

Max Gunther (1925-2018)

Max Gunther, owner of Peruvian Safaris - the company that built and ran Explorer's Inn, and managed the surrounding area of forest - passed away on March 29, 2018. Explorer's Inn embodied Max's life work, passion and legacy. As such it represented for him a source of great pride and inspiration, as well as, inevitably perhaps, frustration.

Although Explorer's Inn was not the first tourist lodge in the Madre de Dios region- Cusco Amazonico in the Madre de Dios river had opened a few months before- its presence in Tambopata heralded and helped propel the subsequent growth of nature tourism, research and conservation in the region. Max was prescient in his understanding of the importance and potential of nature tourism as a form of "eco-development" (as it was then called). His genius was to recognize the synergy that exists between research, education and tourism, something that is obvious today but which was quite original when Max started encouraging scientists to stay in the Lodge and conduct research in the surrounding area.

Max Gunther Doering, the second of five children, was born in Trujillo on November 25, 1925. His father, Max Günter Erbrecht, a German naval officer, arrived in Peru shortly after the First World War, while his mother Emma Doering Alvarez, also of German descent, was from Tacna. Max spent his early childhood in Hacienda Casa Grande, a prominent sugar cane estate in the Chicama valley, close to the city of Trujillo on the northern coast of Peru, where his father worked managing the company's storehouse. It was here, amidst the countryside and surrounding the irrigated fields, that Max first developed a love of the outdoors and of hunting.

When he was eight years old Max was sent to live with his maternal grandparents in Lima, where he studied in the German School in Miraflores. However just as Max was finishing his secondary education, Peru declared war on Germany, which led to the annulment of his German secondary school diploma. Max returned to Trujillo in 1941 and was forced to enroll in a secondary school in order to retake the exams at the end of every academic year, for a period of five years.

During this time, he started working for the company that owned the plantation. As supervisor of the 30,000 hectare estate Max would get up at 4am and work through until 7pm each day, travelling between different sectors on horseback. The managers of the plantation, which itself was owned by a large company owned by the Gildemeister family (one of the largest producers of sugar in the country), were quick to recognize the ability and potential of this resourceful, hard-working and fast-learning fifteen-year-old, who was quickly promoted and

eventually sent to work on a ranch owned by the company in the mountains of Cajamarca. In 1944, a year before his father's early death, Max was sent by the same company to Chile to learn English and to gain experience on some of their large cattle and sheep-ranches in Punta Arenas, Chile.

In 1946 Max went to Argentina to study veterinary medicine, a degree that was not available at the time in Peru. He returned to Lima in 1951 and worked as a vet on various ranches in the provinces of Puno, Cusco and, subsequently, Arequipa. From about 1957 Max worked as a manager and business associate in several different ventures related to the agro-veterinary and food industries, as well as in construction and real estate development, with various business associates and partners.

At the time a consummate deer hunter, Max and his fellow hunter and business partner Richard Wertherman first heard about Peruvian Safaris from entrepreneur and hunter-turned-conservationist Pepe Rada, sometime around 1975. Pepe, together with some business associates of his, had started a hunting outfitting company, catering for wealthy big-game hunters from abroad. Max bought a 50% share in the company, but soon afterwards the hunting of the three main big game species - jaguar, spectacled bear and Andean deer - was outlawed by the Peruvian government, throwing the company into disarray. Max and his partners decided to re-orient the venture towards nature tourism and began to look for a suitable site to build a lodge. Puerto Maldonado was chosen as the ideal destination in light of its strategic proximity to Cusco, the existence of a modern airport, and the large areas of undisturbed forests. An area of 105 hectares was purchased from the Peruvian government and the lodge inaugurated in 1976 by the Peruvian president Morales Bermúdez, brought in by helicopter and landing at the Explorer's Inn football field.

Max, who by then had been appointed Director of the Peruvian branch of WWF, not only bought most of the shares in the Company but also began encouraging several prominent north American biologists to visit the Inn, including David Pearson (Pennsylvania State University), Terry Erwin (Smithsonian Institution), Al Gentry (Missouri Botanical Gardens) Ted Parker (Louisiana State University) and Paul Donahue, among many others, who led several expeditions to the site. The different experts inventoried the flora and fauna of the Reserve and reported world record-breaking number of species for several taxa, including birds and butterflies. This early work provided the technical justification to support the creation of a 5,500 hectare Reserved Zone ("Zona Reservada") by the Peruvian government in 1977, as part of an agreement in which Peruvian Safaris was given custodianship. The evolving and growing relationship with numerous scientists, naturalists and conservationists was also a transformative experience for Max in the sense that it contributed to a deepening of his commitment to conservation and to his sense of the unique value and potential of the Explorer's Inn for both tourism and science.

