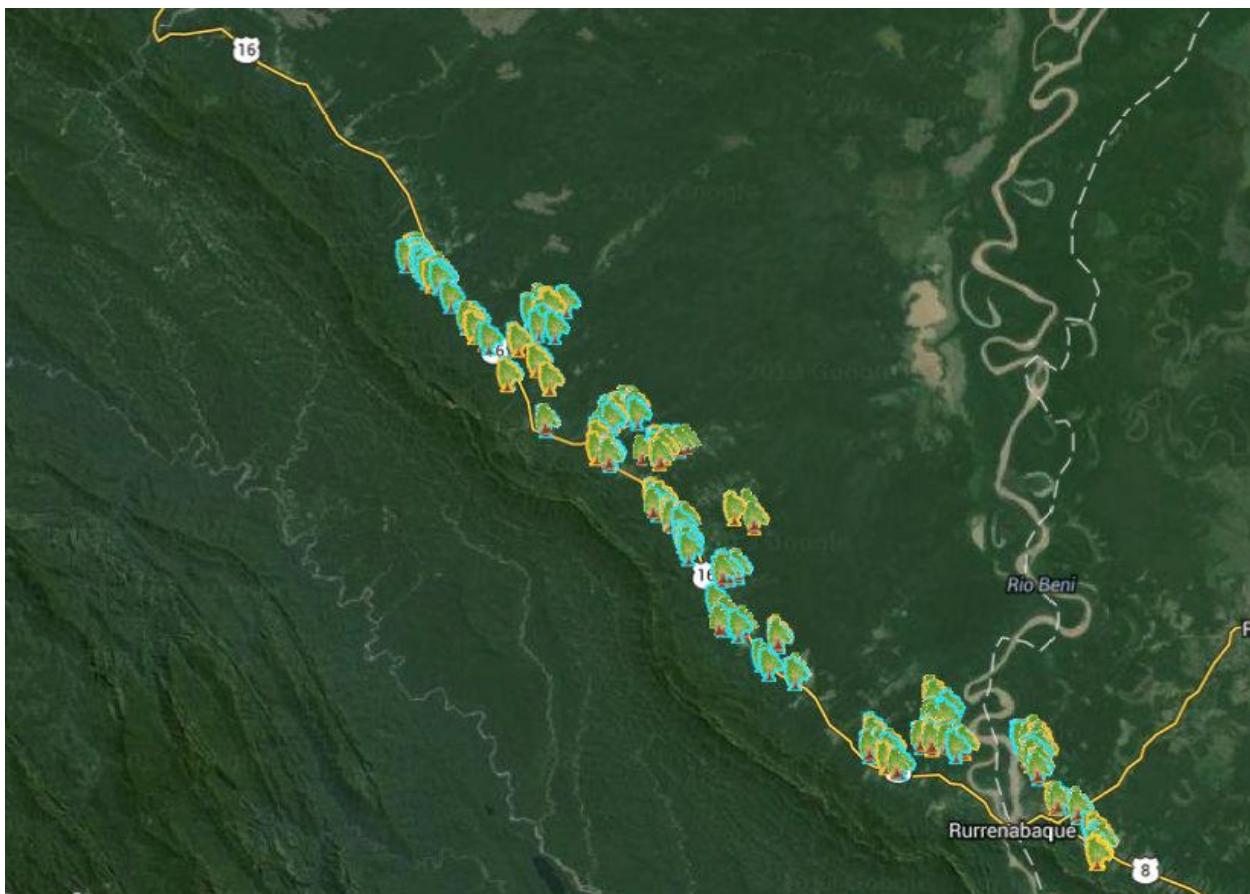


Farmer Stories – Don Patrocinio Revollo Mejia



Don Patrocinio lives on his own in the commune of Nueva Palestina on the dirt road (N16) west of Rurrenabaque, beneath the foothills which mark the boundary of Madidi National Park, west of the river Beni where the flat lowlands of the Amazon basin begin. The names of settler communes often have religious roots and reflect past hardship and hopes of a better future.



