

FROM HANOVER TO THE AMAZON

Anders G.J. Rhodin  
Russell A. Mittermeier

Manuscript submitted to  
Dartmouth Alumni Magazine

1973

## FROM HANOVER TO THE AMAZON

Anders G.J. Rhodin '71 and Russell A. Mittermeier '71

The beams from our flashlights played across the water, searching its surface under the tangled vegetation overhanging the shore. Noiselessly our guide paddled the canoe nearer the thickets as we spotted the glowing red eyes staring across what seemed eons of time. We approached slowly till at last we could see the body of the alligator-like cayman receding down into the murky waters momentarily lit up by our flashlights. Then all of a sudden it was gone, and the three of us were alone on the river, under a canopy of stars. With each of us paddling, we quickly returned to our temporary home on the opposite shore. Entering the reed hut, we strung out our hammocks between the outside beams and the center pole, careful not to wake the Indian family already sleeping. The glow from the smoldering fire and the Amazonian moon lit our faces and we knew a peace and happiness that was nearly indescribable. The moment was the actualisation of a dream, the roots of which lay on the wintry plain of Hanover, some six months earlier.

Back then we were seniors about to embark on a mission of adventure and research. Our goal was the Amazon basin, last of the great unexplored regions on earth. The Amazon -- the world's mightiest river, courses its way through a "green ocean" of jungle 3000 miles from the Andes to the Atlantic. What ever made us want to go there?

As we talked away those winter months in Streeter Hall we got to know each other and discovered a common interest and concern. Though one of us was preparing for physical anthropology and the other for

medicine, it was wildlife conservation which turned into the unifying theme. We both felt that we wanted to make some contribution to the field before embarking on careers that might not, perhaps, ever lead back the same way. The problems of conservation in South America were often discussed. On a continent with so much natural beauty and seemingly endless wilderness, there are the rumblings of a coming ~~disaster~~ disaster, brought on by heedless politics and bad economics. The jungles are being systematically invaded and destroyed. Along every river and every road, the farmers settle, using slash-and-burn techniques, milking the lean soil dry in a few years and then moving on, leaving a scar that even the jungle cannot heal. The people are poor and their means of making a living are limited. Little wonder then that a man will consider the backbreaking labor of collecting rubber in the jungle fruitless when he can earn the equivalent of several months pay by simply killing and selling the skin of some spotted cat or reptile. Yet the poor local hunter is not to blame. Only if the demand for skins in foreign markets goes down will the slaughter ever stop.

Our direct concern then came to center on the animal species in the Amazon area. Some of the animals of the Amazon are definitely already threatened with extinction, but for most of them we do not have enough scientific information to determine whether they are holding their own or not. We decided that we could help by traveling to some little-known area and reporting on the status of some species there. Not only would we be aiding international wildlife organisations trying to save these animals, we would also be contributing new scientific data on animals rarely if ever studied in the wild.

After a lengthy correspondence with some of Colombia and Brazil's leading biologists and talks with noted conservationists in the U.S., we were still uncertain where we could undertake a conservation-oriented study. Also, the legal matters of being permitted to study in Brazil became more and more confused. At last we decided that we would accomplish a great deal if we could simply find out how to go about studying in Brazil, and where suitable studies could be carried out in the future.

With this goal set for us, we headed south two weeks after graduation, with haircuts, packs on our backs, and enough quinine pills to keep away malaria for two months.

Our first stop was Barro Colorado Island in the Canal Zone. This island is maintained by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute and serves as an ideal model for tropical field stations. Numerous lab facilities, caretakers, cooks, showers, dormitories and transportation are provided for researchers on the island. This was the sort of arrangement that we hoped to find elsewhere in South America.

Continuing by plane and bus across Colombia, we first set eyes on the Amazon itself in Leticia, a small Colombian town on the boundary between Brazil, Peru and Colombia. Leticia is the home of Mike Tsalickis, an animal dealer who has created something of an economic boom in this far-flung corner of Colombia. From the conservation viewpoint, one of his most significant activities has been to introduce a small population of squirrel monkeys onto a privately owned island in the middle of the Amazon. Squirrel monkeys are highly important animals in biomedical research. Tsalickis' experiment is

the first attempt to ranch these animals on a sustained yield basis, rather than to remove them from wild populations.

We visited Tsalickis and informed him that we were interested in locating South American study sites. He showed great interest and flew us up to his island in his water-plane. There we spent several hours slogging through the mud which seemed to cover all the trails. In a report that we submitted to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) after the trip we suggested that the island be carefully surveyed and the possibilities for ranching squirrel monkeys further investigated. (This has since been done.)

