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PETROGLYPH RESEARCH EXPEDITION: DARIEN, PANAMA
March 1 - 15
EXPLORERS CLUB FLAG # 51 REPORT

EXPEDITION MEMBERS

Daniel Castaneda  Expedition Leader / Sociologist - Embera Indian, Panama
Robert Edgar Hyman  Expedition Leader / Photographer - Washington, D.C. USA
Carlos Fitzgerald  Archeologist / Expedition Co-Leader - Panama City, Panama
Bernardo Solis  Chief Guide / Embera Indian - Jingurudo, Panama
David “Oso” Berrugate  Porter / Cook - Embera Indian - Puerto Indio, Panama
Eukirio Chami  Porter - Embera Indian - Bayamon, Panama
Pedro Rosales  Boatman / Porter - Embera Indian - Jingurudo, Panama
Ascanio Ruiz  Porter - Embera Indian - Jingurudo, Panama
Mario Flaco  Porter - Embera Indian - Jingurudo, Panama
Introduction

The Petroglyph Research Expedition: Darien, Panama 2005 was planned and led by Daniel Castaneda and Robert E. Hyman to locate and scientifically record petroglyph locations in the Darien province of Panama. This large lowland of tropical rain forest in Panama, known simply as “The Darien,” remains largely unexplored. Indigenous to this area are the Embera Indians, who practice a traditional lifestyle of subsistence horticulture augmented by fishing, hunting and gathering from the old-growth rain forest.

To date, Castaneda and Hyman are the only persons known to have documented the first four petroglyph sites found in Eastern Panama’s entire Darien province. Their successful 1994 Sambu Archeological Research Expedition located and documented the first two sites.

It must be stated up front that some of these petroglyph sites were known to a few of the Embera Indians and then shown to Castaneda and Hyman. Some of the petroglyphs have been visited by others, but the team was unaware of any official scientific documentation or recordation of these remarkable pre-Columbian rock carvings. On this most recent trip, the expedition was fortunate to have Panamanian archeologist Prof. Carlos Fitzgerald, the former national director of the National Heritage Office of the National Institute of Culture (INAC).
Background

This was Castaneda’s and Hyman’s third major expedition to Panama’s Darien province and Hyman’s sixth time to Panama since his 1993 crossing of the Darien Gap.

On March 4, 2005, Castaneda, Fitzgerald and Hyman carried Explorers Club Flag # 51 and traveled by small plane from Panama City to a landing strip in the Darien village of Sambu/Puerto Indio, where the team stayed one night to arrange for required permission, help and supplies for the expedition. The team then traveled four hours by boat up the Sambu River to the Embera Indian village of Jingurudo and spent the night. From Jingurudo, the nine members of the expedition, ranging in age from 20 to 55, walked for two days from the Sambu River watershed over a ridge into the Balsas River watershed. It should be noted that current available maps of this region have been found to be incomplete and/or incorrect. There was a discrepancy between the expedition maps and the names of the rivers that the team visited. The expedition team explored on what was universally called the Sabalo River, although maps indicated it was the Tucuti River. Over the course of 10 days and approximately 48 kilometers of hiking, the team encountered only peoples of Panamanian nationality – mostly Embera Indians.

The entire two-week expedition was funded by Hyman. Everyone received payment. The complete expedition budget was approximately $5,000, with all itemized expenses recorded in the expedition journal written by Hyman.
Goal

The goal of the expedition was simple. With the help of indigenous Embera Indians, the team would try and locate a petroglyph site that, as told by Hyman’s mentor, Bill Harp, existed somewhere on the upper part of the Sabalo River near the confluence with the Chati River. Harp had seen the petroglyph with his friend Rick Weber in 1984 while visiting the area. If the site was located, the team intended to use a Magellan Sportrak Map/ Sportrak Pro global positioning system (GPS) to record the exact location in longitude/latitude and universal transverse mercator (UTM) coordinates, take precise measurements with a surveyor’s tape, do tracings of the rock carvings on clear plastic and record all of the work with digital, still and video photography.

The team hoped to do all of this safely over ten days with no injuries, snake bites or contact with Colombian guerrillas (FARC) who travel across the uncontrolled jungle border between the two countries. In addition, a report of the group’s findings was to be submitted to the proper Panamanian authorities and various journals for publication.

Documentation of the site

On the afternoon of Monday, March 7, after two days of hiking from the village of Jingrudo, the team arrived at its advance base camp on the Sabalo River. The camp was comprised of a cleared space in the forest with three small, thatched roof stilted huts. The huts were built and are currently maintained by the Embera Indians. The main purpose of this base camp is for the Indians to use while panning for gold in the stream bed, hunting for wild game and fishing. The camp had a small covered cooking space. The camp also had numerous poles and lines to dry clothes and gear. The camp had been agriculturally cultivated by previous visitors to the huts. The team recorded that pepper plants and stalks of corn were growing nearby.

