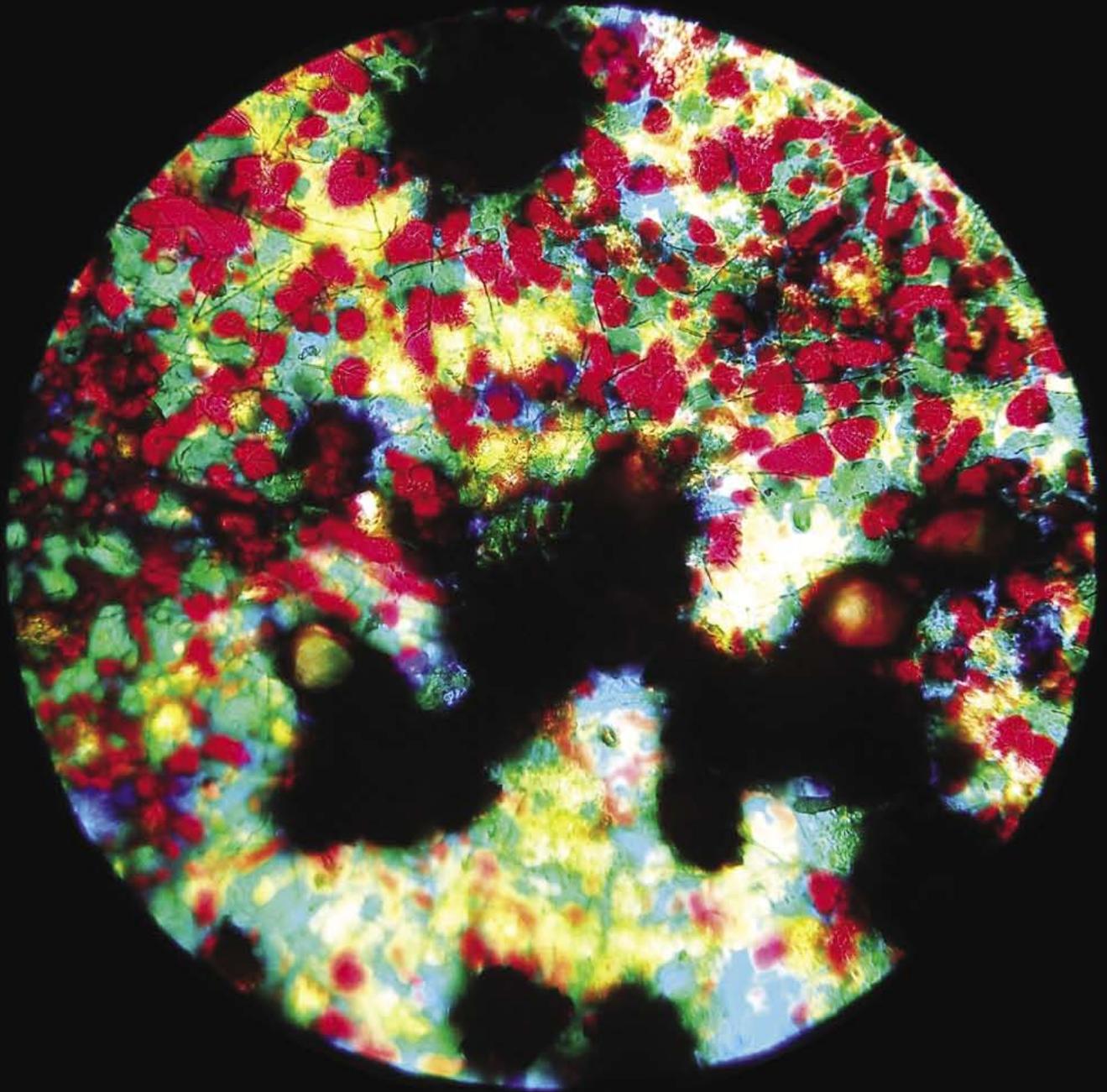


# A walk on the wild side



Cape Farewell brings together artists and scientists to witness the stark facts of climate change. Artist and academic **Daro Montag** tells of his recent experience on an expedition from the ethereal cloud forests of the Andes to the humid jungle of the Amazon basin



LIKE MANY EUROPEANS MY KNOWLEDGE of the remoter regions of this planet has been mediated through cultural artefacts and, to a large extent, has been created by them. Most of us never visit the High Arctic or tropical rainforests. While this is probably a good thing, it does mean that our knowledge of these remote places is often limited and partial. Recently, while sorting through some old papers, I found two documents, which informed and helped to create my mental image of the South American jungle. They were both torn out of magazines in the 1980s and filed in a box marked 'Important'.

