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Local Couple Instrumental in Establishing Amazon Rainforest Cultural Exchange Group

Plantsville, Connecticut — Plantsville resident Daniel Brookes and his wife Melinda have been appointed President and Treasurer of a new non-profit organization that they helped found, the **Native Cultural Alliance (NCA)**. The group is dedicated to the preservation and sharing of the knowledge and cultures of the indigenous tribes of the Amazon region of South America. To this end, **NCA** sponsors and promotes trips to the Amazon rainforest.

“The Amazon is now much more accessible than ever,” Brookes claims. “Flights into Manaus, the capital city of the “Amazonas” region of Brazil and the starting point for our tours, are readily available and reasonably priced.” The trip-goers include all types of travelers from around the world, young and old. “You don’t have to be Indiana Jones to explore the Amazon anymore,” he added. “On a typical trip, you get to spend a few nights in one of Manaus’ newer hotels, but most of the time we’re on riverboats or in the jungle sleeping in hammocks with an indigenous tribe. It’s safe and quite comfortable.”

The trips are also led by two other founders of **NCA**, Dr. Bernardo Peixoto and his wife Jenny Toscano. Dr. Peixoto is an anthropologist, environmentalist, and a member of the Ure-wua-wua tribe of Brazil where he is known as by his native name, “Ipupiara” or “Ipu”. He is a consultant on the rainforest to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. He also creates and teaches public school programs on the Amazon rainforest. Toscano is also an anthropologist from Peru, where she is known by her Quechua name, “Cleicha”. She teaches at American University in Washington, D.C. She has done extensive fieldwork with many indigenous tribes and conducts environmental programs in South America.

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One series of **NCA** trips, called “Seekers of Rainforest Wisdom,” is a unique cultural and educational journey. The program is designed to help participants develop a better understanding of the natural world and to help ensure the survival of the rainforest through exploration, the experience of living outdoors, and learning about the way of life of native communities. The emphasis is on environmental awareness and the importance of the Amazon rainforests to the entire planet. Included are visits with tribes along the Amazon and Rio Negro rivers, interacting with their traditions and cultures, sharing in daily living activities, from fishing, farming and food preparation to dance, storytelling and handicrafts.

Another exciting facet of the trips is the opportunity to meet with tribal shamans and healers. Trip-goers can share their age-old knowledge of local medicinal plants to heal and maintain wellness, and even take part in their preparation and use. Activities include nature hikes in the rainforest, lectures by traditional healers and herbalists.

“These trips will change your life and how you will view and interact with the world once you return,” states Brookes. “They definitely make you more ‘earth-honoring’ and bring forth a true understanding of just how important is the knowledge of these indigenous peoples. Without exchanges like these, we run the risk of this knowledge being lost forever, as even these remote tribes are being assimilated into more modern cultures and ways of living.” He adds, “We had a group of high-school-age students from Vermont take the trip last year, and they all came away with such enthusiasm and enlightenment that their school is considering making the trips a part of the future curriculum.”

A landmark for **NCA** came earlier this year when a noted religious leader from India, Yugpurush Mahamandaleshwar Swami Parmanandji, or “Swami Ji” as he came to be known, sought to visit the Amazon rainforest. He wanted to share in a cultural and spiritual exchange with tribes in the region. **NCA** board member Deborah Goldman, of Long Island, New York, arranged his tour, along with his accompanying entourage, to several of the tribes that **NCA** frequently visits. “This was perhaps a historical event,” says Brookes. “As far as we know, it was the first exchange between two such diverse cultures. The experience was amazing for both sides. Views were exchanged on spirituality, nature, the environment and more. Swami Ji even took part in their rituals and healing exercises. Everyone came away with a deeper understanding of the richness and surprising similarities of their respective cultures.” He also went on to explain, “At one point, the Shaman of the Taruma-area tribe revealed to everyone that for generations, their legends had foretold of a visit to them by just such a holy man as the Swami.”

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NCA uses profits from sponsored trips to support the indigenous people by helping to build schools, medical facilities, and most importantly, facilities to serve as repositories for the rich storehouses of information which these people possess, from their traditional knowledge of the rainforests to healing plants and medicines. “Many of these people face severe discrimination, the loss of their cultural and spiritual freedoms, and even physical destruction,” Brookes emphasizes. “To lose these things means that humankind’s cultural and social diversity will be irrevocably lessened. Vast amounts of ecological, biological and pharmacological knowledge will be lost forever. Today, not just animal species face extinction; entire cultures are also at risk.”

“On my first trip to the Amazon, I experienced so many incredible things,” Brookes continues.” There was the “meeting of the waters” off Manaus. Here, the light brown waters of the Amazon River meet the almost black waters of the Rio Negro. For several miles, they never mix, flowing side-by-side, two different colors. I don’t know of another place on earth that’s like it. Then there was the piranha fishing, caiman (Amazon crocodile) viewing, Iracema Falls, and the pink dolphins. But most of all, it was the warmth and sharing with the native people. It wasn’t staged or performed like some phony tourist thing; it was genuine, from the heart. I made friendships that I will always cherish.”

You can learn more about the **Native Cultural Alliance**, its objectives, future plans, trips and more, through its website at: www.nativeculturalalliance.org. Donations can also be made through the website or by contacting them at P.O. Box 104, Marion, CT 06444.

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