

FOREST-BASED LEARNING SCHOOL

Mushullakta Community - Napo Ecuador



November, 2023
Chochi Iturralde

Forest-Based Learning School in Mushullakta

Report #2

General Information

- **Starting date:** September 2022
- **Reporting date:** Nov 29, 2023
- **Community name:** Mushullakta
- **Location:** Napo Province, Ecuador
- **Organization:** Fundación Pachaysana
- **Program:** Humans for Abundance
- **Project lead:** Chochi Iturralde

Funds

This project has been possible thanks to **Jill Ford** from **The Gift Trust** in New Zealand and other donors.

- **Total amount approved for the first two years of operations:** USD 17,200.00
- **Total amount received until this reporting period:** USD 17,445.00

How did we get here?



Nila, Kuri, Evelyn, Iker, and Bryan are five indigenous children from the Kichwa community of Mushullakta that live in the Amazon rainforest of Ecuador, in a remote area covered in lush vegetation and surrounded by two beautiful volcanoes. The king predators in these forests are the jaguar and Harpie eagle who are also the principal characters of many stories and myths that people of the forest have told for generations. They are being guided by their teacher, Mercedes, a *warmi* (woman) from their community who is showing them how to collect seeds for making traditional jewelry.

This place is a biodiversity hot-spot, a biosphere reserve that should be protected at all costs for all humanity's sake. Sadly, timber and monoculture industries are advancing at a fast pace, destroying everything they encounter in their path, including natural habitats, water sources, soil fertility, community well being, cultural diversity, spiritual connection, ancestral practices, and much, much more.

These young people have many friends who live in poverty or extreme poverty, whose families make under \$100 every month. They barely scrape a living by selling naranjilla, a tropical fruit that when raised in monoculture needs at least four applications of toxic fertilizers and pesticides every year. They've cut down most of their old-growth trees to sell them to the timber industry, yet they remain stuck in the same socio-economic situation as before. Monoculture and timber extraction have not fulfilled the promise of lifting them out of poverty as many outsiders told them it would, but they are the only alternatives they have at the moment.

This way of life is detrimental for everyone involved. Nature, climate, family, community, mankind, everyone loses.

Thankfully, these teenagers are part of a group of families that had the vision to stop this nonsensical way of life. Instead of treating the forest just as a source of sellable goods, they are finding a way to live in and with the forest again, as their ancestors did. The ancestral way of life is more than being part of the forest, it is learning how to create more abundance for all its living beings. These children and their families are reconnecting with this wisdom.

Four years ago, with a bit of encouragement from Humans for Abundance, they became the “ecological restorers” of the vital ecosystem they inhabit. In addition to greater income, this new job title brought them a new sense of pride and purpose, and after centuries of oppression and neglect, they finally felt heard and seen by the world.



Their new mission has two main lines of action: 1) to produce enough food and shelter for all the living beings with whom they share their lands, or in other words, to recreate the native forest's food chains and habitats, and 2) produce healthy and sustainable products that are in-demand for the fast-growing organic/forest-friendly markets.

During these last four years, 12 families have signed on as restorers and, as a group, they are now actively reforesting 150 hectares of land with a wide variety of native trees and bushes that provide them with food

and medicine. More than 11,000 seedlings have been planted, most of which are edible or medicinal. They are also protecting another 300 hectares of primary forest in the Sumaco-Napo-Galeras national park, where they collect most of the native seeds that they propagate in their plant nursery.



Besides the environmental impact, the socio-economic benefits are unmistakable. They are making at least double the income as they did before, plus they have greater food security and better nutrition, which has resulted in better health. Four years ago, the children of these families ate limited meals a day consisting of only rice or yucca and herbal tea, but they now eat multiple hearty meals a day that include vegetables and protein.

Besides eating better, these teenagers, together with their little brothers and sisters, attend a newly formed school in their community. This forest-based learning project was created thanks to their parents' desire to protect their forests and give the new generations the opportunity to experience an abundant life in a healthy place.

In the recent past, because secondary schools are far from the community, youth were forced to leave Mushullakta to find education opportunities; however, now they can stay at home and help their parents as land stewards. They are re-learning (in their own Kichwa language) their ancestral practices for food production and spiritual connection with the forest. They are also combining modern regenerative agriculture practices and learning essential abilities in math and entrepreneurship needed to navigate the Western world.

