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ROLEX AND NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PERPETUAL PLANET AMAZON EXPEDITION: THE JURUÁ RIVER

RIVER GUARDIANS: COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION
OF THE AQUATIC MEGAFAUNA

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National Geographic Explorer and biologist Andressa Scabin counting pink river dolphins in the Juruá River, which runs along the Lago Serrado community.



A fresh catch of arapaimas are transported across the floodplain in the Amazon Rainforest, near the Lago Serrado community.



Rolex Award Laureate and National Geographic Explorer João Campos-Silva set up the Juruá Institute. He and his colleague Andressa Scabin have examined the habitat needs of six riverine megafauna on a 1,500 kilometre stretch of the Juruá river, a tributary of the mighty Amazon.

In April 2022, Rolex and the National Geographic Society launched the Perpetual Planet Amazon Expedition – a ground-breaking multi-year series of explorations spanning the Amazon River Basin, from the Andes to the Atlantic, investigating the region's intricate connectivity by the water that runs through it. Their findings will help devise solutions to secure the future of the ecosystem.

One of the studies sees Rolex Awards for Enterprise Laureate and National Geographic Explorer João Campos-Silva, and National Geographic Explorer Andressa Scabin, examining the habitat needs of six species of riverine megafauna on a 1,500 kilometre stretch of the Juruá River, a tributary of the mighty Amazon, and working with local communities to protect these animals. The megafauna being studied are the arapaima fish, giant turtles, pink dolphins, manatees, black caiman, and giant otters.

The community-based management of the giant arapaima, coordinated by the Rural Producers' Associations of Carauari (ASPROC) has implemented successful community-managed fishing quotas. The arapaima population, previously under threat from over-fishing, has increased more than 600 per cent in 15 years, with the population in protected lakes 50-fold higher than in unprotected lakes.



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On beaches protected by the local community members, the illegal harvesting of turtle nests is at 2 per cent, compared to 99 per cent on unprotected sites, and the number of migratory birds on protected beaches is eight times higher than on unprotected ones. Similar patterns have been observed for caimans, lizards, and invertebrates living on the beaches.

Credit for this success, says Campos-Silva, rests with the local population, whom he describes as “river guardians”.

According to Scabin, the local people organized themselves into associations many years ago to improve their working conditions when they were exploited by the rubber trade: “People here are extremely well organized in local associations, so they can implement research and co-create conservation ideas and solutions. The local organizations such as ASPROC, AMARU, ASMAMJ, AMECSARA and AMAB* are the protagonists of these programmes, we are just helping them with our scientific knowledge.”

This reinforces a key theme of the National Geographic and Rolex Perpetual Planet Amazon Expedition: prioritizing the knowledge and needs of local people in research and conservation.

In Juruá, conservation models have been allowing wildlife to proliferate, and also for local people to benefit financially, ensuring for example that the arapaima they are allowed to catch are bought at a fair price.

But there is still work to be done. Campos-Silva cites the example of Francisco Mendes da Silva, also known as “Bomba”, whose family protect beaches for giant turtles, and in 2022 released 42,000 hatchlings into the water: “There is no conservation without people. If we want a sustainable future for the Amazon, we need to provide opportunities for the people that live there, interacting with the wildlife every day, to be part of the solution.”

Such has been the success of the conservation programme run by the local community on the Juruá River that researchers are now looking to reproduce it throughout the Amazon. “This is very important because it can be expanded across the river basin,” says Campos-Silva. “Ideally, in the future, we could see all the Amazon’s local communities protecting their lakes and rivers with strong social organization.”

This study on the Rolex and National Geographic Perpetual Planet Amazon Expedition has shown just how successful a conservation programme can be when implemented by local people. Even better, this one case on the Juruá River could be just the beginning.

*Rural producers associations of Carauari (ASPROC), Association of residents of the Uacari Reserve (AMARU), Association of agroextractivist women in the middle Jurua (ASMAMJ), Association of Extractive Residents of the Community of São Raimundo (AMECSARA), Association of Agroextractive Residents of lower Juruá (AMAB)



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ABOUT THE PERPETUAL PLANET INITIATIVE

For nearly a century, Rolex has supported pioneering explorers pushing back the boundaries of human endeavour. The company has moved from championing exploration for the sake of discovery to protecting the planet, committing for the long term to support individuals and organizations using science to understand and devise solutions to today's environmental challenges.

This engagement was reinforced with the launch of the Perpetual Planet Initiative in 2019, which initially focused on the Rolex Awards for Enterprise, as well as long-standing partnerships with Mission Blue and National Geographic Society.

The initiative now has more than 30 other partnerships in an expanding portfolio. They include, for example, Cristina Mittermeier and Paul Nicklen, Rewilding Argentina and Rewilding Chile, offspring organizations of Tompkins Conservation, the Under The Pole expeditions, the Monaco Blue Initiative, and Coral Gardeners.

Rolex also supports organizations and initiatives fostering the next generations of explorers, scientists and conservationists through scholarships and grants, such as Our World-Underwater Scholarship Society and The Rolex Explorers Club Grants.

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