



## NOW SHOWING: PERUVIAN COMMUNITY GETS A FACELIFT

It's movie time in the remote Peruvian community of San Francisco de Yarinacocha. Admission fee: one two-litre PET bottle filled with plastic garbage collected in the streets, parks and waterways! Organized by the *Non Nibopotati*<sup>1</sup> project of the Peruvian Association for Children and their Environment (ANIA) a Clean Up the World member, the film screening is just one innovative idea to encourage people to clean up in and around the town, and promote sustainable living.

San Francisco de Yarinacocha is a popular destination in the Peruvian Amazon. Throughout the year, tourists flock here to experience the town's rustic charm, learn about the indigenous Shipibo heritage, and admire the natural beauty of the nearby Yarinacocha Lake formed by the headwaters of the mighty Amazon River.

But even if San Francisco de Yarinacocha is a picture-postcard village, it is certainly not a poster child for sustainability. "When we put in the electricity, we had to cut down many big trees," says local resident Alberto. "Now there is not a single tree that was here when the community was founded in 1914."

Still largely a traditional community where a flush toilet is both a rarity and status symbol, San Francisco de Yarinacocha is rapidly adopting a western lifestyle and associated waste problems. While community residents currently produce relatively small amounts of waste – 2.87 kilograms of garbage per person per week on average, less than what a New Yorker bins in just one day – entrenched habits and attitudes of dumping waste without thinking of the consequences are not easily swayed.

"It is especially worrisome since until very recently all waste has been organic but now the waste composition is changing. To date, only two percent of the community's waste is made up by non-organics, but this seemingly small percentage

takes up a lot of space," says Brian Robert Best who leads the *Non Nibopotati* community clean-up project.

As a first step after joining Clean Up the World, a global campaign that inspires communities to clean up, fix up and improve their environment, Best and his supporters decided to clean the streets, the forest and the lake of plastic and glass bottles, tin cans, used batteries and other dangerous products of modern civilization that had been carelessly discarded.



*The 'Non Nibopotati' project works with young and old to promote sustainable living in San Francisco de Yarinacocha, Peru.*

The Yarinacocha Lake, in particular, has been used as a dump site by all, from local boatmen to the industries upstream, which added heavy metals and toxins to the usual garbage and occasional oil-spill cocktail. The Lake has become so polluted that the locals were advised against eating lake fish, their main source of protein.



*A novelty in town: a shed where non- and biodegradable rubbish is separated.*

The *Non Nibopotati* project made a significant effort to involve local residents in the clean-up campaign. For the upcoming Clean Up the World weekend on 16-18 September, the project leaders plan to mobilize the entire community of San Francisco de Yarinacocha, some 1300 people, to give their town, forest and lake an annual facelift in support of this year's Clean Up the World theme "Green Cities, Green Communities".

"We tried to create a sense of shared responsibility for the community waste, so that the residents are not just cleaning up because some 'gringo' thought it was a good idea," explains Best.

Over the past two years, community volunteers have installed garbage bins around the town and in the local port, with separate bins for non- and biodegradable waste. One-tenth of the 300 San Francisco de Yarinacocha households are now separating garbage at home.



Before and after: last year's clean up site in San Francisco de Yarinacocha.



The main challenge now is finding affordable and locally adaptable recycling schemes, but the town hopes that its new, clean look will further boost tourism, a major source of revenue for the community.

Another major problem in San Francisco de Yarinacocha is sanitation, which is often basic and sometimes non-existent. The *Non Nibopotati* project has introduced the concept of *eko-kini*, or composting sanitation systems, which produce organic fertilizer for reforestation and farming activities through anaerobic decomposition.

The first *eko-kini* was "inaugurated" in March 2004, and project leaders expect that the community will soon be recycling as much as 3600 kilograms of biodegradable waste a week to produce much-needed fertilizer.

"Large areas of the jungle had been burnt down to make room for farmland, but what we are left with now is sun-scorched earth that Yields a year or two of decent crops before it becomes infertile from lack of nutrients," Best explains.

Better harvests thanks to the use of fertilizer together with offerings of coconut saplings to households have been the key "selling points" of the initiative, and many residents value its role in improving nutrition in a community where malnutrition is rampant.

A study conducted last year by ANIA found that 80% of the children in San Francisco de Yarinacocha were malnourished. "Everyone in the community is 'coo-coo for cocos', and the addition of coconut to their diet helped create a positive attitude towards the project," says Best.



*Non Nibopotati* leader B. Robert Best hopes that the project will make a difference for his and other communities.

There are already three *eko-kini* in San Francisco de Yarinacocha, which together with public toilets – latrines made from recycled plastic bottles, will ensure that human excrement is being disposed of in a hygienic and environmentally-friendly way. And, as Best puts it: "More excrement in the latrine means less excrement in the lake."

The project's next steps will be to address grey water<sup>1</sup> treatment in the community, an issue of great concern since untreated effluent contributes to lake pollution.

Thinking ahead, B. Robert Best hopes that the *Non Nibopotati* project will make a difference for the people of San Francisco de Yarinacocha and, by telling their story, will also help other communities around the lake and around the world.

"Clean Up the World gives us an international voice to spread the bold message of a cleaner and better world...and tells us that we're not alone in this struggle," he says.

"Cleaning up the world is like fighting cancer – one has to start at the source. Some say that the future cure for cancer may possibly come from the Amazonian rainforest, so perhaps the garbage cure can come from the rainforest, too!"

*Xenya Cherny is a freelance journalist living and working in Sydney, Australia. This article is available for reproduction free of charge as long as due acknowledgment is given to Clean Up the World Pty Ltd and the author, and the meaning of the article is not changed. For more information on Clean Up the World visit [www.cleanuptheworld.org](http://www.cleanuptheworld.org)*

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<sup>1</sup> *Non Nibopotati* means 'Our Waste' in the language of the indigenous Shipibo people who live in the area.

<sup>2</sup> used water other than sewerage