After the Fact | Protecting the Pantanal and Gran Chaco

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TRANSCRIPT

Amelia Moura, principal associate, conserving the Pantanal and Gran Chaco, The Pew Charitable Trusts: We did this trip and that includes a seven-hour ride in the car, and part of that ride in the car is snorkeling with your vehicle.

Natalia Araujo, senior manager, conserving the Pantanal and Gran Chaco, The Pew Charitable Trusts: El pantanal y el gran chaco representan vida. Representan cultura. Representan Esperanza.

[The Pantanal and Gran Chaco represent life. They represent culture. They represent hope.]

Amelia Moura: It's an adventure. You have to be ready for an adventure.

Dan LeDuc, host, "After the Fact" podcast: Welcome to "After the Fact." For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. And in today's episode, we're taking you on a trip to South America. This part of the world is home to the planet's largest tropical wetland. It's a landscape that's teeming with colorful birds, capybaras, anteaters, and even jaguars. But we're not talking about the Amazon. And unlike the Amazon, this region has not yet been devastated by deforestation. The ecosystem remains intact, so conservation here is about preservation, not restoration. Today, we'll take you to Brazil's Pantanal and Bolivia's Gran Chaco. We begin with my colleague Amelia Moura, who works on Pew's conserving the Pantanal and Gran Chaco project. Amelia Moura, welcome.

Amelia Moura: Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure.

Dan LeDuc: Let's talk about those places in South America. I'm gonna guess that a lot of people in the United States aren't as familiar with them. We think of South America and we think of the Amazon or Patagonia down in Chile. What is special about the Gran Chaco and the Pantanal?

Amelia Moura: They're really unique ecosystems. They're very distinct, but very complementary to one another. The Pantanal is the world's largest tropical wetland. If you think of wetland environments, a lot of times you think of flood control, and that is something that the Pantanal is really good at controlling. The Grand Chaco Forest is the second-largest forest in South America after the Amazon. It's not a

rainforest, it's a dry forest, and that means that it's adapted to periods of really hot and dry conditions. But then there are seasonal rains that come in. One of the benefits of the Gran Chaco is that it's able to regulate some of these climate actions via that seasonal water flow that happens in the Chaco. It's able to provide a consistent livelihood for those communities that are in the region, even when there are periods of dry conditions. There are also these really important considerations, including carbon storage, that happen in both ecosystems.

Dan LeDuc: So, two diverse places that sort of work together.

Amelia Moura: So, they work together because they're linked by water flows. And so if you picture the Pantanal, it's a flood plain. So a really low land area that's surrounded by these higher ecosystems. The rainfall that does happen in the Chaco will flow downstream and eventually end up in the Pantanal, so they're really connected by this flow of water.

Dan LeDuc: You've been working on this project for Pew for several years, and you mentioned to me before that you have Brazillian heritage. Have you had a chance to go down and see this place?

Amelia Moura: I sure have. I have the great pleasure of saying I've been to the Pantanal and now the Gran Chaco several times. It's been amazing.

Dan LeDuc: Tell us about what, what it looks like.

Amelia Moura: We had a really amazing trip that I want to talk about this last May. And it was so special because we actually got to travel the entire Pantanal from north to south. Where we got to see jaguars. We got to take a boat ride down to a very remote part of the Pantanal, to be with these riverine fishing communities that fish for bait fish, which they then provide to recreational or commercial fishing opportunities in their region. From there we got on a little tiny airplane down to the southern Pantanal, and that's where we got to see the amazing pockets of wet and dry and forest out the window of the airplane. It was amazing.

Dan LeDuc: You don't just do this in an afternoon.

Amelia Moura: You sure do not. No. You can't even get to one place in an afternoon. We did this trip from north to south in about 10 days.

Dan LeDuc: And the view from the air be very…

Amelia Moura: It's stunning.

Dan LeDuc: It's really incredible to pass over a really pristine ecosystem and so much so that you're, you can do wildlife spotting from your airplane. So, describe the quality of these places, right? At a lot of times when conservation groups want to work on an area, it's because bad things have happened and we're trying to fix it. What's the state of play in this region?

