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'I have to stay in the fight'

In 1994, Kelly Swing picked the site for the Tiputini Biodiversity Station, and he has been working on keeping it alive ever since

By Hamdi Issawi

From the animal skulls on the shelves to the rows of blowguns, spears and professional-quality nature photographs on the walls, Kelly Swing's office looks more like the home of an adventurer than an academic. But one thing that is clear, even to a casual observer, is that Amazonia is never far from his mind.

"I would like to spend more time out there as opposed to this office," he says in his soft North Carolina drawl, as he gestures to the window. "But with administrative duties, things change."

Hanging from the ceiling above his head, the skeleton of a caiman seems to share the sentiment, as it stares off in the same direction.

With his white sneakers, faded jeans, chevron moustache and rotating collection of caps, Swing, looks fit, athletic and much younger than his 60 years. His blue eyes, however, while kind and curious, appear heavy at times, perhaps betraying the concern of a man who has seen more than his share of life and loss.

As a professor of tropical ecology at the Universidad San Francisco de Quito, in the Ecuadorean capital, and an adjunct professor for Boston University, Swing is director of a program that allows international students to travel and study all over Ecuador. He takes them from snow-capped volcanoes high in the Andes to the seacoast, to the Amazon basin in the country's

Amazonas Oriente region, where he is director of the university's Tiputini Biodiversity Station, which he founded two decades ago.

"Every semester, I'm *obligated* to travel to the coast," he says with a smile. "And to the mountains. And to the rainforest. And to the Galapagos.

"We basically roam around the entire country and see the best that nature has to offer. It's a great excuse for me to essentially express something that I might describe as some version of attention deficit disorder, because I'm kind of interested in everything in nature."

These environments are a far cry from the U.S. South, where Swing grew up, but Ecuador has become his "natural habitat."

As a marine biology student at the University of North Carolina in the late 1970s, Swing got his first taste of wild South America during an undergraduate summer course in Bolivia. After that, he says, there was no turning back. He returned to study freshwater fish throughout the '80s, first in Bolivia for his master's degree, and then in Costa Rica for a doctorate in zoology.

It was a Fulbright scholarship that brought him to USFQ as a lecturer in 1990, and he has taught there ever since. It was also there that he met his wife, librarian Luisa Sempertegui.

"I'm sure he never thought he was going to be here for so long," she says now, sitting cross-legged on the living room couch in their comfortable home in the Quito suburb of Cumbaya, and surrounded by more of Swing's nature photographs. She has shoulder-length brown hair and matching eyes that light up when she talks about her husband. Just outside the window, ivy peppered with red and violet flowers crawls up the stone wall of their yard. The pattern of the flowers is almost identical to the one on her blouse.

"But then, years passed," she continues. "He stayed here and got more involved in everything. He was always very dedicated and focused on his job and his research.

"This profession for him is really to change lives, through education."

Paradise found

Twice a year, in the wet and dry seasons, Swing leads students through a wild, unspoiled stretch of the western Amazon to the remote Tiputini research camp on the border of Yasuni National Park, 250 kilometres east of Quito.

For the last 22 years, scientists have been using the station to catalogue the forest's biodiversity and understand its ecology. As the most complex ecosystem in South America, maybe on the planet, the area is home to myriad plant and animal species: scores of reptiles and amphibians, hundreds of birds and mammals, thousands of types of trees, at least 100 species of bats, and an estimated 100,000 insect varieties, only a fraction of which have names.

The forest around Tiputini is teeming with wildlife, so much so that it spills into the station: lizards scamper across the wire mesh-covered boardwalks that connect dorms, mess hall, labs and library. Monkeys watch passersby from the treetops. Bats hang from the roof of the open-air mess hall, occasionally swooping down to snatch mosquitoes out of the air.

The area provides a bonanza for budding biologists and seasoned researchers alike, and that's the reason Swing chose the site in 1994. Trudging around the marshy forest in knee-high rubber boots, students are exposed to an intricate web of flora and fauna, and conduct independent and original research with Swing on hand to help with measurements and observation.

"It's awesome because, first of all, you can ask him anything and he knows the answer," researcher and conservationist Diego Mosquera says. "For me, he's like a living encyclopedia. He's able to transmit passion about what he does. That's why his students like him so much. And he never loses curiosity."

Over the years, Mosquera says, passion for the rainforest and years of work at the station have earned Swing a reputation as an authority on Yasuni.

"It's a passion to say, 'I know something about this forest that probably no one else knows, and I want to share that, and I'm passionate about sharing this knowledge that I have with other people, so that they can actually start moving their asses and doing something to protect the forest.'"

As an undergraduate at USFQ, Mosquera studied animal behaviour and zoology under Swing 20 years ago. But for the past 12 years, he has served as one of the station's two senior resident managers.

"One thing that's really funny is that he never wears rubber boots," Mosquera says of his mentor's trips into the rainforest, where it rains every day and mud can be calf-deep. "He always goes out with his white shoes. And then, when he comes back to camp, his shoes are clean. Absolutely clean."

Stories like that – an almost mystical ability to float over mud, monsters and menacing insects – have stuck to Swing over the years, creating an odd mythology.

