

AN EPIDEMIC OUTBREAK AMONG THE MATSIGUENKA IN INITIAL CONTACT (NOVEMBER 2007), MANU NATIONAL PARK, PERU.

Report to the ASA – Association of Social Anthropologists of UK and
Commonwealth

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I. Introduction

Over sixty indigenous groups are estimated to live in voluntary isolation in South America, across the national territories of Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela and Paraguay (Brackelaire, 2005). The term ‘isolated peoples’ includes complex and diverse realities. Reflecting a broadly used distinction, Peruvian legislation² considers two states of ‘isolation’. ‘Voluntary isolation’ (*aislamiento voluntario*), refers to groups that have either avoided or chosen to end sustained social relations with other members of the national society, while ‘initial contact’ (*contacto inicial*), refers to those groups who have recently begun to develop such exchanges. Peru, second to Brazil is where the largest number of isolated indigenous groups, estimated between twenty to thirty, live (IUCN, 2007).

Such isolation makes these indigenous groups highly vulnerable, epidemiologically and socially. Their notorious susceptibility to common ‘western’ diseases such as flu, whooping cough or TB has historically led to the decimation of indigenous societies following sustained contact with non-indigenous populations. The difficulties faced by these groups in understanding, communicating and negotiating with non-indigenous others creates additional forms of vulnerability, threatening their social reproduction and their ability to protect their own interests (Cueva, 2006; Rummenhoeller and Huertas, 2006). In Peru, road building, logging, oil and gas mining and incursions by missionaries, explorers, filmmakers and tourist operators are the main precipitating factors for contact (*Defensoría del Pueblo*, 2006; Huertas, 2006).

Manu National Park (MNP), is one of the largest (1.532.806 ha) and most biodiverse natural protected areas in the world. The Park comprises the traditional

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² *‘Ley para la protección de pueblos indígenas u originarios en situación de aislamiento y en situación de contacto inicial’* (Law 28736, April 2006).

territory of several Arawak and Panoan-speaking indigenous peoples living in various degrees of isolation (Pro-Manu, 2003). Contacts between isolated peoples and external agents have resulted in a long history of induced contacts and epidemic outbreaks. Especially relevant was the case of the Yora people (Panoan), almost exterminated by epidemic diseases following their contact in the 1980's (Shepard, 2003). The fate of 'Mashco-Piro' groups (Arawak), displaced inside MNP by illegal loggers and oil and gas activities, is currently of great concern, not only because of the epidemiological risks they face, but also because of the interethnic conflicts with settled Matsigenka communities which such displacement has propitiated (Ponce, 2005; Rodríguez, 2008). Matsigenka (Arawak) groups in a state of initial contact in the Piñi Piñi and Palotoa rivers (south of MNP) have long-suffered health and social problems related to the presence of informal tourists and explorers (Tello, 2002; García 2002; Pro-Manu 2003; Defensoría del Pueblo, 2006; Huertas, 2006; Rodríguez, 2008). In 2002, for example, twenty-four Matsigenka died of respiratory diseases in Piñi Piñi following their encounter with an expedition lead by renowned explorer Jacek Palkiewicz, who was searching for a mythical lost Inca city ('*Paititi*') (Rodríguez, 2008).

The following report focuses on an epidemic outbreak that occurred among a vulnerable Matsigenka population in a state of 'initial contact' living along several small tributaries of the Manu river, inside a restricted area of MNP, and the role played by a visiting film-production company team. The aim of the report is two-fold: first to elucidate the specific responsibilities of the company in this case, and second, to flag the wider risks associated with the ongoing rise in TV production projects that specifically target remote indigenous societies for 'reality-TV' shows, and a parallel development in the industry of 'extreme tourism' among such groups.

