



Cultivating a Future in Manu: Conservation Born Out of Collaboration

Country: Peru

Program: Accelerating Women's Empowerment (AWE)

Partner: Crees Foundation for Manu & Crees Manu

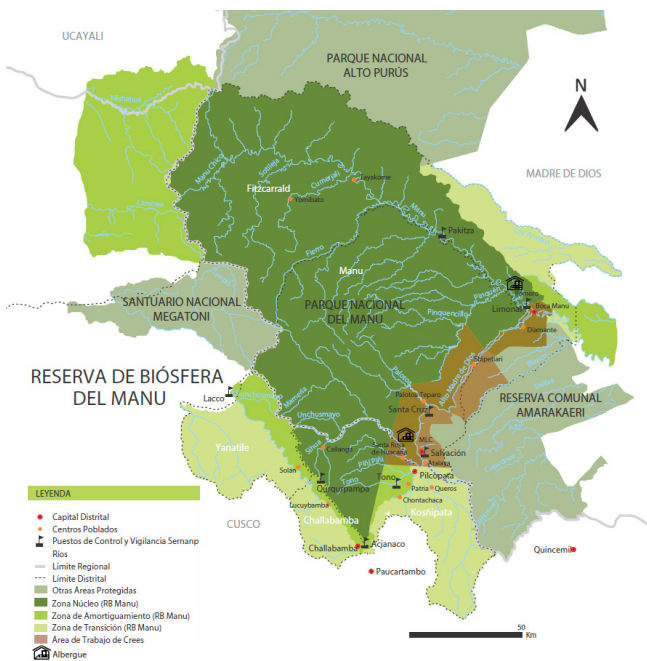
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Roots in the Rainforest: Crees and the Path to Collaboration

In Peru, Crees Foundation for Manu & Crees Manu (Crees) work in tandem with a shared mission: to protect the Manu Biosphere Reserve, known as one of the world's largest and most biodiverse rainforests. This extraordinary area is characterized by its winding rivers and dense canopies, which serve as habitat for a wide variety of species, including jaguars and macaws.



Map of the Manu Biosphere Reserve in Peru.

Both initiatives were founded in 2003 and fulfill distinct yet interconnected roles. On one hand, Crees Manu is the sustainable tourism operator offering experiences in the heart of the Manu rainforest. Through educational programs, research internships, and purpose-driven trips, it allows participants to explore the rich nature and culture of the Peruvian Amazon while generating the necessary resources to support conservation. On the other hand, the Crees Foundation for Manu is a non-profit organization that conducts long-term scientific research and works directly with local communities.

For the organization, conservation goes beyond the preservation of wildlife; it includes close collaboration with the communities of Salvación, Atalaya, and Shintuya, where local economies are closely tied to the forest. Through research, education, and community programs, Crees integrates environmental management with the promotion of sustainable livelihoods, placing special emphasis on women's leadership and youth participation.

Recognizing the need to strengthen strategic areas, Crees partnered with Catalyste+ in 2019. Both organizations began this collaboration based on professional connections and a shared vision of conservation and community development. Juan Carlos Cárdenas, Crees's Executive Director, fondly recalls his meeting with a Catalyste+ Advisor in Manu, who helped initiate the relationship.

Today, the partnership between Catalyste+ and Crees is a core element of the organization's development strategy, integrating Canadian expertise to strengthen operations, deepen community impact, and create opportunities for women and youth to lead conservation efforts in Manu.



The Crees team participating in an activity in Salvación.

Communicating Conservation Beyond Manu

Through its partnership with Catalyste+, Crees received guidance from Advisors M.J. Plebon, Ugo Monticone, Lorne Daniel, and Edward Allen to strengthen its marketing and communication strategies. This guidance led to the implementation of essential digital marketing tools, including an updated website, targeted landing pages, and synchronized social media campaigns. This support particularly empowered female staff and department heads to refine their communication with English-speaking audiences, improve marketing plans, and effectively showcase the unique value of the organization's educational and tourism initiatives. In this way, Crees distinguishes itself from typical travel agencies by actively promoting sustainable conservation within the Manu Biosphere Reserve.

Five female staff members led the implementation of these strategies, drafted program messages, designed newsletters, managed social media content, and engaged directly with the target audience. By incorporating the Advisors' suggestions, the team refined its marketing campaigns, identified key demographics, prioritized relevant communication channels, and adopted customer-centric communication strategies. The foundation also revamped its website to turn it into a hub for sales and outreach, offering clear and useful information to visitors and partners. These improvements increased the organization's visibility and led to a 20% increase in sales of sustainable tourism experiences and educational programs, generating additional resources to expand community initiatives, strengthen operations, and invest more in conservation projects. The women on the marketing team also gained confidence, strengthened their communication skills, and took on greater leadership roles in the department's

decision-making, demonstrating that technical support also fosters internal capacity building and empowerment.

