



# Close Encounter with Three Anteaters

Max Planck scientists cooperate with partners in around 120 countries worldwide. Here they relate their personal experiences and impressions. Norbert Kunert, who scours the Amazonian rainforests as part of his research, recounts the endearing madness of the urban jungle – and his dilemma over soccer’s World Cup.

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The last harvest of passion fruit has been brought in. In our private jungle, which we’ve planted on the grounds of our property and in which bananas and coconuts also grow, around 20 kilograms ripen every two months. Alida and I have again made jam and juice from this crop. Not that this is really necessary here in Manaus, the Brazilian city in the Amazon with a population of two million, where all sorts of exotic fruit and delicious juices made from them are available.

Nevertheless, a degree of self-sufficiency can be useful. Manaus is, after all, very remote – there is only one highway that doesn’t even head toward Brazil, but instead north, to Venezuela. Sure, you can get anywhere from the airport, but otherwise, there are only the waterways that connect the urban jungle in the rainforest with the outside world. And since this is the case, there’s sometimes a glut of certain foods. On the other hand, you can spend weeks searching for them in vain in the supermarket should the supply ship be delayed.

I’ve now been here for four years and will feel somewhat like a Brazilian in exile when I return to Jena in the summer. There are many things that I’ll miss, including one aspect of everyday life that is wonderfully aggravating: the heat. At seven in the morning, the outside temperature already stands at 30 degrees Celsius. Inside, you have to rely on air conditioning, which provides a noticeably cooler environment – at least until noontime. People then take a siesta that lasts several hours, and often travel home to eat. In this midday rush hour, the journey home from the institute, the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia, takes at least



**Norbert Kunert**, 33, is a post-doc at the Max Planck Institute for Biogeochemistry in Jena, which cooperates with the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazônia on the TACAPE Project. Since fall 2010, the forestry scientist and ecologist has been conducting an experiment on how individual trees react to disturbances – such as the construction of roads, forest management or large-scale wind breakage – and what impact this has on the importance of the rainforest as the green lungs of the Earth.

20 minutes by car, despite the fact that we live only a kilometer away. This is part of the endearing madness here in this concrete jungle in the heart of the world's largest rainforest.

The climate also has its plus points: You don't usually need to dry off after showering .... And the location at the equator ensures there are moist forests. This is the reason why I've spent the last four years here carrying out research. When I travel out into the jungle, the humidity is almost 100 percent. There is an odor of turf and humus, similar to the one found in garden nurseries in Germany. Not like in the big home improvement stores, but in the small garden nurseries, as I remember them from my childhood.

I find the rainforest fascinating because of the vast array of plants and animals, which you usually only discover at second glance, or when you take the time to pay attention to detail. This is best done when I stay overnight in the jungle during a field trip, taking just a tarp, a mosquito net and a hammock. Sometimes this results in extraordinary encounters: once, in a single day, I got to see all three varieties of anteaters. That may sound cute, but the chances are almost as remote as your numbers coming up in the lottery.

A colleague told me that the institute used to be located outside the city in the 1970s and 1980s, practically in the jungle. But Manaus is a growing city, and the roads quickly become congested. As the soccer World Cup made things even worse, the government decreed four days of public holiday – whenever tournament matches took place. The working hours had to be made up on other days, and school kids even had to attend special classes on Saturdays.

We are now a tri-national family. Alida is Mexican, and our daughter Camila was born in Brazil. When we travel, we take a blue, a green and a red passport along with us. And during the World Cup, we of course cheered on all three teams. My heart went out to the Brazilians after their hammering by Germany. But this was outweighed by the joy of seeing Germany win the World Cup for the fourth time – naturally! Brazil will definitely remain with us. And it isn't just my research that will bring me back: after all, Manaus is the city where our daughter was born.

Report: Jens Eschert