II. The November 2007 epidemic outbreak among the Matsigenka in the headwaters of the Cumerjali, Sotileja and Yomybato rivers

Background

The officially recognized Matsigenka community of Yomybato has a population of about three-hundred people, and is located inside MNP on the Yomybato river (also known as '*Quebrada Fierro*' in Spanish), a tributary of the Manu river. Although, Yomybato's Matsigenka have access to basic education and health services, they maintain many elements of a 'traditional' lifestyle, living in a considerable degree of isolation from external agents, and suffering from a relatively

high vulnerability to outsider diseases (Shepard and Rummenhoeller, 2000; Shepard and Izquierdo, 2003; Pro-Manu 2003; Puygrenier, 2004; Rummenhoeller and Aguirre, 2007; De Lara, 2008; Rodríguez, 2008).

Yomybato is within a land-use class in the park referred to as '*zona de uso especial*', which allows for certain kinds of human-related activities to take place, and delimited '...by the flood-plain of the Yomybato or Fierro river' (INRENA/Jefatura PNM, 2002: 29). Any visitors wishing to enter Yomybato or this zone must apply to the Park for a permit, itself subject to an invitation by the community, and must be accompanied at all times by a designated park ranger (Amilcar Osorio, Head of MNP, pers. comm., December 2007). A surrounding buffer zone, '*zona silvestre*', accessible only with a specific permit from MNP authorities, separates the previously mentioned area from the restricted '*zona de protección estricta*' (Ibid.).

Between one to four days walk from Yomybato, in an area locally referred to as the 'headwaters' ('*cabeceras*') and comprising several streams of the Cumerjali, Sotileja and Yomybato rivers are a number of small Matsigenka settlements in situation of initial contact ('*contacto inicial*') (Shepard and Izquierdo, 2003; Pro-Manu, 2003; Defensoría del Pueblo, 2006; Rummenhoeller and Huertas, 2006; Rummenhoeller and Aguirre, 2007; Rodríguez, 2008). The relationship between these groups and Yomybato is partly mediated by kinship ties since back in the 1970's and early 1980's a number of families from the headwaters settled in Yomybato, allegedly in response to interethnic conflicts with the Yora, who were also in voluntary isolation at the time (Shepard and Izquierdo, 2003). As part of their mutual visiting, the headwater Matsigenka come to Yomybato to obtain steel tools and other manufactured goods, or to seek medical assistance in the health post.

Precise information on these 'headwater' groups is scarce as they reside in restricted areas of the park, which is only occasionally visited by authorised park and health personnel, and outsiders are explicitly disallowed to establish any contact with them. Nevertheless, the available evidence does suggest that these headwater groups face considerable epidemiological stresses. The last visit by a health team, which took place in 1995, documented the presence of 164 Matsigenka living in a state of high immunological vulnerability, and suffering from a series of infectious diseases (Pro-Manu, 2002).

The events surrounding the November 2007 epidemic outbreak

In December 2007, Dr. Wilfredo Huamani Oblitas, Head Manager of the Manu province health services (*'Micro Red Salvation Manu'*), officially reported on an epidemic outbreak among the Matsigenka living in a situation of initial contact in the headwaters area surrounding of the community of Yomybato³. Dr. Huamani based this report on a routine visit that he and his team carried out to the community of Yomybato. The team found that about eighty Matsigenka from the above-mentioned remote headwater region, all suffering from respiratory problems of different magnitudes, had arrived to the community seeking medical help (Wilfredo Huamani, pers. comm., December 2007)

According to testimonies collected by Dr. Huamani four people (three children and one adult) had already died in the headwaters. The team treated twenty-five people at this time, including one suffering from pneumonia who required intensive medical care. A subsequent report from the regional health authorities⁴ (*'Dirección Regional de Salud'* - DIRESA) reported an additional outbreak of acute diarrhea in the headwaters of Cumerjali, leading to four deaths between November 2007 and February 2008.

Dr. Huamani suggested a link between this outbreak and the visit of *'...a team of Discovery Channel who had respiratory diseases'*. On this basis, he advised the park authorities to *'...control in a stricter fashion the people who visit the communities, and even more when they head to the headwaters region, since the population living there has not been exposed to people like us'*. Park authorities⁵ subsequently identified Mrs. Deborah Mc Lauchlan and Mr. Matt Currington, Peruvian and British nationals respectively, representatives of CICADA Productions⁶ as the two 'foreigners' mentioned in Dr. Huamani's report, noting that they were given a permit valid from the 13th of October to visit the community of Yomybato to evaluate the prospects for a future TV series for Discovery Channel.

