance he has to travel to find certain of the rarer plant medicines as their natural habitat is rapidly being lost to the advances of progress in the form of logging operations and cattle ranches. Faced with the risk that one day he may not be able to find these plants at all, he and the other *curanderos* are planting medicinal herb gardens near to their houses which they hope will not only help prevent the plants from becoming virtually extinct but also ensure that they are close to hand when needed urgently.

The five *curanderos* form part of the Council of Traditional Guaymi Healers which aims to coordinate efforts to recover traditional medical knowledge and improve the health of the Guaymi people. The apprentice program, the medicinal herb gardens and the Council are supported entirely by ACT's Traditional Medicine Recovery Program which we hope will bring into sharp focus the interconnectedness of the health of people, cultures and ecosystems.