

STORIES FROM THE HEART OF COLOMBIA

Amazonas

Stories from the Heart of Colombia
A podcast by Procolombia

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Hello, and welcome to Stories from the Heart of Colombia, a podcast by Procolombia.

I'm Nick Perkins and I've been living in Colombia since 1999.

I love cycling, hiking and traveling to unusual places. For a long time, I'd been dreaming of visiting every Department in Colombia on one round trip, but I hadn't been able to do it until this year, when I was finally able to plan the trip of my dreams. A trip that would take me to each of Colombia's 32 Departments, plus its capital, Bogotá, to spend a day or two, exploring the magical geographies, witnessing their immense biodiversity and soaking up the majestic vistas, all while enveloping myself in the warmth of their peoples.

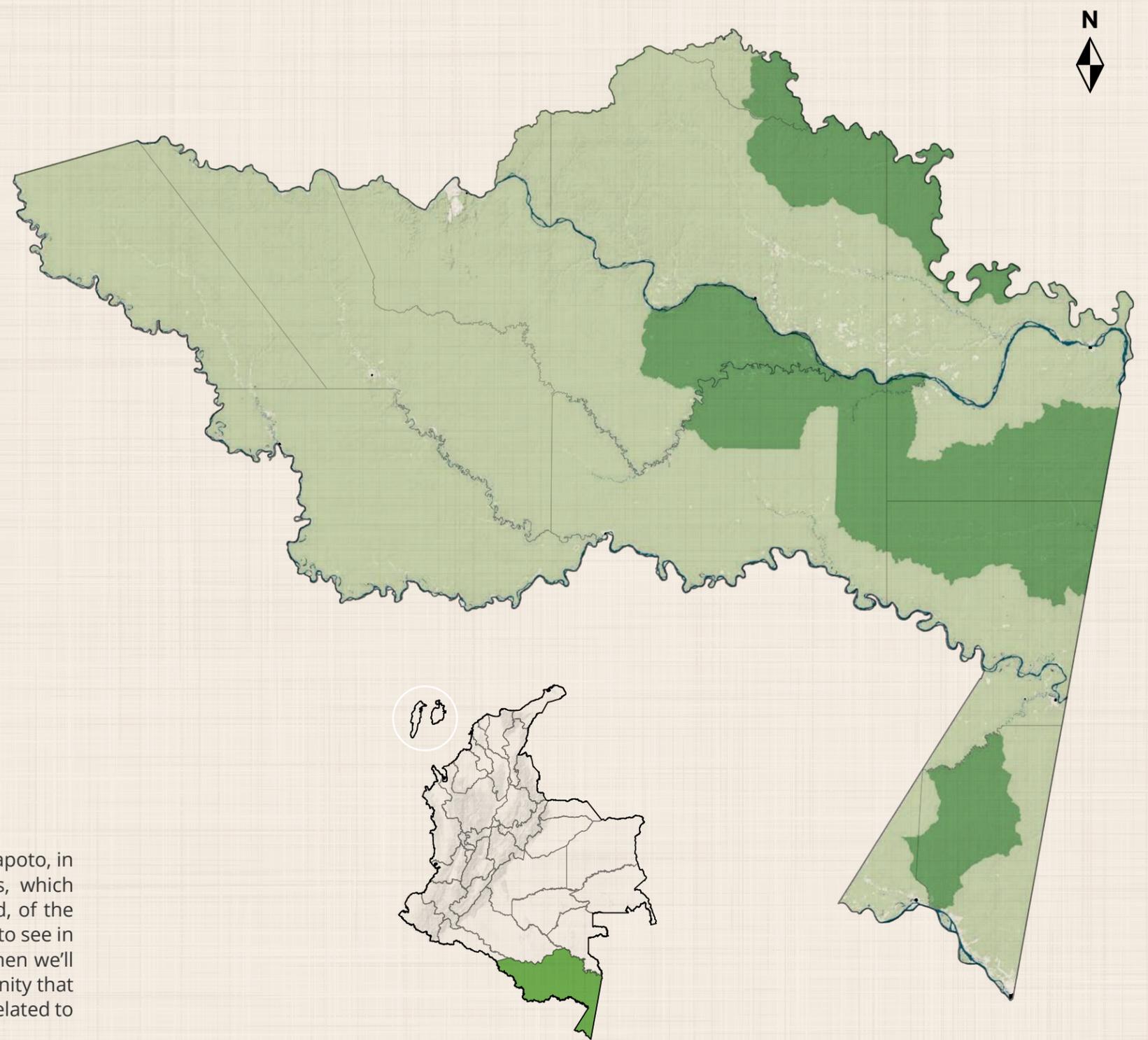
In each episode of the podcast, I explore emblematic places in one Department. On my journey, I learn about the customs and cultures of the people I meet, and I record a travel diary of their experiences, stories and legends. The diary becomes an intimate and very personal record of the flavors, colors and sounds I discover in this land of infinite horizons.