Anthropologist Glenn Shepard, a widely recognized expert on the Matsigenka and who has worked in the area for over twenty years, was present in

³ Huamani, W. (2008). 'Informe de Ocurrencias en la Comunidad de Yomybato'. OFICIO No 210 -2007-CSS-MRM- DRSMDD. Villa Salvación, Manu (07/01/08). Unpublished Report.

⁴ De Lara, C. (2008). Situación de las Comunidades Nativas de Tayakome y Yomybato. Dirección Regional de Salud de Madre de Dios (DIRESA). Puerto Maldonado. Unpublished Report.

⁵ Jefatura PNM (2008). 'Informe del ingreso de CICADA Productions -CCNN Yomybato'. Informe No 04-2008-INRENA-IANP-JPNM. Cusco (21/01/08). Unpublished Report.

⁶ The London-based company CICADA Productions has produced more than fifty TV series for channels like Discovery Channel, National Geographic, BBC and Channel 4, and has received various international prizes (www.cicadafilms.com)

the community of Yomybato at the time of the CICADA visit. Besides being a first-hand witness of several key events, he returned to Yomybato a month later, recording additional testimonies surrounding the activities of CICADA and the epidemic outbreak⁷.

Additional information relating to the entire incident, including videotaped testimonies, were collected in December 2007 by members of the regional indigenous federation, *Federacion Nativa del rio Madre de Dios y Afluentes*, FENAMAD⁸, the FENAMAD team were travelling in the area as part of an ongoing program that seeks to document and comprehend the problems and challenges faced by indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation and initial contact in various sectors of the national park.

In February 2008 FENAMAD learned of the intention of CICADA Productions to continue their work and start filming in Yomybato, even though the causes and the extent of the November epidemic outbreak had still not been properly or officially elucidated. At that point, FENAMAD decided to make a public statement denouncing CICADA Productions for their alleged implication in the case. FENAMAD also extended responsibilities to Peruvian Forestry Agency (INRENA), first for allowing CICADA to enter Yomybato without the mandatory supervision of a park ranger, and secondly, more generally, for the recurrent spate of epidemic outbreaks which have affected different Matsigenka groups in initial contact in various sectors of the park, and which has followed from increased contact with visitors, specifically explorers and tourists, who have been granted access into these areas or entering them escaping MNP's weak control mechanisms.

As a result of the epidemic outbreak and the ensuing controversy, INRENA carried out an internal investigation. The official report that followed⁹, which is signed by the Head of the Natural Protected Areas Intendancy (*'Intendencia de Areas*

⁷Dr. Shepard's account on the case was first made public on February 25th 2008 in an open letter denouncing CICADA's intentions to return MNP, which was addressed to Ada Castillo, INRENA's Head Director of Operations in Nature Protected Areas (*'Directora de Operaciones en Areas Naturales Protegidas'*).

⁸Created in 1982, the FENAMAD represents thirty titled native communities belonging to seven ethnic groups. Since mid-1990's, the organization has pioneered the protection of isolated peoples in the Peruvian context, receiving for this work the Bartolomé de las Casas international award in 1996 and the Goldman Prize in 2007. From its inception in 2007, FENAMAD has been a member and coordinator of the International Indigenous Committee for the Protection of Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and Recent Contact (CIPIACI).

⁹ Ugaz, J. (2008). 'ASUNTO: Pronunciamiento de FENAMAD'. OFICIO No 142-2008-INRENA-IANP/DOANP (28/02/08). Unpublished report.

Naturales Protegidas– IANP) has faulted CICADA on a number of key points, which are detailed below.

Key aspects of the CICADA controversy

Following the growing controversy, CICADA Productions has claimed that: 1) ‘At no time did the Cicada researchers go outside the area of their permit...’; 2) that they ‘... at all times followed correct procedure...’; and 3) that there is no solid evidence specifically linking their visit to the ensuing outbreak.

