



Women make a variety of crafts from local materials. PHOTO/COURTESY TIA FLORES

"There was no way I was prepared for this, emotionally, to see a village in crisis," she said. As an animal lover, she found it difficult to watch the local dogs deal with the flood. They are valued as workers but not pampered as pets, and in emergency conditions, they were left to fend for themselves, fishing for food and occasionally stranded on a boat or floating log. During Flores and Land's visit, a five-year-old drowned in the next village over, and shortly after they left, two people died from snake bites. The snakes, with no ground to dwell on, had taken to the river.

The floods caused a new social dynamic, as well. The school was under several inches of water and closed through May. The children's soccer field was flooded, and the men could not farm. The women's hut, a few feet higher than the rest of the buildings, was the only un-flooded place, so, for April, children, men and grandparents joined the women who usually craft there, an unprecedented situation.

FUTURE PLANS

Flores has been back in Reno for a few weeks now. Two of the thousands of insect bites she got are still lingering, and she's

still organizing her photos—hundreds of stills and videos of jungle sloths, pink river dolphins, people in flooded homes with temporary raised floors, endless horizons of muddy river so wide it doesn't even seem to have a bank, and dozens of women, children and men weaving bracelets.

"Their bead work is pretty strong now," Flores said. She's already planning for next year's trip. She'll make an improved version of the manual drills and get ready to teach her charges more about about basketmaking, especially how to weave in patterns.

Flores made video interviews, asking the people of Ayacucho what effect the tools and instructions have had.

"One woman, Elizabeth, said it gives her money, where, if she has to take her child for care, she can—gas money for the boat," Flores said. Others told her it was a relief to now count on being able afford rice to feed their children.

Right now, the people of Ayacucho are working on their jewelry, perfecting bracelet clasps in particular. Land is planning another trip this summer and intends to purchase a batch of crafts.

"We'll sell them at Sierra Arts and use the profits to buy them tools," Flores said. □

For more information, visit sierraarts.org.

In the village of Ayacucho—not to be confused with the city of Ayacucho, also in Peru—the central fact of life is the Amazon River.

gourds that Flores uses at home, perfect for a pouch that's sized to hang on a pendant.

They found a wealth of other materials—hardened fish scales, red and black seeds so glossy they almost look manufactured, and tiny snake vertebrae to string on bracelets. With Flores' guidance, the women began to develop some design motifs, piranhas etched into the gourds with X-Acto knives, for example.

If, at this point, you're wondering why people in Peru would need to rely on an artist from the United States instead of drawing from their own local traditions—it turns out there's a reason for that.

"There are indigenous people that live in the Amazon," Flores said. "This particular village of people are not." When she asked the villagers how long they had lived in the area, they replied, "Just a few generations."

"Peru was invaded by the Spaniards in the early 1900s for the rubber plant," she explained. "They were enslaving or killing the people of Peru." The locals fled to the Amazon. If the current residents' ancestors have an artistic tradition, it has been lost to them.

"They are still in the process of developing their own traditions," Flores said.

RETURN VISIT

In April, Flores and Land returned for a three-week visit, this time with small, manual drills and laminated illustrations of advanced jewelry-making techniques.

This year, the river was swollen, and the village was so flooded that there was no ground to walk on. For Flores, the visit was heartwarming. She was glad to see friends she made last year and impressed with the strides her students had made in their crafting skills, but it was also difficult.

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