Colombia has something for everyone.

Join me on this unprecedented, sonic journey around one of the most diverse and fascinating countries on earth.

I'm Nick Perkins, and this is Stories from the Heart of Colombia.

Amazonas



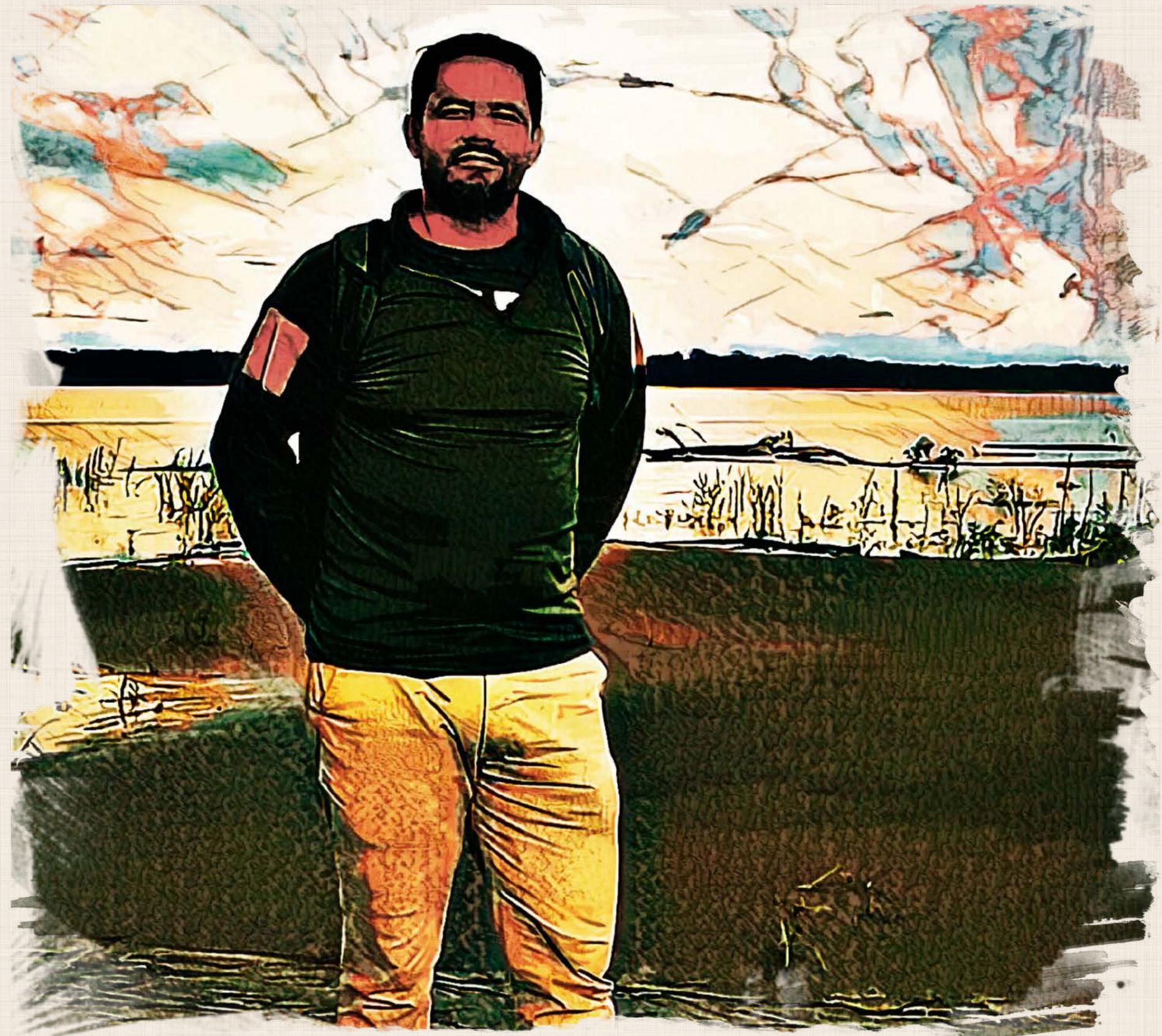
Today I'm heading off up to the far-flung department of Amazonas down in Southeastern Colombia, flying into the town of Leticia. Which is a very interesting place. It's a three-way border between Colombia, Peru and Brazil, you can literally walk across the border into Brazil and you just cross the river a few hundred meters to get to Peru. So you can have breakfast in Colombia, lunch in Peru, dinner in Brazil without ever leaving the ground. It's the point at which the mighty Amazon river flows along the Colombian border for a few hundred kilometers between Colombia and Peru, before heading off into Brazil to continue its journey. And tomorrow, I'll be meeting my guide, Sergio. We're heading

off up the Amazon towards Lake Tarapoto, in search of Amazonian pink dolphins, which are in fact the cousins, I've been told, of the dolphins that I've been lucky enough to see in the Inírida and Guainía rivers. And then we'll be visiting a local indigenous community that is working on an interesting project related to conservation. Looking forward to it.