Our Fourth of July was celebrated in uproarious manner by flying down the Amazon to Manaus. We passed through an uncountable number of hailstorms, the plane being tossed like a cork on the ocean. We sat in the back, air-bags covering our mouths and water dripping on us, feeling a cold breeze from the door which flew partly open in the beginning and never was closed during the flight. This, too, was the actualisation of a dream, but somehow we hadn't foreseen the nightmarish quality of it.

Feeling shaky, we finally arrived in Manaus, the former rubber baron stronghold, and presently an isolated free-port. Unreachable except by boat or plane, Manaus nevertheless boasts high-rise buildings, traffic jams and an opera house, imported stone-by-stone from Europe. Situated in the middle of the jungle, Manaus is an ideal home base for Amazon studies. Here we hoped to make contacts and get some definite information on Brazilian laws concerning field research. We succeeded in both and also managed to get some work of our own done.

For nearly a week we were out in the jungle with a guide, Kurt Glück, an English-speaking German who has been in the Amazon area since 1938. He took us up some tributaries of the Rio Negro in a small canoe equipped with a weak outboard motor. Sleeping in Indian huts by night, and traveling by day gave us a first-hand look at what the Amazonian jungle is really all about. We were taken in as friends everywhere we stopped, even sitting down with one family to eat the boiled meat of a tapir shot in the jungle. We were shown the traps used to capture jaguars and ocelots, and saw the 15-foot skin of a recently killed anaconda. Whenever we could we collected small amphibians and reptiles which we preserved and labelled and later turned over to the herpetology collection of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard. As the blazing equatorial sun beat down, warming us to the bone, Hanover seemed so very far away.

From Manaus we flew to Belem at the mouth of the Amazon, and from there took a bus to Brasilia. Once again we became victims of the South American way of travel. The trip covered 1400 miles of dirt road and took 45 hours. We were supposed to stop only for gas and food but once got stuck for six hours because a stalled truck in front of us couldn't make it up a hill. We and some 200 other people finally managed to pull the truck up the hill with a huge metal cable, allowing traffic on this main thoroughfare to once again flow freely.

As we rolled into Brasilia we marveled at the modern architecture so unlike anything we had yet seen. What surprised us most, however, was that it was not cut out of the jungle as we had heard so many times. ~~Instead~~ Instead it was built on a vast savanna-like plateau

where nothing but shrubs and small trees grow.

Continuing by bus we finally reached Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. Here we made our most important contacts, setting up contacts for field research in coming years. We also established ourselves as crazy Americans by climbing the steep-walled Sugarloaf Mountain, a major tourist attraction in Rio, by foot -- a feat which required the written permission of the Brazilian Army.

Our mission for the summer had been achieved. We were well on the way to establishing some study sites where useful information could be collected in the future. More importantly, we had earned the respect and well-wishes of important South American biologists, without which no real progress could be made in the area.

We split paths in Sao Paulo. Russ crossed the continent and continued up the South American west coast before beginning graduate studies at Harvard. Anders flew to New York and Boston to see his fiancée Susan DeSanctis (Vassar '72) before heading off to Medical School in Sweden. Since then, Russ has returned once to the Amazon and Anders and Susan have gotten married. Presently we are all planning to return again to the jungles of South America, to continue where we left off, in search of rare and unstudied animals -- and ourselves.



Russ and Amazonian explorer Kurt Glück on the Rio Negro, north of Manaus.



Yagua Indians near Leticia, Colombia.





Anders at the summit of Sugarloaf Mountain in Rio de Janeiro, after climbing it by foot.



Russ with a nine-foot Anaconda we captured in the jungle near Leticia, Colombia.



Kurt Glück and a local hunter with the skin of an anaconda. Note the charred turtle shell (Podocnemis).



Anders at a village on the Amazon looking at captured monkeys.



Russ and Kurt Glück at a camp on the Rio Branquillo,  
tributary of the Rio Negro.



A sea-plane -- the best way of getting around in the  
Amazon.



Indian women near Manaus grinding manioc, the root which serves as the staple of their diet.

Kite vendor on Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro with Sugarloaf Mountain in the background.





Anders on a monkey-collecting excursion  
on the Amazon.



A stalled truck gets pulled up a slippery hill on the Belém-Brasília highway.



House-boats in the weed-infested backwaters of Manaus.