We are proud of this project's rapid expansion and the positive impact it has already had in the lives of all the children and families involved. As one walks in the school building, the happiness and positive energy are tangible and contagious.

Highlights of the School's Second Year (2023 - 2024)

For the first time in their lives, the students now have access to a series of high-quality educational experiences that are transforming the way they think, feel, and express themselves, and the way they relate to others and their environment.

The experiences are designed for students to learn how to use the natural resources in a sustainable way. Regenerative agriculture methods, which include ancestral practices, are a huge part of the curriculum because they teach youth how to create organic food forests, aquaculture systems, organic fertilization, bioconstruction, and more. The children are redefining what health and wellbeing mean in the community, ensuring they know how to sustain themselves and their families, as well as how to produce and sell their products to outsiders.

Besides regenerative agriculture, the students learn leadership, product processing, entrepreneurship, communication in three languages, traditional music, dance, and art. The experiences range from how to be a tourist guide on a forest adventure, to how to create attractive promotional materials in both Spanish and English to attract clients, to how to cook and sell products created with native ingredients.

Overall, the school's primary goal is to create diverse experiences that teach them how to maintain their families, community and forest for many years to come.



We are happy to share the main highlights of this school year. Enjoy!

1. A Major Milestone!

One of the biggest obstacles of this project was finding a way for the students to receive transcripts and diplomas that are recognized by the Ecuadorian government. Last year, the students were enrolled in an international homeschooling system that was too expensive for the project. This year, we sought a new alternative. After months of dialogue, we convinced a private school in Quito, El Sauce School, to accept the Forest-Based Learning School as their micro-campus in the Amazon rainforest.



Photo: El Sauce School directors visiting the school in Mushullakta

In addition to officially providing transcripts and diplomas to students, El Sauce School supports the community by becoming their long-term co-restorers. The 600 El Sauce families offer continuous financial and networking support to the 12 Mushullakta families who are restoring their farms.



In the pictures above, you can see Rosy, the director of the school, showing Bryan and the other students the new school jacket they designed for their program in the Amazon.

With a private Quito-based school working so closely with an Indigenous Amazon community, we see evidence that social justice barriers are finally being broken.

2. Student Enrollment, Girls and Women in Leadership



Photo: Evaly, Kuri and Nila performing a traditional dance

Another great outcome of this program is the involvement of more girls and women in educational opportunities. We know that girls and women who become compassionate leaders have better chances of lifting their communities out of poverty and improve the overall wellbeing of all the families involved.

Two of the community's women, Mercedes Narvaez and her daughter Janice Avilez, are working as full-time school facilitators and five girls are currently enrolled in the program. Last year, we only had one woman facilitator and two girl students, so this year marks a big improvement.

This is the complete list of students enrolled this year:

1. Evelyn Avilez (girl, 15 years-old)
2. Bryan Narvaez (boy, 14)
3. Nila Narvaez (girl, 14)
4. Iker Avilés (boy, 11)
5. Kuri Narvaez (girl, 11)
6. Maycol Narvaez (boy, 10)
7. Damian Avilez (boy, 8)
8. Jefry Avilez (boy, 9)
9. Telmo Narvaez (boy, 9)
10. Clider Narvaez (boy, 7)
11. Kerly Avilez (girl, 6)
12. Alina Avilez (girl, 5)