Sempertegui laughs at the sneaker story and says she doesn't know how it came to be, "because those shoes get home very dirty."

Still, she does admit that her husband is uniquely calm and quiet – something that has saved him on at least one occasion in the wild.

At Yuturi, an ecotourism lodge 15 kilometres northwest of the station, there's a swampy lake where Swing sometimes takes students at dusk to see caimans – South America's answer to the alligator.

"The reason we'd wait for it to get dark is that's when the caimans come out," he says. "They're hiding in deep vegetation. You can't see them in the daytime, but paddle around at night and you can find them."

On one trip, hoping to fish a baby caiman out of the water for the students to handle and photograph, Swing was sitting in the bow of the canoe, shining a flashlight on the water, looking for reptilian eyes to shine back.

“On this occasion, there was an eye-shine and it looked small,” he recalls. “And I said, ‘Let’s sneak in on this one.’”

“We’re being very quiet because this animal tends to escape or hide if you splash. So, Jose (the guide) is paddling very quietly and we’re sneaking up to this small caiman. And, as we get right on top of it, the eye-shine just disappears. And I’m going, ‘Where is it? Where is it?’”

“As it turns out, what we had been seeing was a reflection of the eye-shine from behind some big heart-shaped leaves hanging out over the water. It was actually a much bigger animal than we had expected.”

As wide as the boat and submerged just below was a massive black caiman, almost six metres long, waiting for prey.

Just a swing of its tail would have been powerful enough to capsize the boat, landing everyone in the water and turning the group into a buffet.

“And I’m directly above it, perched here on the canoe. And I’m signalling to Jose with the idea that I shouldn’t be noisy because if this animal gets started – It was literally like a dinosaur.”

With the guide still paddling softly, only now in reverse, the group fell back, and watched as the caiman surfaced, its yellow eyes flaring back again.

It’s the kind of story no spouse wants to hear, Sempertegui says.

“I think at the beginning, the first years, I worried more. But, then, when I’ve been there with him, he’s like a native from there. He feels so comfortable there that I’m not worried about that part.

“I think sometimes that he’d be a hermit in Tiptutini. He would love to do that.”

Over the years, she says, she grew comfortable enough to bring their son, Daniel, now 16, on canoe trips around the station.

But that was more than five years ago, before, on Mother’s Day 2014, Daniel contracted an infection that spread to his brain, manifesting in a dozen or so strokes that left him confined to bed, receptive but paralyzed and unable to communicate, except through shows of emotion.

Before he fell ill, Sempertegui recalls, he loved travelling with his father into the rainforest.

“I think he really admired Kelly’s job,” she says. “I think he was like, ‘My father is better than Indiana Jones.’”

Paradise lost?

Swing says it’s not the prospect of falling prey to a giant predator, venomous snake or deadly insect that keeps him awake nights. It’s oil.

Beneath Yasuni and its wealth of wildlife lies a sea of black gold that makes up 20 per cent of Ecuador's reserves. International oil companies are eager to extract it, and the government desperately needs it to fund infrastructure and social programs.

Getting official recognition of Yasuni's scientific value, as well as its economic potential, has been a challenge for the station since Day 1, Swing says.

"We had to be sensitive to that, and recognize that oil is part of the landscape in eastern Ecuador. And, although there aren't oil wells everywhere yet, there's this idea that eventually oil concessions will be developed.

"We're going to see this progression, like a cancer on the landscape that ends up consuming a good portion of what's left of Yasuni. Ecuador is one of those places where there's so much diversity, and there's a lot of interest in what's here and how fast it's being lost."

In 2013, buckling under the economic pressure of dropping oil prices, former Ecuadorean president Rafael Correa took the country out of an initiative to forego resource extraction in the park. Since then, drilling in Yasuni has expanded, along with the rate of deforestation.

It was around that time, Mosquera says, that he noticed a shift in Swing's attitude.

"My sense is that he can let himself go into the pessimism. He's very concerned about people not caring about what's going on, even though there's so much proof that oil activity should not be here."

Swing says he wishes he could be optimistic about the future.

"But, for the moment, I see this progression – this drive for getting access to the money for crude oil – as being something that can't be avoided."

As drilling operations increase, swaths of forest are mowed down to create access roads to drilling platforms. Experts estimate that a single hectare of mature, intact rainforest could contain 100,000 unique plant and animal species, and in every hectare cleared, less than one per cent of that life survives.

"If we're careful, we can maintain this other stuff," Swing says. "That will give us time to notice if there's a plant to cure cancer, or there's an insect that has some kind of toxin in its tissues that can be the perfect herbicide.

"The question is, How many hectares are we willing to sacrifice?"

But even as his outlook has darkened, Swing has managed to hold on to the passion for nature that brought him to South America more than 30 years ago.

And he says he isn't planning to leave soon.

"I have to stay in the fight and try to maximize the number of hectares that will survive another decade or another century. But I think it is going to be a fight. We can't take for granted that somebody is going to care about this enough to save a big block of Yasuni.

“I think the progression that we’ve seen over the last half century in places like Ecuador tells us that we’re headed to an end point that is going to include very little intact nature.”