As Juan Carlos reflects: "Working with Catalyste+ has helped us align with international standards; we better understand expectations regarding financing, accountability, and marketing, and we have learned to communicate our work clearly, which has made our campaigns much more effective."

The work with Catalyste+ brought Crees both national and international recognition. This includes Peru's Antonio Brack Egg National Award (2022), one of the country's highest honours in environmental conservation, as well as the Nature Positive Awards (2024) from the Latin



A biologist and junior field collaborator with the Crees Foundation teaches a class on Amazonian plants to volunteers at the Manu Learning Centre.

American Travel Association (LATA) and recognition from the International Centre for Responsible Tourism (ICRT) in the United Kingdom. These distinctions highlight global leadership in biodiversity protection and responsible tourism. Collectively, they have strengthened the organization's reputation across the conservation and sustainable tourism sectors, reinforcing its credibility, influence, and the recognized expertise of its dedicated staff.

Building on this progress, Crees strengthened its fundraising and organizational capacity with the support of Catalyste+ Advisors Teresa Pratt and Frits Pannekoek. Through targeted crowdfunding initiatives and a long-term fundraising strategy, the foundation raised over \$3,500 through multiple channels, including \$2,287 from a GoFundMe campaign. A significant portion of these funds went directly toward creating organic community gardens for 17 families in Salvación, Atalaya, and Shintuya, supporting

improved food security at the household level, as well as the Biological Station's Conservation Fellowship Program.

Beyond program funding, the initiative strengthened the organization's structure and long-term sustainability. The team defined the roles more clearly and created a fundraising manager position. It also established new marketing and coordination departments to improve internal communication and operational planning. Organizational growth included the hiring of two female biologists, which bolstered environmental sustainability programs. Together, these improvements increased Crees' capacity to secure funding, expand community programs, and establish strategic partnerships with institutions such as the Municipality of Villa Salvación and the Universidad Andina de Cusco. These collaborations now support research initiatives, further linking local community action with broader scientific research and long-term conservation goals.

Turning Knowledge into Action

For more than 20 years, Crees has documented the region's rich biodiversity through scientific research and field monitoring, generating a valuable database on species, ecosystems, and ecological patterns that underpin its conservation work. With support from Catalyste+, the organization strengthened the management, use, and dissemination of this information, building bridges between science and community engagement, and ensuring that this data guides both its conservation strategies and local management.

One of the main achievements was the consolidation of biodiversity monitoring data into a single, accessible database. With the guidance of David Hildebrand, Crees improved internal access to information, established quality standards, and optimized management practices to avoid

duplication and ensure reproducibility. The Advisor and Crees worked to align the database with regional, national, and international academic standards, increasing its utility for research, decision-making, and reporting. As part of this process, they also trained 80% of the field staff responsible for data collection (11 women and three men), significantly strengthening their technical capacity and methodological consistency.

Subsequently, with the support of Gillian Watkins and André Tremblay, the organization strengthened its capacities in scientific writing, biodiversity conservation, and participatory methodologies, consolidating a more comprehensive approach.

In this context, Crees developed the field guide *The Biodiversity of the Machuwasi*

Wetland, in close collaboration with the municipality and the community of Salvación in Manu, and in partnership with the Universidad Andina de Cusco for its second edition. This process incorporated the lessons learned from Catalyste+, strengthening institutional capacities. The guide combines species identification with an understanding of ecosystems and their natural and cultural context, and integrates principles of conservation, environmental education, and responsible ecotourism. As a practical tool for community use, the guide equips local residents with the knowledge and skills to identify key species, interpret ecological relationships, and confidently lead guided tours. In doing so, it enriches the visitor experience while strengthening local capacity and pride in conservation.



A forestry engineer and field staff member at the Crees Foundation, she leads a project to replant palm trees around the Cocha Amalia at the Manu Learning Centre.

At the academic level, these improvements in data and documentation systems strengthened Crees' contribution to the scientific literature. The second edition of the guide, which is internationally indexed, served as the basis for nine scientific articles, including *"Indigenous lands are better for the conservation of amphibian biodiversity than agricultural lands managed by immigrants"* and *"Are we using the most appropriate methodologies to assess the sensitivity of rainforest biodiversity to habitat disturbance?"*. With support from Catalyste+, Crees aligned these publications with international standards, incorporating greater methodological rigour, ethical practices, reproducibility, and peer-review processes. Additionally, it integrated artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted editing and research design processes. As a result, the number of publications accepted by international scientific bodies increased by 40%, raising the organization's profile and scientific credibility.

To complement these advances, Crees strengthened its Conservation Fellowship Program, promoting greater participation by women in active research projects at its biological station. Three fellows were directly integrated into ecosystem studies, receiving mentorship from national and international biologists and environmental engineers. Their participation in data collection and publication processes allowed them to apply improved methodologies, develop technical skills, and build their confidence as emerging professionals. This approach ultimately enabled local women to actively participate in knowledge generation and build professional trajectories aligned with international scientific standards.

