

The Nunoa Project, International Agriculture, Education, and Me

3 years ago I was sitting in a Pre-Veterinary science club meeting waiting to hear a veterinarian speak about his experience with international agriculture. A tall quiet man came into the room and introduced himself as Dr. Stephen Purdy. Slowly he began to talk about his work in Peru, and this insane idea of how you can improve the lives of people through some simple changes and hard work with their Animals. Dr. Purdy talked about how hard these Peruvians had it, but also how they never once complain, and how often they didn't even stop to consider how difficult their lives were. At the end of the seminar I went up to Dr. Purdy and I asked him why he continued to go to such difficult and challenging place, he paused and then smiled genuinely and replied, "That's a good question... I guess I just enjoy the work". It was as simple as that, there was a great need somewhere in the world and he had a solution. From that moment on I knew I had to go Peru and experience just what he was talking about.

3 years later I find myself getting on a plane in Texas about to leave the country for the first time in my life. That same tall man is with me joined by two other students as we head into a completely different world. As we boarded the flight to Peru all I could think about was "what am I doing here? what did I have to offer these people? I remember arriving in Urubamba full of bustling strangers and loud noises, and just thinking, "Where do I even start?" Each place we travelled I brought with me doubts in my qualifications, my preparedness, and my own skills. But Peru would not let this last long, as I instantly felt at home in the unplanned layout of the various towns, the unfinished buildings, the sunsets and sunrises, and the mountains that dominated every landscape.

Fast forward to Pucara where we spent most of our time and made the biggest impact. The work there was difficult, working at high altitudes, constantly combating language barriers, fighting centuries of tradition and stubbornness; it was a complete uphill battle. While it was challenging it was also incredibly rewarding as the people patiently taught me their language and their way of doing things. Each morning despite getting up at 4 or 5 am, I woke up with a smile and a hunger for the work that was ahead of me. Each community presented unique situations that put our minds to the test, often the people just couldn't keep the males separate, sometimes the people were hit hard by parasite filled pastures, others struggle to combat the cold temperatures, and the problems go on and on. Each day our group of eight had to think about what we wanted to do, and more realistically what we could feasibly do. We would work all day then return back to our rooms and debrief about the day. We talked about the positives, the data we collected, the issues with the animals, the issues with the people, and we made plans for the future. Every day we worked to become better scientists and we thought more critically about the issues facing the Peruvians and in our own lives. In our small meeting space we talked about things so much bigger than ourselves.

In college I have taken a number of courses, had countless professors, and read thousands of pages of text, but none compare to the learning I did in Peru. Peru taught me that education isn't about just presenting new information, it's not about creating unique visuals to explain an idea, and it doesn't need to be done in a classroom. Education is a conversation, a dialogue between the teacher and the learner. Just as we hoped to teach the Peruvians about preventative medicine and keeping records, they taught us about taking each day as it is, and remembering to laugh even when life gets hard. Peru taught me the value of doing the best you can in each moment. Often times we had to take a step back and think, "Which animals can we actually and effectively treat, and how can we encourage the Peruvians to take steps so that they didn't arrive at this situation again". Peru taught me that life is unbelievably fragile, as death was a common place in the highlands, but also taught me that even in death, we must continue to look for reasons to smile. If these people could smile in the face of everything then so could I.



Traveling to Peru reinforced this idea of community. Community means someone always has you back and that we all must take care of each other. Each Peruvian I met took time to help me, they watched patiently as I struggled to formulate Spanish words. They showed me their food, where they slept, and what they worried about. They welcomed complete strangers into their lives as if we were old friends. Peru taught me that “Risa es Universal” Laughter is universal. Despite not speaking the same language, despite coming from different worlds, despite different ideology, we were all able to share our laughter together.

Through our work in Peru I solidified skills I will use for the rest of my life. I learned to work in a team with people from all different backgrounds, I learned to take a step back and recognize where I could be most effective, I learned to think and operate as a scientist outside the classroom, and I developed the skills to plan effectively for the future. For me Peru refined and redefined my goals. Until Peru I hadn’t even considered working in international agriculture, my future was a fuzzy image of working as a large animal vet in some obscure place that wasn’t too cold. After seeing the progress we can make in Peru I realized that international agriculture would be an integral part of my future work and I will do whatever I can to encourage others to do the same.

Lastly the biggest lesson I learned is that life is all about climbing to newer heights. You have to make goals and you have to work hard to reach them. Sometimes that goal is so far away that it seems impossible to reach. But Peru showed me that the higher the climb, the harder the work, the more blood sweat and tears you have to shed, the more magnificent the view is at the top. Since traveling to Peru I have a renewed energy and drive for that goal at the top. The Peruvians face countless problems, and each problem is uniquely complicated with no direct solution. But I believe that by bringing young minds, by bringing new energy, and new viewpoints to these problems, we are creating a catalyst for positive change. The Nunoa Project is the perfect outlet for young and old veterinarians and animal specialists to come together and grow to find their place in the world.

I am thankful for this amazing opportunity and Nunoa Project's investment in both me and my future. Wherever life takes me I know that it will be shaped by the lessons learned in the beautiful and mystifying place. I want to say thank you, to the incredible people that made this unforgettable life experience a reality, to Dr. Purdy for pushing me to be better than sometimes I even believe myself to be, to those that support the Nunoa Project however they can as every single contribution matters, to the friends new and old that came with me to Peru, and to Peru for making me open my eyes just a little more and teaching me that care and love for animals is universal and perhaps the key to changing the lives of people around the world.

Sincerely,
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