1) Permit violations

The permit issued by INRENA authorized CICADA to ‘...*ingress MNP up to the native community of Yomybato to evaluate the possibility to include the mentioned community in a television documentary*’¹⁰. It explicitly disallowed the team to leave the authorized area and to establish contacts with indigenous populations in initial contact. Evidence clearly suggests that the CICADA team did violate the terms of the permit:

- CICADA’s letter of request to the national park head office, dated September 24th 2007, states the aim of ‘...*evaluating the possible participation of the Machiguenga community of Yomybato and its surroundings in this interesting project*’ [my translation]. CICADA also re-iterated their intent to establish contacts with the Matsigenka living above Yomybato headwaters to Yomybato’s health workers Fernando Ramos and Violeta Mahoma, whom they met in the downriver settlement of Boca Manu a few days before CICADA’s entry into the park (Rodríguez, 2008).
- A number of eyewitnesses have confirmed that CICADA travelled upriver, as indeed they originally planned and stated. This includes anthropologist Glenn Shepard, who was in the community at the time, and who was told by the CICADA team that they had dismissed the possibility of working with the Yomybato community due to the ‘westernization’ of its residents. Dr. Shepard subsequently also collected testimonies from Matsigenka whom the team visited in the Cumerjali river (see below).

¹⁰AUTORIZACION ESPECIAL No 081-2007-INRENA-IANP-J-PNM (11/10/07)

- After Survival International¹ publicly released a summary of the events in March 26, 2007, CICADA Productions provided access to some of the field notes taken by its team in MNP. This unofficial report¹¹ details how the team left the community accompanied by eight local Matsigenka on October 21 (four days after their arrival on the 17th), visiting several settlements in initial contact along the Posapari river and reaching the Kiratenia creek along the middle course of Cumerjali river on the 23rd, where they reportedly stayed for two days. The areas mentioned were not included in CICADA's permit, which specifically restricted them to the community of Yomybato only. In particular, the Cumerjali river and surrounding areas are included within MNP's 'zona de protección estricta' (see MNP's official zoning in this document). The report also indicates that besides the people living in the settlements visited, during the expedition CICADA's team also met Matsigenka in initial contact from other areas: '*several guests and visitors from other regions including the "headwaters" of the Sotileja, Karuri, Timpía*'.
- In its report¹², the national director of Peruvian natural protected areas ('*Intendente de Areas Naturales Protegidas*') also accuses CICADA Productions of entering a 'strictly protected area' in the 'Fierro and Cumerjali streams', and hence of failing to observe the conditions stated in the entry permit. As a consequence to this, CICADA Productions has been blacklisted by IANP-INRENA and have been banned from future access to the area.

2) Proper procedures

In contrast to most professional bodies working with indigenous peoples, the film industry lacks any guidelines as to what 'proper operating procedures' are, particularly when working among highly isolated and vulnerable groups. The ethical, moral and medical implications of film projects- also largely unexamined- are even

¹¹ Survival International received from CICADA in confidential terms a first version of the mentioned report on the 26th of March 2008. On April 10th, Survival allowed me to access and circulate a second version sent to them by CICADA. Despite their requests, IANP and Park authorities had not received any official communication from CICADA regarding the activities of its team inside the park.

¹² Ugaz, J. (2008). "ASUNTO: Pronunciamiento de FENAMAD". OFICIO No 142-2008-INRENA-IANP/DOANP (28/02/08). Unpublished report.

greater when they entail bringing outsiders into direct contact with vulnerable peoples, as would be the case with this TV show.