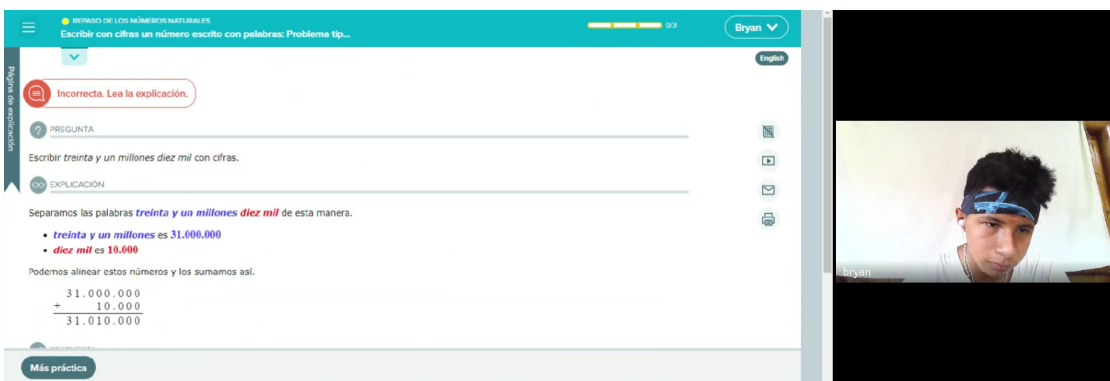
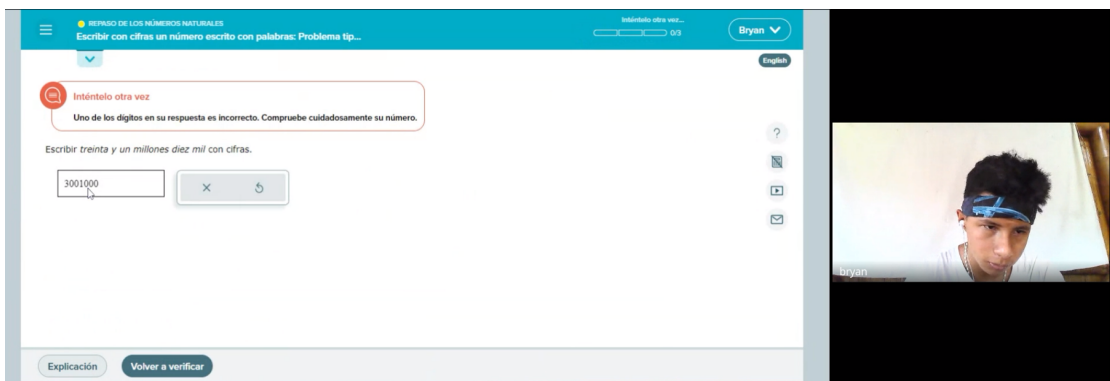
Photos: Janice Avilez running a reading fluency test and Mercedes helping Nila with her painting

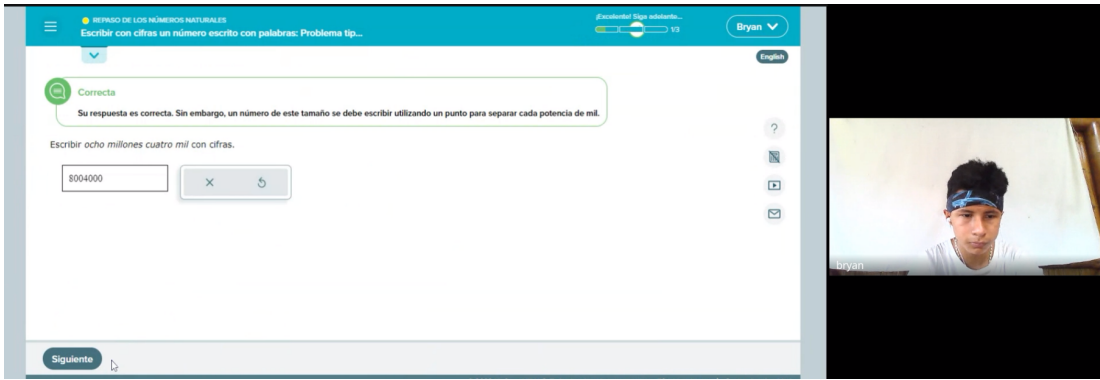
3. One-Year Free Subscription to Digital Platforms (Math, Spanish and English)

Another very important milestone this school year is the support we are receiving from Learning A-Z and Aleks for Latin America, two companies that provide digital literacy math programs for students. Both of these companies have gifted each one of our students a one-year subscription to their learning platforms.

In the pictures below, you can see Bryan practicing math on Aleks, one of the best platforms for learning this subject in Spanish.

You can see how the program shows him when he's made a mistake and then gives him various explanations until he gets the correct answer.





Here are Maycol and Kuri studying Spanish and English on the RazKids platform.



These students are learning how to manage their learning processes on their own without an authoritative teacher telling them what to do. They are gaining skills to become life-long learners.

4. Making New Furniture



The warmis (women) of the community made new furniture for the children of the school. By assembling cut-out pieces of wood, they were able to make two tables with storage space in the middle and ten chairs that can be used both for little kids and teenagers depending on how you position the chair.

Telmo was also really excited about this project and spent most of the day helping out. His new favorite subject in the school is carpentry and bioconstruction. He's discovered a good use for his math skills!