Amelia Moura: So we're lucky because we're working on relatively intact and relatively conserved ecosystems. And that's really exciting because we're not talking about restoration. We're talking about being able to come in at a time when that ecosystem is still providing for the communities that live there.

Dan LeDuc: That means working, of course, with the people who live there. They're the ones who matter and the ones who know best.

Amelia Moura: We're talking about local communities, and especially in Bolivia, a large number of Indigenous communities. And for my colleague Natalia Arauju, who works on the ground in Bolivia, lasting conservation depends on collaboration with Indigenous communities.

Natalia Araujo: La forma de trabajo es promover y fortalecer las capacidades locales y las voces locales, porque los pueblos indígenas son actores claves dueños del territorio y la iniciativa lo que busca es lograr el mayor fortalecimiento posible de acuerdo a sus usos y costumbres para que ellos puedan ser los gestores de este territorio.

[The approach is to promote and strengthen local capacities and local voices, because Indigenous peoples are key stakeholders and owners of the territory, and the initiative seeks to achieve the greatest possible strengthening of their uses and customs so that they can be the stewards of this territory.]

Amelia Moura: Our support is very much in capacity building, in helping, planning so that these communities have the tools they need for ecosystem planning and for planning for their areas. And in the Pantanal, one of the key groups that we work with is traditional landowners, and most of them in the Pantanal are ranchers. About 95% of the Pantanal is still privately owned. And so a key group for conservation and for sustainability is ranching.

Dan LeDuc: So that's a little counterintuitive maybe to the American perspective, right? Ranchers they have cattle, they trump over stuff, not always great in some areas of the world. In this case, it's just the opposite.

Amelia Moura: It is the opposite. So the Pantanal is a seasonal flood plain where water comes for half of the year and it's flooded, and then for the other half of the year it's really dry. And that seasonal difference really helps to regulate the environment and actually helps the cattle ranching operation be

sustainable because the ranchers are automatically rotating the cattle to different pastures because of the influx of water.

We're talking about very few heads of cattle per acre. And that means that there's a very low density of cattle that's grazing on any particular piece of land. These are huge fields with open grazing. It's not the confinement that you think about when you think of a traditional cattle operation.

Dan LeDuc: So, the human presence that we're talking about is a good thing in this environment. Sometimes people coming into a place are seen as changing it, but people are already here. They're part of it all. What is the added benefit of the people being there?

Amelia Moura: The Pantanal has had continuous human presence in this cattle-ranching style for close to 300 years, and ranching has been really beneficial in keeping the native vegetation intact and in keeping the native species there and part of the ecosystem. Eighty-five percent of the Pantanal is still native vegetation. And so that means that these ranchers are not converting fields. They're not deforesting more than they need to support their operation. It means that they're one with the environment in the Pantanal.

Dan LeDuc: In addition to cattle, there are a lot of other local species. What's the animal life there and what are they known for?

Amelia Moura: There are giant river otters, which are like 6 feet long. They're amazing. There's tapers, the hyacinth macaw. And then of course the iconic jaguar, which is a huge draw for tourism.

Dan LeDuc: Does the local community embrace ecotourism to see these jaguars?

Amelia Moura: There are certain regions of the Pantanal where there's really dense jaguar populations. There's a particular state park called Encontro das Águas State Park, where they have one of the highest densities. And their ecotourism for jaguars is one of the top economic drivers of the region.

And then there are other areas where jaguars are less common, but they actually pose a bit of a threat and a bit of a problem to some of the ranching communities. As you can imagine, cattle might be a food source for a jaguar, right? And so there is this tension at times between the ranchers and the big cat conservationists. But there are a lot of solutions coming to light these days that will allow jaguars and the economic activity of cattle ranching to happen in unison.

Dan LeDuc: Do you think part of that is helped by what we were talking about at the beginning, which is we're not taking a place that's been degraded, we're taking a place that's flourishing and its natural self

and people want to just keep that going and enhance it. So does that sort of mindset make some of the challenge easier to handle?