So I find myself on the banks of the river Amazon, in front of Santa Rosa island, which belongs to Peru. I'm standing on Colombian soil. And if I look over to my left, I can see the end of the Brazilian city of Tabatinga, which is basically... it's just, it's one urban area, which is Leticia, in Colombia, and Tabatinga, Brazil, and you wander between the two of them. It's an interesting point to stand. It's a three-way river frontier where we're standing now. And I'm with my guide, today, Sergio León.

Sergio's gonna take us to Lago Tarapoto, which is up river, on the Amazon. We'll be going up the Amazon, which is the frontier between Colombia and Peru. We'll have Peru on our left as we go up river and Colombia on our right. And we're going to go up to a place called Puerto Nariño, which I believe Sergio lived in for a while. And once we get to Puerto Nariño, we'll be going up to the lakes.

So Sergio was just telling me that there's 116 kms of river border between Colombia and Peru... We'll be going along a good section of Tarapoto, 80 kilometers or so, it's where we're going. And the reason that he chose Tarapoto lake is because of its unique place in the local ecosystem. It's recently been designated a Ramsar wetland, and it gives local people a huge source of income through tourism, thanks to the conservation efforts of the local area. So, let's go! "Vámonos!"



We've spent about an hour and a half coming up river. Sergio, Carlos, our boatman and me. On the way we caught a glimpse of some grey and pink dolphins. But then, as soon as we slowed down and tried to persuade them to come a bit closer, they got shy and disappeared, just past the coast in these waters. And we've just come to a small settlement code Mocagua, which Sergio tells me is a community that's been working on sustainable tourism. And I'm gonna talk to some people in the community, find a little bit more about what's been going on here and why they believe it's important for the local tourism offer.





John was just telling me a little bit about this project. So it was 17 years ago, that the project started, and it was all part of a gathering or a growing knowledge amongst the community that it was really important that they began to protect and preserve their local environment. The community was growing, tourism was growing, and one of the things that John was particularly interested in was rescuing monkeys, which had been removed from the forest, illegally removed from the forest, and especially the fact that when they are removed from the forest, usually what happens is that a mother will be found with her calves... the mother will be killed and the baby monkeys will be taken away in cages and sold to collectors or whoever else. And this particularly affected John and it began to affect other people in the community as well. And this led to what they now have, which is the Macuchica project, which basically rescues and also receives rescued monkeys, rehabilitates them and releases them.