5. New Classes in the Schedule

Based on the lessons learned from the first school year, this year we made changes and created new classes that are better suited for the context, resources, and needs of the community.

1. REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE AND ANCESTRAL CHAKRAS

Twice a week, the students learn how to create and manage their own ancestral chakra (garden) where they plant the food that they prepare and eat every day.



They also visit other community chakras to learn how other families grow food using traditional Kichwa methods.



Finally, they are learning about new agricultural methods that they didn't have in their community before, such as ways to create bokashis and other organic fertilizers by harvesting native microorganisms from their own forests.

2. CAFETERIA, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND INTERCULTURALITY

After learning how to plant and care for their products in the chakra, the students learn to prepare delicious recipes both from their ancestral background and from other cultures.



Once they have prepared a dish, they sell their products to community members and learn about basic bookkeeping and math skills, communication, negotiation, and many other skills that are included in this activity.

3. INDIGENOUS ART, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

The elders in the community are teaching the students how to find native materials in the forest for ancestral arts and crafts. They collect fibers and seeds to then peel, cook, or treat them with natural tinctures. Once the main processing is done, they turn them into baskets, fishing or hunting gear or traditional jewelry or decorations.



Sometimes the whole process takes weeks, but the skills the students develop and what they learn about their own identity is invaluable.

4. SWIMMING AND OTHER SPORTS

Swimming in the river located at the edge of their primary forest is what students love the most. Sadly, because it is a bit far away, their parents rarely have the opportunity to take them there. So we decided to add it as a class and their teachers now take them there twice a week. Their faces tell what this means to them.



They get enough exercise from walking there and back, and swimming for hours in the rapids of the river. Occasionally, they also play soccer and other sports in their community center.

5. CARPENTRY AND BIOCONSTRUCTION



Having a surplus of available branches and fallen trees is a treat from nature as it provides the materials for our carpentry and bioconstruction class. Students develop their cognitive, artistic, and even emotional skills through this craft.



By purchasing a few basic carpentry and carving tools, we were able to create this new class where the students also develop and apply their math and design skills and their knowledge about forest's species.

6. FOREST BIODIVERSITY

During this class, the students visit the forest with specific objectives in mind. For example, in the photos below the students were observing old-growth trees and all the life forms that use the tree as their home.



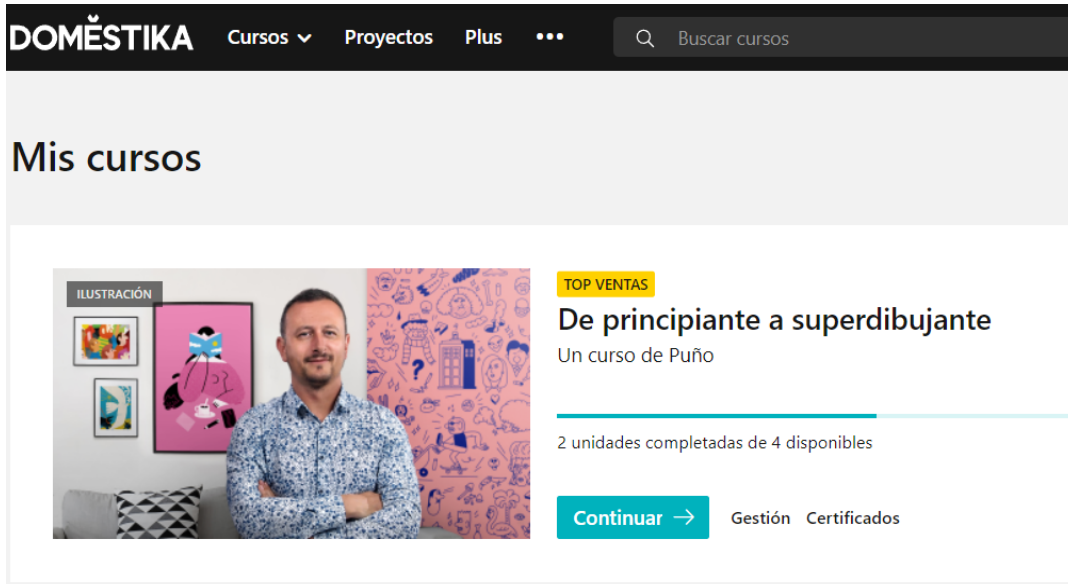
These observations are essential for the new generations of Indigenous children to protect their forest. Regrettably, their parents have been forced into cutting/selling their trees, leading them to forget how all life forms connect with each other and how important it is to keep these old-growth trees alive.