From then on Explorer's Inn and the Tambopata Reserved Zone gained increasing attention and recognition as an international centre for scientific research, exploration and conservation. The Tambopata Reserved Zone became one of several early sites for comparative biodiversity and ecological research in the Amazon, notably through the efforts of Alwyn Gentry, Ted Parker and Terry Erwin. The formative influence of Explorers' Inn was also considerably extended through the work of Didier Lacaze, who was the manager of the Inn from 1982-1986. Didier's pioneering work with traditional medicine, AMETRA (Aplicación de Medicina Tradicional) and the neighboring community of Infierno was originally organised out of and supported by Explorer's Inn and Max Gunther.

Together with some of the scientists listed above, Max created the innovative Resident Naturalists' programme, which gave an opportunity for biologists to gain field experience and conduct research in the Reserved Zone, while acting as voluntary guides for the visitors. The Resident Naturalists' Program was particularly important in consolidating the reputation of the Explorer's Inn as a global destination for tropical ecotourism and scientific research. It was highly successful in attracting a high number of young, enthusiastic biologists into the area, introducing them to the wonders of tropical forests, shaping their future life and careers and, in some cases, prompting them to continue working in the area in different ways over many years.

Helen Newing, for example, went on to co-found the Tambopata Reserve Society (TReeS), which has since worked to promote conservation and support research, environmental education and local community development in the region since 1986. Kevin Morgan brought Operation Raleigh to Explorer's Inn and the Reserved Zone in 1985, which was an important factor leading to a subsequent agreement with the University of La Católica to build a research and training centre at the Inn. Miguel Alexiades arrived with Operation Raleigh in 1985, supported by Conrad Gorinsky and Bioresources- a subsidiary of the Earthlife Foundation- and in the following years worked with Didier Lacaze and the indigenous federation FENAMAD, developing the AMETRA project, which eventually led to the construction of the Ñape ethnobiological centre in the neighboring community of Infierno. There were many others: the late Barry Nicholson, who led two expeditions to the upper Tambopata in the 1990's, Paul Stewart, who later became a multiple Emmy and BAFTA award winning cameraman and producer with the BBC Natural History Unit, Oliver Phillips, now a professor at the University of Leeds conducting long-term research on the dynamics of carbon and biodiversity in tropical forests. Like many others before and after them, the Resident Naturalist experience introduced these young professionals to the marvels of the tropical forests and shaped the course of the rest of their lives.

During his involvement with Tambopata and Explorer's Inn, Max faced numerous challenges and difficulties, particularly during the first twenty years. The logistics of running a tourist lodge from far away, in such a remote location and in a poorly developed region- Madre de Dios lacked anything close to reliable road or telephone links to the outside until the mid-1990's- were notoriously hard, particularly during the rainy season when bad weather caused frequent flight cancellations and when all road communications and critical supplies from the outside were cut off for weeks or even months at a time. The war with Sendero Luminoso and a series of political and economic convulsions between the 1980's and 1990's contributed to many lean seasons and years. Moreover, the relationship with the neighbouring community of Infierno was at times problematic, in part because due to an oversight by government departments the Reserved Zone had been created partly on top of the community's titled lands. The labyrinthine nature of Peruvian bureaucracy also took its toll on Max. In 1985, after a devastating fire in the central building of the lodge, Max suffered a stroke from which, amazingly, he subsequently recovered fully.

Recovering, persevering, succeeding; these are things that Max did repeatedly and remarkably. I can see him now, sitting behind his desk: his short, slight but athletic build, his penetrating, intelligent, shrewd and somewhat mischievous look, his dry sense of humor, attending to several different matters in quick succession in a deliberate, focused and very determined way of being that was so typical of him. His mind, his conversation and his life were completely focused on Explorer's Inn. He was a part dreamer and part pragmatic businessman, determined to the point of obstinacy: all qualities that were necessary to see Explorer's Inn become what it did despite all the obstacles and constraints.

While his immediately legacy is first and foremost the Explorer's Inn, he should be recognised for his critically important role in pioneering and catalysing the transformation of Tambopata and Madre de Dios into one of the Amazon and the world's centres for nature tourism and international conservation. While it is the logistics of managing and keeping the lodge afloat that consumed Max, I think it was the lodge's place and promise in the world beyond itself that sustained him. I think this was obvious to anyone who met with Max in his office, watching his expression and tone of voice visibly switch back and forth between enthusiasm and exasperation, depending on whether he was talking to his visitor about some event or hope related to research or conservation in Tambopata, or to one of his dedicated assistants, who would frequently, if often sheepishly, interrupt the conversation to bring to his attention to a specific problem, document, call or question relating to the management of the Inn and the business.

After dedicating almost 40 years of his life to the Explorer's Inn, Max finally sold the lodge to a Peruvian entrepreneur in March 2014. He died four years later,

exactly to the month, after a long and debilitating illness but peacefully and surrounded by his children. He is survived by six children from his first marriage and one child from his second.

Miguel Alexiades, June 7 2018

