

Federación de Centros Shuar-Achuar: New Technology in the Ecuadorian Rainforest

The Shuar and Achuar Indians live in the northwestern region of the Amazon River basin in a rainforest that spans part of the border between Ecuador and Peru. In Ecuador, they have been working for more than 30 years to build their relatively small, isolated forest communities into a federation that can defend their lands, civil rights, and cultural identity. Their work has borne fruit and serves as a model for the emerging quest for rights to indigenous territories throughout the hemisphere.

Shuar territory was generally left alone by outsiders until the 1960s, when the Ecuadorian government began a program to resettle farmers from the overpopulated highland regions. Commercial livestock projects devastated the forest but created a few wealthy farmers, including some Shuar. These individuals pressured the government for the legal right to divide communal lands, a step that would have made it more difficult to defend the area from outside encroachment. Miguel Tankamash, a founding member of the federation, recalls its response: "Land must not be a business or a market stall, for land is our mother.

But our only guarantee that our land not be expropriated or invaded by colonists is to legalize our ownership of it according to the law of the nation."

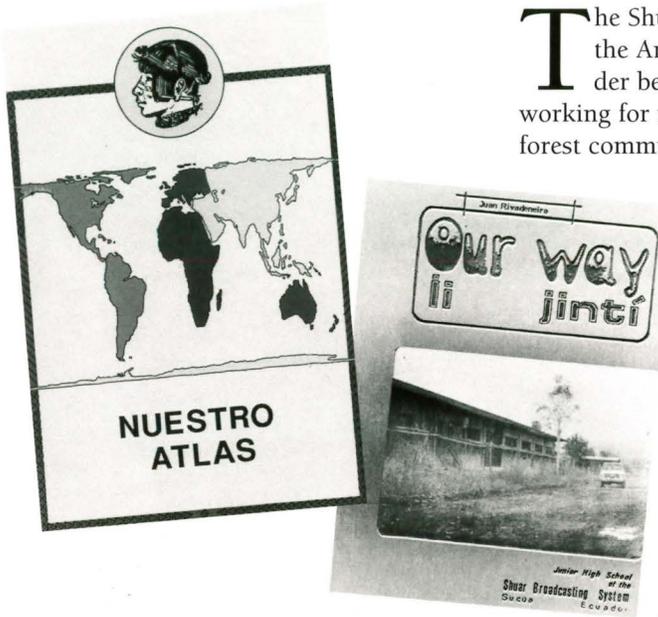
In the Shuar world, land is collective property, so the Shuar have fought to establish "global" land titles. The organization they have built to do so employs traditional ideas and practices of social organization, but also makes use of contemporary technology like surveying and mapping to defend territorial rights, and radios and airplanes to link dispersed communities.

With the help of nongovernmental and religious organizations, as well as the Peace Corps and international funders, the Shuar began surveying, mapping, and titling over 400 *centros* or communities. They have successfully established legal title to over 80 percent of their land.

The Shuar Federation has developed a broad range of programs, including one in bilingual radio education, SERBISH (Sistema de Educación Radiofónica Bilingüe Intercultural Shuar). Begun by Salesian missionaries in an effort to incorporate Indians into the larger Ecuadorian society, bilingual radio has been transformed by the Shuar, who use it to revitalize their culture. Courses in language, mathematics, social studies, natural science, and health address Shuar and Achuar culture, their traditional governing structures, and the precarious rainforest environment and its management. Programs also emphasize bilingualism. Today the radio school directly serves some 200 remote forest communities, although the programs reach communities as far away as Peru.

The wisdom that informs the federation's activities grows from local culture, the knowledge built over generations that supports and enriches human life in a particular place. Miguel Tankamash says, "We are committed to rediscover and revalue this land, with all its resources that are our life."

— Olivia Cadaval



The Shuar-Achuar Federation's radio classroom is broadcast daily between 7:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. Called to class by the sound of a conch shell blown by an instructor, students in each community listen to the lesson over a battery-operated radio. Instructors supplement radio lessons with discussion and work in the textbooks.

Photos courtesy
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