The incident with CICADA Productions also raises the related problem of establishing effective communication and obtaining meaningful authorization from indigenous communities in relative isolation. As a run-up to their October visit, and in order to get the necessary invitation from the community, CICADA's contacts with the community of Yomybato visit, took place through a series of calls made by Deborah Mc Lauchlan to the community's satellite phone. The main interlocutor during these was the community schoolteacher Mr. Benito Chinchiquiti Hindenberg, one of the few Spanish-speaking residents in the community, who along with his nephew, Danilo Migori Chinchiquiti subsequently assumed a key role in organizing CICADA's expedition to the settlements of the 'headwater' Matsiguenka¹³. According to his own testimony, Mr. Samuel Shumarapague Mameria, Yomybato's main authority ('*Presidente*') was not included in these negotiations and was not present in the community when they arrived¹⁴.

3) CICADA's direct responsibility in the epidemic outbreak

The possible connection between the November 2007 epidemics outbreak in Yomybato and CICADA's expedition was originally mentioned in Dr. Huamani Oblitas' report, and is subsequently mentioned in above-cited reports of the National Park Head Office, the regional health authorities (DIRESA) and the IANP. This inference was largely made on the basis of the fact that when the CICADA Productions team returned from their expedition, one of the team members showed visible symptoms of a respiratory disease.

Kian-Kian, a Matsiguenka from a settlement in the Cumerjali river visited by CICADA's team also linked the death of the four people to their contacts with the CICADA visitors. According to his testimonies to the people of Yomybato, later collected by Dr. Shepard in November 2007, the company had promised to help his people with medicines, clothes and tools in exchange of the construction of a house for the film crew. Paraphrasing Kian-Kian, Shepard writes '*his people will not construct the house Mc Lauchlan had asked for, and that they did not want the film*

¹³Unpublished Report from park ranger Miguel Vicente Sácaro addressed to MNP Head Office on November 23rd 2007. '*Informe sobre la visita de la señora Débora*'. *INFORME No 002-2007-C.N.Y. (23/11/07)*.

¹⁴Report from Samuel Shumarapague Mameria to MNP's Head Office (23/11/07)

crew to come back to their community', and that if they did, it would be to 'exterminate the entire population with strong flu'. [My translation]

It is important to note that the transmission of external diseases to immunologically vulnerable populations can take place even when the disease is not visibly manifested in the outsiders that are involved in the contact¹⁵. While it is clearly very difficult to establish a direct link between the visit of the CICADA team and the subsequent deaths of eight Matsigenka, it seems clear that CICADA operated in a highly improper fashion: First by violating the permit requirements and entering a restricted area inhabited by highly vulnerable Matsigenka populations, and secondly, by ignoring the specific recommendations of qualified experts, who specifically warned them of the risks involved, and who strongly advised them against travelling upriver. Glenn Shepard writes how *"During my conversation with them on the night of the 18th, I explicitly warned them of the delicate situation of the isolated groups of the headwaters of the Cumerjali river where they had planned to go. I clearly told them that they were an extremely isolated group in a process of recent contact with the community of Yomybato, for whom the contagion of flu could be very dangerous or even fatal. For this reason, the few previous visits to the area had always been carried out with the company of health workers.'* [My translation].

III. Indigenous Peoples in Isolation as a New TV Phenomenon

Besides the specific importance of the epidemic outbreak, the incident with CICADA raises some general, and troubling, questions about interactions between the media and indigenous peoples. An increasing number of 'reality' TV shows based on the close contact of westerners with remote indigenous societies have proliferated in recent years. This new trend of 'ethnographic' mass entertainment has proven to be highly successful among European and American audiences, stimulating TV channels and production companies to offer new and more 'exciting' products¹⁶. CICADA's application for an authorization sent to MNP Head Office on the 24th of September 2007 describes the aim of its work as follows:

¹⁵ This point was made by Dr. Neptalí Cueva, authority in field and Head of the National Centre for Intercultural Health (CENSI), in a meeting organized by FENAMAD to deal specifically with this case, and which was also attended by MNP Head Officer, National Director of INRENA-IANP, DIRESA, and the Regional Government of Madre de Dios (Puerto Maldonado, April 1st 2008).

¹⁶In Discovery Channel's series "Last One Standing" a team of British and American athletes engages in physical competition and fighting with "the most remote tribes in the world".