In this photo, you can see students visiting the forest to study flowers. They found one type of flower that looks like giant red lips when you put it inside the mouth.

7. ART, DESIGN AND COMMUNICATION

To develop the artistic and communication skills necessary to create promotional materials for the community's endeavors, we use Domestika, a digital platform that provides a variety of high-quality courses in Spanish.



The students watch the instructional videos on the computer, following each of the course modules and completing the assignments together. In the photos below, you can see this process taking place during a drawing class with Mr. Puño, the Domestika teacher. He's showing the students how to draw a wrinkled ball of paper by noticing the shades and the lights.



8. FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING CENTERS (SPANISH AND ENGLISH)

We have taken advantage of diverse technological tools (computers, tablets, etc.) and created a “learning centers” system for language instruction. The two women from the community who serve as the school’s facilitators completed a teacher training program during the summer, and they are now carrying out this system with the students.



In the photos, you can see how the students rotate between three different activities. Two students in the back are using the computers to connect to the English platform, two students are on the table working on their Spanish reading skills, and two in the front using the tablets to log into the Spanish platform.



This system maximizes the use of digital resources while Janice, one of the facilitators, can provide personalized and differentiated reading instruction in smaller groups.

9. ANCESTRAL DANCE AND MUSIC

Finally, a special moment every week is when the students get to practice ancestral dance choreography taught by community elders.



In these photos, you can see the students wearing their traditional clothes while performing dance for visitors from El Sauce, the private school in Quito that became Mushullakta's partner.



6. Math Manipulatives and Other Learning Resources

The primary school students are enjoying the new math manipulatives that were acquired this school year. The tools help them explore geometric figures and concepts like symmetry.



In these photos, you can see some of the students' creative work. They spend hours playing with the pattern blocks



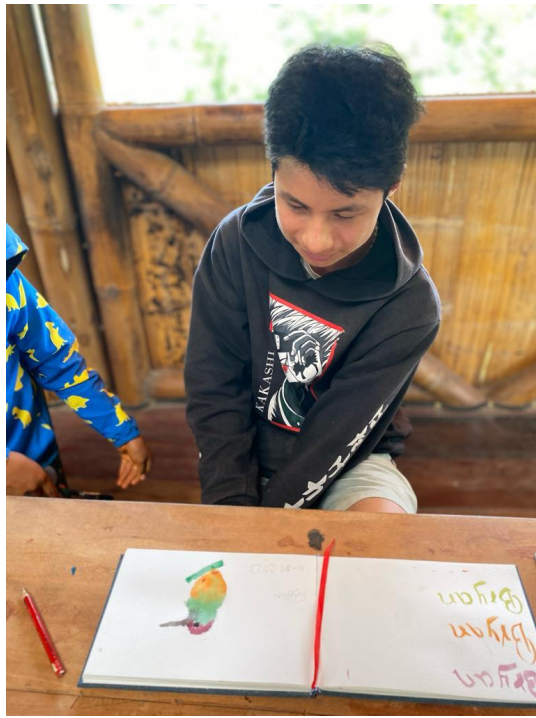


Besides the magnetic geoblocks, we provided the students with many other types of manipulatives so that their knowledge and imagination can grow through play and free exploration.

7. Volunteer Mentors and Especial Visitors

On various occasions during the school year, students receive special visitors and experts that share their knowledge and help them develop new skills. On this occasion, Agni, a visual arts expert, taught the students how to draw birds using geometric shapes.





After drawing the birds, Agni showed the students how to paint them using watercolor.



And last, but not least, we've been lucky to find many volunteers that act as mentors for English and Math that meet with each student via Zoom once a week.



