

“Come here,” beckoned my friend and fellow veterinarian Patrick Mahaney as he held a middle-aged black dog in his arms. “I think this dog has a botfly in his eyelid.” Paco, the dog in question, looked up at us quizzically as we gently prodded his orbit and concluded he probably did have one of those gargantuan marble-sized fly larvae burrowed below his left eye.

“And he needs to be neutered anyway,” Patrick declared. “Let’s bring him with us tomorrow.”

We were one week into a volunteer veterinary visit to the Peruvian Amazon with the Amazon Cares animal welfare organization. During our first week in the large port city of Iquitos, we had seen plenty of mange, fleas, ticks, and malnutrition, but it wasn’t until we headed deep into the small villages along the Amazon that we were treated to the delights of the botfly, which burrows deeply and painfully into the skin of its host and develops into an adult fly.

Paco was one of the lucky ones. He lived at a lodge that catered to tourists, with access to food and shelter that so many dogs in Peru lack. His owners agreed to let us bring Paco to our mobile spay/neuter clinic the next morning for botfly removal and a neuter.

Just after sunrise the next morning, the Amazon Cares team loaded our medications, surgical supplies, and an unsuspecting Paco into a boat and motored down the river to the village of Tamanco. In these remote villages, access to veterinary care is practically nonexistent, so the need for spay/neuter services and preventive care is great. As we pulled up, a small group of barefoot children scurried down to the water to greet us.

“It’s a smaller group than we normally have here,” observed Molly Mednikow, the director. One of the villagers chuckled. “When we told them the doctors were coming today, they thought we meant human doctors, who were coming to give them shots. They’re hiding, but they’ll come out in a little bit.”

We lugged our plastic bins of supplies over the muddy field towards the village, dodging indignant cows and ankle-deep puddles along the way. Already at 9 am, the equatorial heat was beating down on us and I could feel the sweat working its way along my spine.

After a short hike, we arrived at our clinic for the day: an open-air building that had most recently served as a schoolhouse. Over the course of the previous week, the diverse volunteer group had perfected our technique: Patrick, myself and local veterinarian Ester Pena would stack whatever flat surfaces were available to us like Jenga sticks until we had a workable surgical table. Over the two weeks we were there we used folding tables, school desks, wooden planks, and most memorably, a pool table.

While we were setting up, the Amazon Cares staffers would check in pets from the village. Dogs in makeshift rope leashes, plastic bags made into carriers, and lacking that, just lugged in by their armpits. All were weighed, sprayed down with Frontline for fleas and ticks, and put in cages to await their turn for surgery.

Each pet was given its injectable premedication, and when he or she was sleepy, an IV catheter was placed in the front leg. It was through this catheter that the technician administered all the anesthetic drugs. The dogs were placed on our table, held in place with sandbags and ropes, then shaved the old-fashioned way: with a simple straight razor and some soap.

The surgery itself was rather straightforward, with a few twists unique to the jungle. One, I had never done surgery in front of an audience before. With the open walls three feet from our table, it provided a natural viewing area for the curious locals to observe our surgical technique. They seemed to mind the spays less than the neuters; at least, the men did.

Two, I've never performed surgery while struggling mightily to suppress the itchiness of a hundred chigger bites covering my forearms. Despite generous, nay, probably dangerous, levels of 100% DEET, those ironclad Amazon bugs seemed impervious to all chemicals and were happily feasting on every bit of exposed skin they could find. Of course, touching anything other than the surgical field would negate your sterility, so we'd finish as quickly as we could, rip off our bloody gloves, scratch ourselves silly, then start all over.

And third was learning to adapt to the bare-bones circumstances of being in a mobile clinic, far away from the fully stocked medicine cabinets and crash carts of our home clinics. Here, we had one bottle of antibiotics that had to solve 15 problems; myriad suture of a weight and heft unfamiliar to these hands that have used nothing but my favorite Monocryl these past 3 years; no bandaging material to create a pressure bandage when the surgical sites started to ooze. We managed, improvising bandages from paper towels and tape. We made it work.

I was amazed at the efficiency of the support staff, veterinary technicians from places as diverse as Australia, Wales, Nashville, and Peru. Despite the language barrier with the Spanish speaking clients and staff, they were able to efficiently and safely usher 25 pets through anesthetic induction, surgery, and recovery that hot and humid day. Among the 25, Paco, who had not one but two botflies in his eyelid, as well as another in his nether regions. I am sure it felt so good to get those parasites out of there so he could close his eye fully once again!

At days' end, we wiped the pools of sweat from our faces, loaded the piles of instruments back into the bins, and carried them back across the field to the waiting boat. Paco sat towards the front of the boat, letting the rushing wind ruffle his fur while I looked out the window for anacondas or pink dolphins (I didn't get to see either.)

Back at the lodge, Paco slinked off to hide and recover while the Amazon Cares staff undertook the gargantuan task of sterilizing the instruments for the next day using a portable plug-in pot. As for the volunteer staff, we took our exhausted and sweaty bodies down to the cold water showers for a much-needed cleaning. Not even the tarantula moults staring eyelessly in the corner could dissuade us from this task. After all, we still had the rest of the week to get through.