'One of our new projects is the production of a series that will try to show the traditional way of life of distinct native groups around the world, during a period of three consecutive months, during which a couple of European (British) citizens will share the lives of each chosen community, participating in their daily activities.' [My translation].

CICADA team members explained to Dr. Shepard their intention to include the Matsigenka in its ongoing series: *'World's Lost Tribes: New adventures of Mark and Ollie'*. Playing on stereotypical depictions of indigenous 'savagery', the series is based on the encounter of two British explorers with remote indigenous societies around the world and the extreme experiences they endure in the process of becoming part of 'them'¹⁷.

The impacts of this emerging industry on vulnerable indigenous peoples living in complete or in a high degree of isolation needs to be carefully assessed, particularly in the light of several facts. First, the making of these documentaries requires extended stays by the film crew, sometimes up to several months, increasing the spread of diseases among the population. Additionally, filming work and its logistics involves a series of interactions and exchanges that could lead to cultural and social disruptions, whose consequences are difficult to estimate. Issues of representation are equally problematic. The special emphasis placed on specific traits or practices for sensationalist purposes misrepresents indigenous societies, often offering images that are often de-contextualised, degrading or biased image. Clearly, the circumstances involve a profound imbalance of power that shapes the relationship between media companies and the indigenous peoples. This context makes it very difficult for indigenous peoples to understand the implications of the film project or to exert any kind of control of how they are represented to outsiders. Finally, this media phenomenon has generated a rising demand for 'wild' or 'tribal' tourism, increasing the pressures and threats on isolated indigenous groups¹⁸.

Many of these actions contravene the principles of ILO Convention (1989) and specific articles of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In the case of CICADA, the company appears to have also violated the Peruvian legislation and internal regulations of MNP. It is ironic that the media trend of which the CICADA project is part coincides- and undermines- the intense efforts out at

¹⁷ www.discoverychannel.co.uk/worldslosttribes/mek/index.shtml

¹⁸ 'Visiting Tribes – the ethical way' in www.greentraveller.co.uk/node/312; 'Is it right to join the tribe', in *The Guardian* (30/08/07)

different levels by a number of key actors (international and governmental bodies, indigenous and human rights organisations and institutions) to afford a measure of protection to highly vulnerable indigenous groups who are either in voluntary isolation or who are developing tentative, incipient, links with national society. Professional bodies like the ASA have an important role to play in encouraging a broader debate of the issues and principles at stake, and to flag the dangers and risks that Euro-American fascinations with 'others' can pose to vulnerable peoples.