A Need for More Funds

The school is ready to go into the next level and, in order to get it there, we are raising between **USD 50,000 to 90,000** to cover for the expenses through the next school year. Please read here a detailed annual budget needed for this project and a description of what how we will spend the money:

		DESIRABLE ANNUAL BUDGET	\$86,860	ACCEPTABLE ANNUAL BUDGET	\$47,900
STAFF		Desirable per month	Desirable per Year	Acceptable per Month	Year
	School Director and Project Head	\$1,500	\$18,000	\$1,000	\$12,000
	Curriculum and Resources Head	\$1,200	\$14,400	\$700	\$8,400
	2 School Supervisors (local women from the community)	\$800	\$9,600	\$400	\$4,800
	Accountant	\$150	\$1,800	\$150	\$1,800
	Community mentor 1 (permaculture and ancestral food forests)	\$75	\$900	\$50	\$600
	Community mentor 2 (carpentry and biocanstruction)	\$75	\$900	\$50	\$600
	Community mentor 3 (Kichwa Culture and Identity)	\$75	\$900	\$50	\$600
	English Tutors	\$300	\$3,600	\$100	\$1,200
	Spanish Tutors	\$300	\$3,600	\$100	\$1,200
	Math Tutors	\$300	\$3,600	\$100	\$1,200
		\$4,775	\$57,300	\$2,700	\$32,400
LEARNING RESOURCES					
	Computers and tablets	\$200	\$2,400	\$50	\$600
	Raw materials (wood, cooking ingredients, etc)	\$100	\$1,200	\$50	\$600
	School supplies	\$100	\$1,200	\$70	\$840
	Digital learning platforms	\$300	\$3,600	\$200	\$2,400
	Internet, website and electricity bills	\$50	\$600	\$50	\$600
	Cleaning and maintenance	\$30	\$360	\$30	\$360
		\$780	\$9,360	\$450	\$5,400
INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER PROGRAM					
	Food and Lodging	\$900	\$9,000	\$450	\$4,500
	Stipend	\$800	\$8,000	\$400	\$4,000
	Transportation	\$200	\$2,000	\$100	\$1,000
	Medical insurance	\$120	\$1,200	\$60	\$600
		\$2,020	\$20,200	\$1,010	\$10,100

Projects like this Forest-Based Learning School are essential if we are to stop deforestation in the Amazon Rainforest and help these very important ecosystems return to their former trajectory.

These extraordinary initial achievements of this project have the potential to grow and completely transform this community. The early success of the school has turned Mushullakta into an example for neighboring communities and organizations who are observing the process and are convinced by the benefits they are seeing. They are now waiting for the opportunity to become restorers themselves and register their children in this education project, ready to follow and learn from this successful example.

This means that for the next phase of this project, we need to go deeper into a forest-based curriculum design, including a detailed documentation of all our processes to date so that our work can eventually be replicated and multiplied. We also need to create more learning resources that are based on the realities of the Amazon rainforest, instead of those available in textbooks that are universalized from a city-based perspective. Such resources need to be created from scratch.

As we look toward providing more learning resources to our current students, growing our school to include more students and documenting our work so that others can replicate our work in other communities, we recognize the need for additional personnel. We seek funds to create to grow our team with the following positions:

1. A full-time school director/project head that can guide the students and the local women who run the school, guiding them during their daily learning experiences.
2. A full-time curriculum design expert who will work on documentation and design of new learning resources for all of their classes/subjects mentioned in the section above.

3. Several part-time community mentors that can guide the students once or twice a week in specific areas of the indigenous knowledge. (Local community members are currently being trained as community educators.)
4. Several part-time online tutors for subjects such as English, Spanish, and Math.

Besides these new positions, we hope to provide a small yearly salary raise to the women facilitators who run the school, as well as recognizing them financially for their ongoing professional development. We notice that as they learn more about their jobs, they go above and beyond expectations by dedicating time outside of school hours to improve the educational experiences of the students.

We will need to purchase additional digital learning resources and didactic materials in greater quantities as we add new classes and more students enroll.

Finally, we hope to start a volunteer program, in which an international volunteer lives and works with the community for the duration of a school year, similar to a Peace Corps Volunteer. The volunteer can provide continuous learning experiences in subjects that are foreign for the community like entrepreneurship, math, English and Spanish, and they can assist with the communications with the online tutors and other staff members.

Grateful for your support!

We invite you to take part in this transformation and change the lives of many families who live in this area of the Amazon Rainforest. Your direct support to the school will have a positive impact on the incredible biodiversity that exists in this area as well.

We are very grateful in advance for any action on your part that can help us reach our goal. If you are interested in donating or know someone who would, please contact:

Chochi Iturralde,
+593 2 984470084
chochi@pachaysana.org

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