Don Patrocinio has a smallholding of 40 hectares (100 acres), which is not untypical in this area but without mechanization or capital farmers cannot actively manage more than 4 – 5 hectares at any one time.

The soil is very poor here and quickly becomes unproductive so farmers have had to resort to “slash and burn” clearing to create new areas each year for their crops.

At his age it would be easy to think that there was little attraction in joining the ArBolivia project. However nothing could be further from the truth. Although he sees his trees as providing a legacy for his children, there are plenty of more immediate benefits for him too.

Before joining the project in 2008 Patrocinio was growing bananas, coffee and cacao. Although coffee and cacao are regarded as high value crops, they are also extremely hard work, particularly in this harsh climate. The lowland varieties grown here are of much lower quality than those of hilly regions like the Yungas. Farmers here have also struggled to reproduce the same quality of cacao beans as those in the wild. Yields are also relatively low and are increasingly affected by a cool seasonal wind called the Surazo, which is becoming more and more unpredictable.



Above: Don Patrocinio's land is outlined in red. Much of his neighbour's land has been cleared for pasture.



Above: Cacao bushes inter-planted with palo roman for shade and shelter from wind

Don Patrocinio's technical adviser recommended planting palo roman alongside his cacao bushes to provide shade and also shelter from the Surazo. Since then both the quality and the yield of his cacao have increased.

Like many older farmers, who join ArBolivia, his children do not live with him and he cannot afford to pay for additional labour, so trees provide a low maintenance option for him.



Although the money paid by ArBolivia for maintenance is only modest the work is much less physically demanding than crops like coffee and cacao and it doesn't need doing every day so Don Patrocinio can choose to do it when it is cooler or he has some spare time. ArBolivia has provided specialist equipment and training to make the higher pruning work easier. Some of his trees are already ready for thinning and he expects to receive his first share of revenues later this year.

Left: regular pruning is important to prevent knots in the timber. Unfortunately this tree is too crooked to be cut and used as a pole but it may straighten as it matures. Patrocinio's technical adviser will advise whether this tree should be felled now to give stronger, healthier trees access to more light and nutrients or to leave it to grow for lumber.



Above: Don Patrocinio's field agent recommended thinning his banana plantation to increase the size of fruits and then planting tejeyeque trees in the gaps. The banana plants are getting old now and will need to be cut down in a few years. It would take three years before new plants bear fruit but by then the tejeyeque trees will be well established and ready for thinning. Standing trees provide an excellent insurance policy for years when farm income drops.



Above: ArBolivia's head of forestry in Rurrenabaque. Moises Andres, takes a photo for quality control. The diameter is measured at "breast height" (dbh), a standard 1.3m above the ground and recorded in the ArBolivia database. Using our new small sawmills this tree is almost good enough for lumber.

Don Patrocinio now has a range of trees: First of all he chose teak because the local farmers had heard that this is a good commercial species. However, he was also persuaded to grow palo roman because of the contribution it can make to his coffee and cacao crops. He has since planted some tejeyeque, which is a leguminous species that can provide some extra nutrients for his ageing banana plants. With his absent children in mind he is also growing some almendrillo, a slower growing hardwood species, which will take about 35 – 40 years to mature.

As part of his overall land use plan he has created a small conservation area, which is planted with mara, native mahogany. ArBolivia had hoped to include this as one of its timber species but sadly the young saplings are too susceptible to a species of moth, which lays its eggs in the growing tip so it is now deemed too risky to grow mara commercially.

As well as providing some cacao plants, ArBolivia has also provided Don Patrocinio with some citrus fruits to compensate for his loss of short term revenues from the land he has agreed to set aside for trees. The plan is that they will be ready to replace his banana plants when they are cut down in a year or so. Citrus fruits do not offer as high an income as his coffee or cacao but they will be easier for him to look after as he gets older and offer an alternative and more dependable source of income.

Finally, now that Don Patrocinio has shown that he is trustworthy and a capable forester he is now able to get a small loan from our partners IDEPRO, based on the value of his trees and the income expected. It is clear that not all the benefits of ArBolivia are so long term.