The first, an essay by the English environmentalist, Jonathon Porritt, came from a colour supplement. In it he outlined the importance of the rainforest with its biodiversity and emphasised the devastation being caused by logging and farming. Although he did not mention the term 'carbon sink' the forest's significance to global atmospheric dynamics was clear. The paper must have resonated with my own dawning environmental awareness.

The second article, which was from a film journal, was an in-depth review of Werner Herzog's classic film, *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*. Made in 1972 this film featured the legendary German actor, Klaus Kinski. The plot follows a mythical journey, taken by a band of Spanish conquistadors, from the Peruvian cloud forest into the Amazon rainforest. As the story unfolds Aguirre, played by Kinski, gradually descends into the madness of his hubris. The stunning jungle scenery plays a major role in the film and

serves as a metaphor for the unruly band of travellers and the fecundity of nature. To the lost conquistadors, the jungle is both impenetrably dense and totally unknowable.

Although, in the intervening years, I had learned more about the rainforest through my support of Greenpeace and other environmental organisations, these two articles formed my personal touchstones for the South American jungle. So, when an invitation came for me to participate in a Cape Farewell expedition to Peru, I felt prepared for the scale of the adventure, but totally ignorant about the reality and the details.

Perhaps this lack of experiential knowledge, and need for artists and cultural communicators to acquire it, is why Cape Farewell expeditions are so important. As an organisation, it has an unrivalled track record of taking artists to Arctic regions to learn about climate change and gain first-hand experience by working alongside scientists. The idea behind sending these creative missionaries to climate hotspots is that they will bring back ideas, images and sounds that speak to an audience which might miss the story if told in more scientific language.

This expedition, which was the first that Cape Farewell had undertaken to the Tropics, was instigated by the Environmental Change Institute (ECI) of Oxford University. ECI has a number of projects underway in Peru studying the ecosystems of the Andes in order to gain knowledge about their role in the Earth's systems. This work is crucial, particularly given the atmospheric importance of tropical forests and the impacts a changing climate might have on the most bio-diverse ecosystems on the planet. In seeking to work with Cape Farewell, Yadvinder Malhi and Josh Fisher of the ECI hope that artistic insight and production might contribute to raising awareness of this research and the scientific knowledge being gained. It was also hoped that exposing a diverse group of artists to scientific research might lead to new creative exchanges and insights that would be of benefit to both parties.

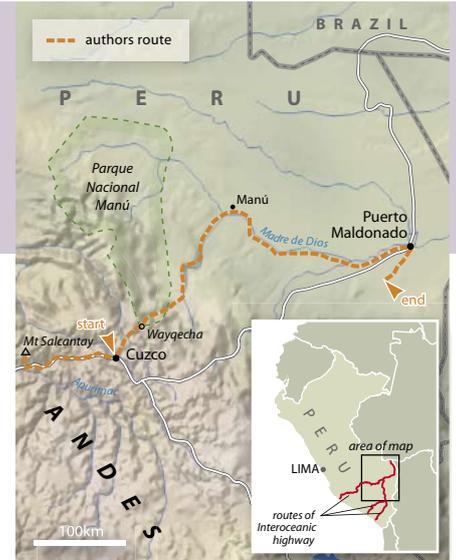
I was selected to participate for two reasons. Firstly, as an artist, I have been working for many years with micro-organisms found in soils. I have developed a process for generating images on prepared photographic film using the activities of microbes. The other reason for my invitation was that I lead Research for Arts, Nature and the Environment (RANE), at University College Falmouth, which examines the relationship between art and the environment. Cape Farewell selected Falmouth and the RANE group as one of three universities that they will be working with over the next few years. By teaming up with three arts' universities, Cape Farewell aims to inspire the next generation of artists. This particular expedition will lead to a series of events at University College Falmouth and the Eden Project in Cornwall in early 2011.