Building Resilience from the Ground Up

Throughout the years of collaboration, Catalyste+ supported Crees in strengthening its community-based agroforestry and organic vegetable garden programs, which transform abandoned plots into reforested areas while providing trees, technical guidance, and sustainable food production to local families. The model involves the whole family: fathers manage the agroforestry plots, mothers tend the organic gardens for household consumption, and children participate in hands-on environmental education activities.

This collaboration included species selection, plantation design, agroforestry management, and environmentally friendly pest and disease control, and marked a turning point in the evolution of both programs. With guidance from a Catalyste+ Advisor, the program improved cultivation methods, composting systems, and organic garden management practices. As women

adopted these techniques, the bio-gardens became more productive and resilient, yielding higher-quality crops and consistent surpluses. The sale of surplus produce generated new income, which bolstered the women's self-confidence and influence in household decision-making, while also contributing to improved food security for participating families and the wider community. At the same time, the program supported the reforestation of more than 60 hectares, 25 of which are currently under active management.

The impact is visible in households like Doroteo's in Salvación. As Juan Carlos recalls: "Doroteo took the agroforestry project very seriously; he began selling bananas, kept his plot clean, and followed all the technical instructions. His dedication improved his household's economic stability and demonstrated how careful management can transform a family."



A biologist and field collaborator with the Crees Foundation, sharing knowledge about Amazonian plants with volunteers at the Manu Learning Centre. Pictured is a pineapple growing in a bio-garden.

Lasting Change

Catalyste+'s support led to lasting change for the Crees Foundation for Manu & Crees Manu. Rather than isolated improvements, the collaboration strengthened fundamental systems and ways of working: how the organization plans, communicates, documents knowledge, mobilizes resources, and measures impact. These cross-cutting capabilities now guide daily operations and support long-term decision-making, enabling the foundation to respond more strategically to conservation challenges and growth opportunities.

A key outcome has been the integration of evidence-based practices across all programs. Strengthened data management, scientific documentation, and knowledge-sharing processes now inform conservation strategies, community engagement, and external communication. As a result, Crees has enhanced its credibility with academic partners, donors, and public institutions, contributing to sustained international recognition and greater trust among external stakeholders.

As Juan Carlos reflects: "Catalyste+'s support has been a valuable learning tool that strengthened our institutional philosophy and our way of thinking, while consolidating trust in our team and our external partners. On this foundation, the organization's international positioning developed naturally and sustainably."

Women's empowerment emerged as a decisive and transformative outcome across all areas of work. Through the bio-gardens, women strengthened food and health security, generated income, and increased their influence in household and community decision-making. At the organizational level, female staff expanded their professional skills in fundraising, digital communications, research coordination, and scientific writing. Participation in publication processes, database consolidation, and program planning deepened their understanding of international standards, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making. Many women reported greater confidence in presenting their work, participating in strategic discussions, and assuming leadership roles within their departments, reflecting an evolution in their role within the organization: from program implementation to institutional leadership.

Together, Catalyste+ and Crees combined technical guidance with participatory approaches to jointly develop a model that strengthens conservation outcomes while promoting women's economic agency and leadership.



A Path Forward

Looking ahead, Crees seeks to expand opportunities for women and youth while ensuring the long-term sustainability of its programs.

The organization plans to develop educational modules for staff, volunteers, and community members, with the goal of simplifying complex environmental concepts and encouraging active participation in sustainable conservation practices. The revitalized bio-gardens will serve as spaces for hands-on learning about sustainability, nutrition, and income generation, while preserving traditional crops and reinforcing women's central role in household and community development.

The organization also aims to further expand its regional and international visibility by highlighting women-led initiatives, preserving traditional knowledge, and keeping young people engaged in conservation projects. The ongoing collaboration with Catalyste+

will continue to support the joint creation of educational tools and community programs to empower women and protect the environment, ensuring long-term social and ecological impact.

The partnership between Crees and Catalyste+ demonstrates how targeted technical assistance, when grounded in local leadership and community participation, can generate lasting environmental and social impact. By strengthening organizational systems, advancing scientific knowledge, and positioning women as leaders of change, the collaboration has succeeded in building a resilient conservation model based on equity, knowledge-sharing, and sustainability. The skills, confidence, and networks developed through this collaboration position Crees to continue protecting the Manu Biosphere Reserve and Manu National Park, as well as to contribute to building a more inclusive future for conservation in the region.

Online Resources

[Field Guide to the Biodiversity of Lake Machuwasi](#)

[Indigenous lands are better for the conservation of amphibian biodiversity than agricultural lands managed by immigrants](#)

[Are we using the most appropriate methodologies to assess the sensitivity of rainforest biodiversity to habitat disturbance?](#)

[All scientific articles published by the Crees Foundation](#)





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