

**Planting one million trees for life in Peru
Incan descendants clean up Mother Earth**

By Rick Kearns, Indian Country Today correspondent
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CUZCO, Peru – The project involves men, women and children of all ages planting trees and cleaning up lakes and rivers and working to protect a region sacred to these descendants of the Incas.

The indigenous workers are being lead by Yachay Wasi, the “House of Learning” in Quechua, which is a nonprofit advocacy organization based in Peru. According to a press release, the advocates intend to plant one million native trees in the Circuit of Four Lakes region in the Peruvian Andes as part of a broader program that includes cultural as well as sustainable development efforts. Yachay Wasi has been a partner with the United Nations on a number of initiatives and has offices in Peru and the United States (New York).

The Trees for Life project began in January with the planting of 4,000 native trees around Laguna Acopia Lake, and in the surrounding villages of Acopia and Santo Domingo. Laguna Acopia is, along with Pomacanchi, Mosoqllacta and Pampamarca Lakes, the focus of the related Circuit of Four Lakes project which aims to restore and conserve these sacred bodies of water (which are the sources that feed into the Peruvian Amazon River). The next step in February included the planting of 2,000 more trees by local school children from the villages.

The ambitious plan has also involved gathering funding for the scientific study of the region done in 2004 and then education and environmental training of the mostly indigenous residents, as well as other projects put together by Yachay Wasi.

In an e-mail interview with Indian Country Today, Yachay Wasi President Luis Delgado Hurtado explained some of the background on both projects, why their success is so important and about other initiatives relating to environment and culture. Hurtado wrote from the organization's home base in Cuzco province, Peru, his home region and whose main city was the capital of the Incan Empire.

ICT: What were the most important points brought out by the environmental study of the region done in 2004?

Hurtado: Ecological restoration of the area along with conservation of the Circuit of the Four Lakes; and education on regional climate change.

The high Andean territories, sources of water for the Peruvian Amazon, are very vulnerable to climate change. ... the flora, fauna, biodiversity and cultures are all in danger. ... In relation to all of these dangers and water crises, all signs indicate that the crisis is getting worse, and is caused by human beings and the utilization of inadequate practices in the daily life of both rich and poor.

Yachay Wasi has embarked on an environmental effort of reconnaissance of the four lakes and micro basins, of their fresh water springs.

The principal mistakes made by residents and others have been discovered. ... we've found a large number of plastic items, disposable plastic bottles, old clothes, and trash along the banks of the rivers and streams that run through the region and connect the lakes, which have turned into garbage dumps and laundry areas where harsh detergents are used.

The study has shown that our lakes only have five percent contamination. ... and this fact gives us a lot of hope. ... but it will be very important for us to preserve the flora and fauna of the region.

This requires sensitization, information and mobilization to achieve the objectives for conservation and it has to involve local authorities and civil society in general to manage these natural resources.

ICT: How have the indigenous people of the area responded to the lakes and tree projects?

Hurtado: The sensitization of the indigenous residents to environmental issues has come about through organized talks with students, farmers, mothers' groups, and folks in general to teach them the importance of conservation, how it benefits them and future generations. We've done this through video presentations as well as posters and other gatherings. Yachay Wasi hopes to achieve a desired effect through the environmental education within the context of the familiar setting of the residents and that each of them is trained and aware of their ways of living. ... and that each resident is charged with the care of the natural resources in their area.

ICT: What were some of the environmental protection methods you taught to community members?

Hurtado: We did get some good results, but it should be noted that changing habits and customs does not happen overnight. But it is happening with the support of workshops. ... and a team of professionals, the project leader, a foreman and two biologists.

We have had the communities doing almost all of the planting, but some of the related activities include cleaning and recovery of trash from lagoons, streams; drying out plastic items to be taken for recycling; teaching people to not clean their clothes in the rivers and lagoons with detergents; and again with the biologists we take folks on tours of the rivers and countryside to better explain the need for care of the environment.

ICT: Why did you choose those particular species of native trees for planting?

Hurtado: These trees were part of the natural environment of our Inca ancestors and that, in time, these forests will be conserved. ... they are *Polylepis Incana*, known as qeñua or yagual; *Escallonia Resinosa*, known as chachacomo or orko chachacomo; *Buddleja Coriacea*, known as qolle or kishuara.

These species can be planted in poor soil, they tolerate the high elevations, and don't need much water and can develop in very dry terrain. They also have diverse uses for construction due to their strength; as homes for beehives; their bark can be used as medicine for tonsillitis; they have properties for use in dyes or as firewood, charcoal and their foliage makes for good fertilizer; and some of the leaves also are used in medicines for cleaning wounds and for treating kidney ailments, among other things.

ICT: What else is needed to complete the Trees for Life project?

Hurtado: We need human, professional, biological, economic and solidarity help to achieve the reality of one million trees for life, then we can be grateful again to the trees for our lives. They have evolved over an imponderable 370 million years and helped us create the same air we breathe today and make us understand we must save Mother Earth, Pachamama. We need everyone's help.

ICT: Have you received any help from the Peruvian government?

Hurtado: We have never received any support from the Peruvian government.

But the fundamental importance of planting a tree is that it has a natural, universal force for every man, woman and child. Today we plant, and tomorrow we plant another tree for the new generations.