In September 1985, an Embera Indian named Chino showed Hyman’s mentor, Bill Harp, and his friend Rick Weber the petroglyph site that the March 2005 Darien team was in search of. The Expedition’s Chief Guide, Solis, told the team that Chino, his brother-in-law, lived two hours away in the village of Tucuti and could be extremely helpful to the expedition in re-locating the site. Solis offered to hike there and find him in order to get precise information on how to locate the petroglyph.

On the morning of Tuesday, March 8, 2005, Solis returned to the base camp with food supplies and reported that he had located Chino and got the information the team was seeking on the whereabouts of the petroglyph site. The team members discussed and agreed that an advance party should be sent to find the site. Solis, Castaneda, Chami and Rosales were the chosen team members to scout out the petroglyph site. Flaco remained at base camp to guard equipment and food. Hyman, Fitzgerald and Berrugate hiked down stream to explore the rain forest and stream area from the Sabalo River base camp. Ruiz went fishing to provide dinner for the team. Down stream vegetation appeared to have been planted by a previous agricultural settlement.
At 5:15 p.m. the group members who had explored upstream -- Solis, Castaneda, Chami and Rosales -- returned with great news. They had re-located not only the one known site that Chino had told Solis about, but they had discovered another petroglyph site. The second site was located 300 meters directly downstream from the known site in the middle of the Sabalo River.

On Wednesday, March 9, the entire team departed at 7 a.m. for the 3-hour hike up the Sabalo River, with the exception of Flaco, who stayed behind to guard the camp. The team traveled light, and took enough supplies for only one day. The expedition returned to base camp by nightfall. On the hike, the team encountered remnants of a last-century mining operations owned and operated by a company named H.A. Robbins. The H.A. Robbins Company had hired a geologist named Tyler Kettridge to survey the area. It is believed by some that Kettridge most likely knew of the petroglyph sites as well. To date the team has not researched the existence of any field notes that Kettridge may have kept. The team also encountered local inhabitants of the rain forest panning for gold, as well as small encampments of indigenous Indians and blacks farming bananas, plantains, pigs, ducks and chickens.

At 10 a.m. the team arrived at the first petroglyph site, 300 meters directly downstream from the known site in the middle of the Sabalo River. It was a rounded, fairly smooth, boulder approximately 7 feet tall from the river bed and had designs of spirals facing up river or west (see photo #1). The river width south to north at this point measured 20 meters with the river flowing from west to east. The global positioning coordinates were 07 degrees 50.884N by 077 degrees 57.508 W (latitude/longitude) and 18 172667E by 0875087N UTM. The team took digital, video and still images, tracings on clear plastic, drawings and measurements over a two-hour period.
The team continued upstream for approximately 300 meters carrying the necessary make-shift scaffolding to the known petroglyph site. The team was able to positively identify this second petroglyph site as the one visited in September 1985 by Harp and Weber, who provided the description and photos to the expedition leader Hyman. This second petroglyph site was much more complex, with many varying carvings visible (see photo #2). The team followed the same procedures, taking measurements, photos and drawings. The river's width at this site was 30.90 meters and the GPS coordinates were 07 degrees 50.868N by 077 degrees 57.569W (latitude/longitude) and 18 173613E by 0868619 UTM.

Another geographical feature at this location was a small stream entering the Sabalo from the North that was referred to as the Rio Uno or Uno River. The team believes that further exploration of the Uno River could possibly yield more petroglyphs and clues to the people who carved them. After spending two hours scientifically documenting this second site, the team consumed the prepared lunch that had been brought with them and then departed for the return trip back to the advance base camp. The team explored for additional sites as they hiked back to base camp, but no other sites were found.
Accomplishments

The expedition team located two petroglyph sites on the upper drainage of the Sabalo River approximately 300 meters apart. Using a surveyor’s tape, members of the expedition measured the river’s width at each petroglyph site, noting the distance from each side of the rock to the shore and compass headings. Scaffolding was constructed to stand on so that tracings could be made. The tracings were made using sturdy, clear plastic sheeting and black indelible markers so that the rock would not be adversely affected. Carefully keeping the plastic in place and using fingers to feel the grooves, archeologist Fitzgerald worked with the team tracing the ancient carvings onto the plastic so that it could be rolled up and taken for further analysis. Field notes also include hand drawings and other notations, such as conditions and descriptions. In addition, the team’s advance base camp on the Sabalo River indicated the presence of a ceramic-period site with pre-Columbian and historical ceramic and lithic fragments. A surface collection was done, and one shard was identified as a Colonial Era olive jar by Fitzgerald.
Medical Concerns

While no members of the expedition had any serious problems, all experienced insect bites, rashes, minor lacerations and topical infections. Berrugate suffered a scalp laceration after he hit his head on a hut roof support while moving quickly to rescue food from swarming ants. Fitzgerald was bitten on his big toe by a large toxic ant that was collected as a specimen. Flaco suffered a hand laceration when he fell on the return trek.

Acknowledgements

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