As well as scientists and guides, the participants in the Peru expedition included visual artists, sound artists, an animator-photographer, cameraman, as well a senior climate campaigner from Greenpeace. Starting at Cuzco in Peru, the group travelled from the dry, cold Andes (4,000 metres above sea level) to the hot, moist tributaries of the Amazon (at 200 metres above sea level). The itinerary took in the shrinking glaciers at Mount Salcantay, the cloud forests of the Andes, and the tropical rainforest of Manu National Park. Camping in tents and at science stations along the way, the group experienced freezing temperatures in the mountains and 100 per cent humidity in the lower forest.

The forests of the Andes and Amazon are at the centre of the rainforest debate. At present the cloud forests are being pushed further up the mountain, with the changing temperature affecting plant life and biodiversity. If this continues, it is possible that the cloud forests will be destroyed. Moreover, the Andean cloud forests and adjoining Amazonian lowlands have some of the highest levels of biodiversity to be found in the world – there are more species of trees in 100 square metres of some Amazonian forests



*On the Cape Farewell expedition: walking across the Puna*



than in the whole of Europe. This variety of species is reducing continually and will be exacerbated further once the ecosystem is disturbed. Our 18-day journey enabled the group to witness some of the problems facing the region, from deforestation and exploration for oil to the potential environmental and social change that will follow the opening of the Inter-oceanic highway through Peru and Brazil.

At key locations along the route, Wayqecha, the Manú Learning Centre and while walking the Trocha Union, the Cape Farewell team helped to gather data for ongoing field work. This proved a challenging task, which gave the artists a greater understanding and appreciation of the sheer physical labour involved in gathering data in tropical conditions. Data being gathered from the various plots included the height and diameter of trees; the rate of carbon dioxide being emitted by soil and vegetation; and the constituents of specific soil and water.

There were many occasions when discussions revolved around the two cultures of art and science. Perhaps the most enlightening was during an evening of presentations at Los Amigos Research Station. The scientific presentations included research on South American bats and their habitats, and problems caused in the food chain by the use of mercury in gold prospecting, which leads to

high levels of the poison in birds of prey. The artists Lucy and Jorge Orta presented their own research and practice. This was followed by a short presentation on my own work.

The shared conversation, on this and other occasions, showed that the two cultures are not so far apart as some would like us to believe. There were genuine connections being made that probably would not have been arrived at had we all stayed at home. It is this that makes the Cape Farewell model so productive. By immersing artists fully in an environment where research is being conducted, they gain a deeper knowledge than might be gleaned from the commercial media. They gain first-hand experiences, memories and ideas that will inevitably re-emerge through the art they produce. And this art will help to feed the next generation's view of a world now under threat - because that is what art does best, it helps create meaning and shape a world view.

And this is where I started my journey - with a couple of old articles that helped to shape my own image of the rainforest. The place I discovered was much richer and certainly more complex than I had imagined. The problems identified in the two articles, re-discovered at the start of my journey, are still there. The devastation that threatens the biodiversity continues unabated. The ongoing deforesta-

tion is likely to increase as the Inter-oceanic highway reaches completion, opening up previously inaccessible areas for exploitation. In addition to this, the changes being brought by an increase in atmospheric carbon and a warming planet, are beginning to have an impact on this delicate ecosystem. The results of this are already being detected by scientists from the Environmental Change Institute.

Our expedition to learn about this science mirrored the fictional route of Aguirre in his search for a kingdom of gold (although without the madness and suits of armour). Gold still drives the economy of the shanty towns we visited along the river. Improvised rigs that dredge the muddy water add to the pollution. The mercury used to extract the gold ends up being deposited in the water and accumulates in the food chain. But now a greater threat has been added. Multinational oil companies, including the appropriately named, Hunt Oil, are poised to explore these supposedly 'protected' areas for gas and oil.

The jungle still offers vast resources that can be of immense value to a limited number of people. If this exploitation goes ahead, and fossil resources are discovered, the devastation facing the region will be unstoppable and the consequences unimaginable.

An alternative scenario would be to leave the fossil fuels in the ground and allow the rainforest to play out its role as the 'lungs of the planet'. The Cape Farewell expedition, and the images and artworks that will emerge from it, will contribute, hopefully, to ensuring that this is the scenario the world follows. ■

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**I felt prepared for the scale of the adventure, but totally ignorant about the reality and the details. My knowledge of the region was largely constituted by cultural artefacts and media representations**