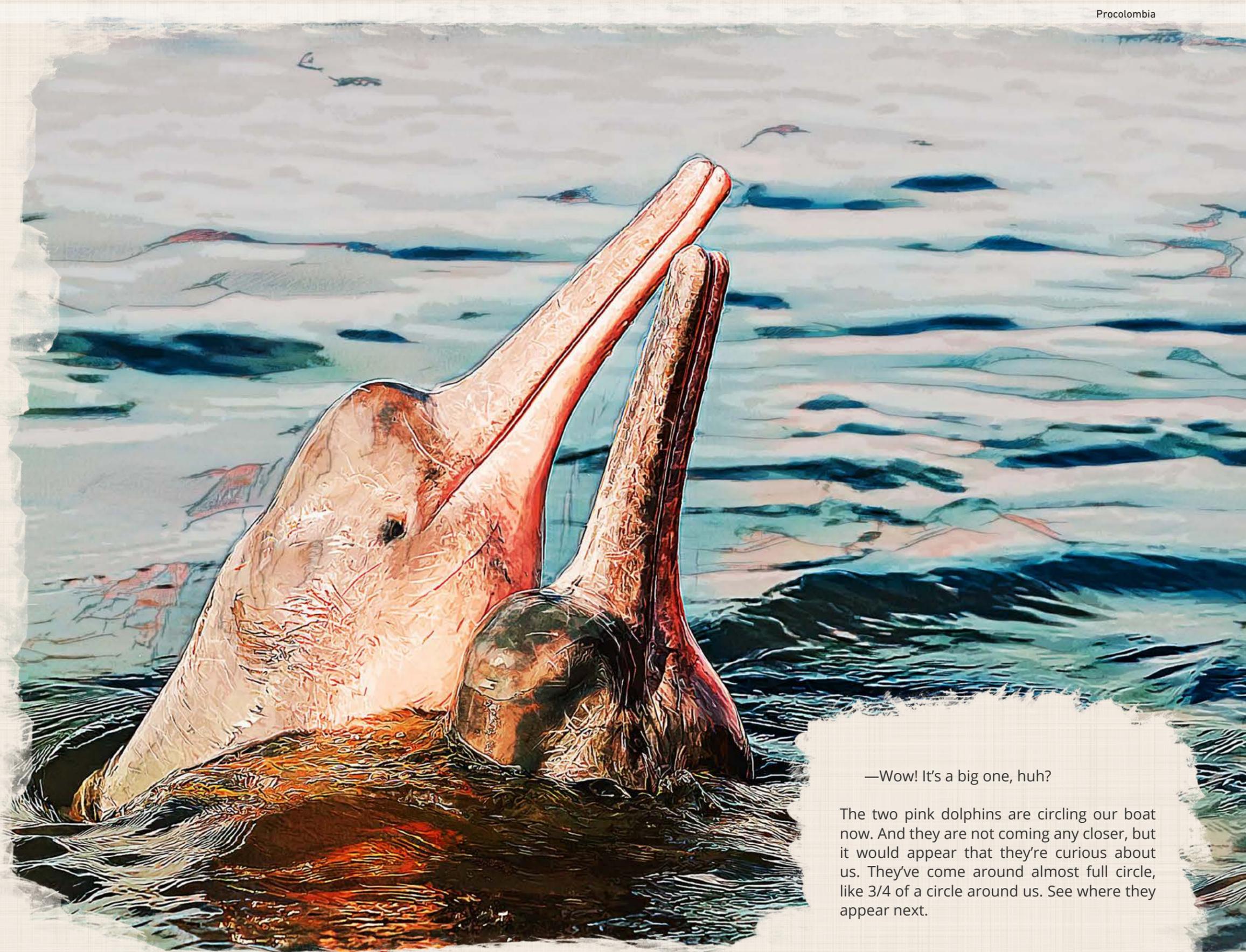
So I asked John to tell me a story that he found particularly moving, particularly emotional, on a personal level about a rescue. And so he told me a story about a sloth, which I thought was fantastic. He said, "the sloth was brought here." And he said, "you've got to understand that when the animals come here, they're usually absolutely terrified of human beings." They've been badly treated by humans in the place where they were rescued from, in almost all cases. So the sloth arrived, and typically terrified of human beings. It was here for a good while, as it recovered. And then when it was time to release the sloth, they released it, it stayed fairly close to the house for a while and then he said it at some point, it just disappeared. So he realized that the time was right for it to go and seek its own fortune, as it were. And he said it was months later, months and months later. Early one morning, he heard the cry of a sloth and he said, "now, I recognize that cry." That's Moe. And Moe means sloth, in the Tikuna language. So he goes outside and sure enough it is Moe, and he was really worried, so he said, "what's happened to him?" And he said, the only thing was, it was... it was wintertime. And Moe was wet and cold and hungry. And so he knew where to come to get some TLC, get some food, and a bit of love. So John said he picked him up and obviously Moe lets him pick him up. So he picks him up, takes him upstairs to where he'd been kept as a rescue sloth and he was giving you a hug and then Moe showed him the sign that he was hungry and they had some food. And then off he went again. And the point of the story to John is the fact that what he's also doing is, he's helping animals understand that humans aren't all bad.



And I asked Sergio, who was standing next to us, why he chose of all the different community projects, the different activities that we could have done in the morning of tourism on the river Amazon from Leticia, why this one? And he said, “basically, it is because this is a shining example of conservation,” in the sense that people have realized that animals are worth far more in their natural environments than they are dead or in a cage. I think that’s... that’s as good a reason as any to come here and I completely agree with him.

So Sergio and I find ourselves with Carlos, a boat driver, right in the middle of the Amazon. We just stopped for a moment, just near the Mocagua Island. We’re waiting to see if any dolphins appear up and Carlos just said there’s a pink dolphin he just saw. So we just turned off the engine. We’re just letting the river push us wherever the river wants to push us, which is drifting now. So we don’t disturb the dolphins at all. And just listen. I’m just going to record the sounds.

And they’re coming. It worked. As Carlos just said, “look, there’s a pink one.” And there’s two pink dolphins. The first one’s about seven or eight meters away from the boat, and let’s hope the fact that I turn off the engine means they’re going to get curious.



—Wow! It’s a big one, huh?

The two pink dolphins are circling our boat now. And they are not coming any closer, but it would appear that they’re curious about us. They’ve come around almost full circle, like 3/4 of a circle around us. See where they appear next.



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