Amelia Moura: I think that we have a unique position where we're working for conservation rather than working for restoration of an ecosystem. The Pantanal as a whole is very well designed to support this collaboration between humans, between the plant species, between the animal species, between the hydrology. It's being defined by those extremes of flooding. And then dry season really helped to create this collaborative environment, and you have to work together in order to persevere there.

I think the region is as a mosaic. So, if you picture a mosaic full of little tiles, that individually might not look like a lot, but you zoom out and you get the bigger picture of this amazing landscape, and that's very similar to what the Pantanal and Gran Chaco can look like.

Dan LeDuc: And is the future of this place tied to one side of the equation more than the other, or is the great beauty of it that it is this interlocking thing?

Amelia Moura: The long-term success of the Pantanal and Gran Chaco as ecosystems really relies on protecting them both and protecting the entirety of those ecosystems.

Dan LeDuc: Beyond the climate threats that so much of the world faces, are there any other specific threats that this region faces?

Amelia Moura: The greatest threats are actually pretty similar across Pantanal and Gran Chaco, and that shouldn't be surprising. They're adjacent ecosystems with a lot of shared interest. And the greatest threats right now are deforestation as a result of expanding and intensifying agriculture.

And the other issue is wildfires. They are a natural port part of these ecosystems, but at the scale that they're happening and at the frequency that they're happening, it's becoming really difficult for the ecosystems to bounce back. Think of wildfires in California or in Canada that we've seen in recent news. Those kinds of devastating impacts are happening in Brazil and Bolivia. And so working to try and mitigate those threats is really important. And then the final threat is any threat to the hydrology of the region, of course, will have a really great impact downstream.

Dan LeDuc: So underlying everything you've just described, the threats and how you respond to them has to be the Indigenous knowledge of the local communities. Are there examples of that you've come across that, that where you see the indigenous knowledge put to work?

Amelia Moura: Yeah. Pew supports the Indigenous autonomous government of Charagua Lyambae in Bolivia. And they have been so successful that in the 2024 fire season, the area that they were most monitoring and taking action to prevent wildfires did not burn, and all the surrounding regions around it did. And that's a testament to how much knowledge that team already has and is already implementing and is having such huge success with just one year of fire training. And so, thinking about that moving forward gives me a lot of hope.

Dan LeDuc: And that sense of hope is echoed by my colleague Natalia.

Natalia Araujo: Lo que más me gusta de trabajar en estos paisajes es disfrutar del entorno natural y, por supuesto, entrar en contacto con los gobiernos indígenas, el gobierno nacional, y las otras instituciones, colegas que están trabajando en territorio que están haciendo esfuerzos increíbles para lograr cambios. Todo esto te revitaliza, te llena de esperanza es realmente un placer tener la oportunidad principalmente de trabajar en territorio.

[What I like most about working in these landscapes is enjoying the natural environment and, of course, coming into contact with the different populations and stakeholders, Indigenous governments, the national government, and other institutions colleagues, who are working in the field who are making incredible efforts to achieve change. All of this revitalizes you, fills you with hope, and it's truly a pleasure to have the opportunity, especially to work in the field.]

Dan LeDuc: Amelia, before we let you go, talk to people have never been there, who probably won't get there. What would you tell those folks?

Amelia Moura: So I come from an environmental background. I am really interested in conserving and protecting and engaging in sustainable practices to make sure that these beautiful, incredible ecosystems will be here for years to come.

I'm getting to enjoy it, but I'd love for it to stay there for the next generation, and for the one after that. I would encourage folks to think about the impact that just having these intact ecosystems can have, not just locally for these amazing communities that I described, but for the world for us on a global scale. Just the appreciation of having this resource out there is really amazing. Knowing that there is a way that carbon is being collected and sequestered and stored is really amazing. Just knowing that these opportunities are there is beautiful.

Dan LeDuc: Thanks for listening. To hear more stories like this, visit us at pewtrusts.org/afterthefact. And if you have questions or feedback you'd like to share, you can write us at podcasts@pewtrusts.org. You can also leave us a review wherever you listen to your podcasts. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."