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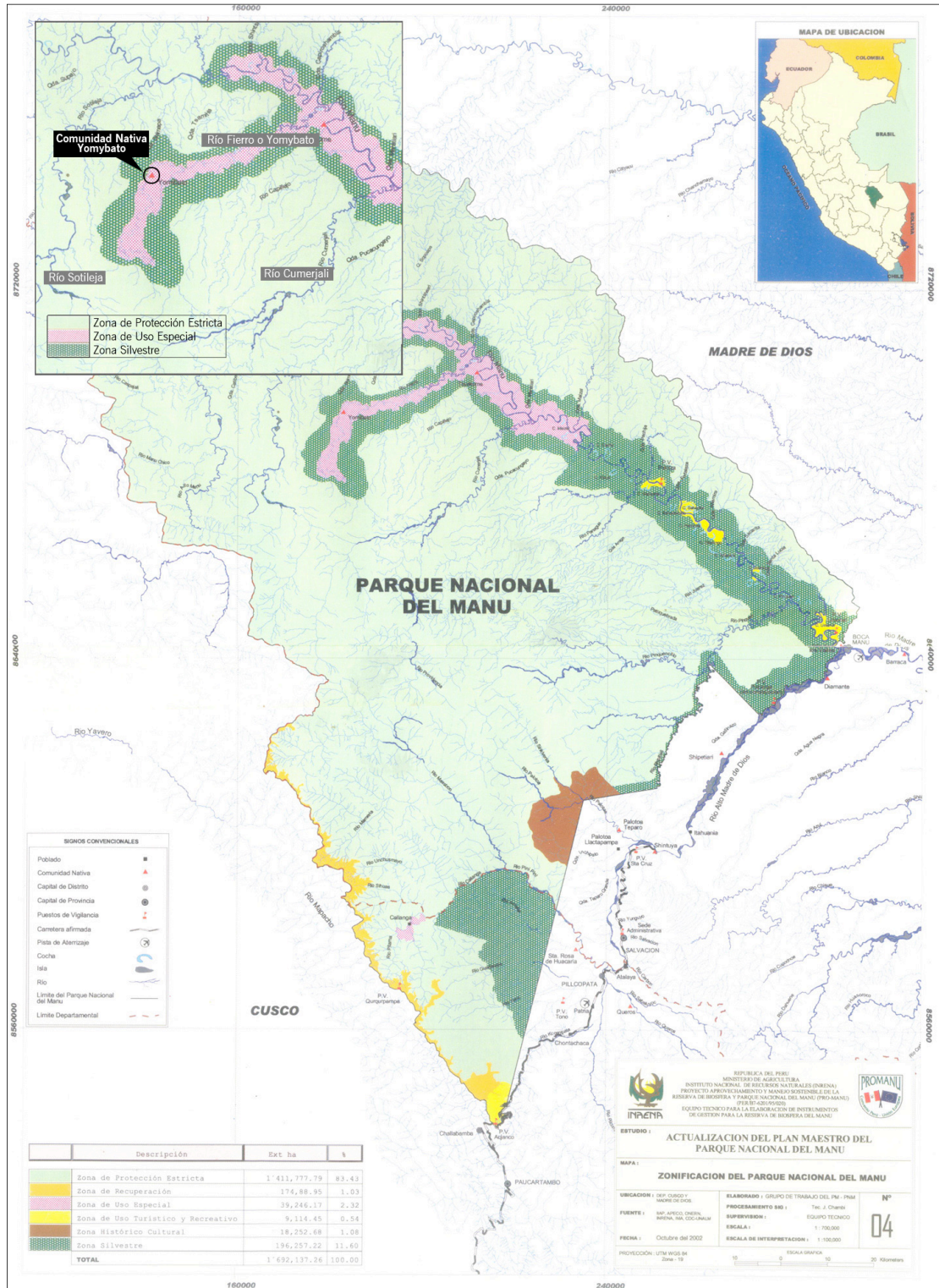
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Manu National Park official zoning: The Yomybato area where the events related to the November 2007 epidemics outbreak took place has been magnified (Taken from MNP's 'Plan Maestro')



Matsigenka in initial contact. The picture was taken during the visit of a health team in October 1995 to the headwaters region of the Cumerjali and Sotileja rivers (*Neptali Cueva, Sotileja headwaters, 1995*)



Matsigenka women in Yomybato. CICADA Productions dismissed the possibility of working with the Yomybato community due to the presence of 'western' traits among its people (*FENAMAD, December 2007*).



Limonal Control Post, located at the entry of the park, near the small village of Boca Manu (Madre de Dios river). Any visitor entering the park through the post is required to show its entry permit and is warned not to establish contact with isolated populations.



Manu River, view from the Matsiguenka community of Tayakome. Yomybato, is situated at a distance of 70 km upriver from Tayakome, along the Yomybato (Fierro) stream. They are the only two officially recognized communities inside the Manu National Park.



Yomybato (Fierro stream). FENAMAD's team on its way to the community of Yomybato in December 2007



Yomybato's Health post. The post has serious deficiencies in medical supplies and personnel to assist the large and highly vulnerable Matsigenka population of the community and its surroundings (almost 400 people).



'World's Lost Tribes: New adventures of Mark and Ollie'. Allegedly, the Matsigenka in initial contact of MNP were to be included in this CICADA Productions TV series for Discovery Channel. In the picture, the stars of the show: ex Royal marine Mark Anstice, and journalist Oly Steeds, in West Papua (www.discoverychannel.co.uk/worldslosttribes/markandolly/index.shtml).