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Metro's Robin Blair and his colleagues returned from the remote village of Amak, Nicaragua, on push boats such as this.

Photos courtesy of Robin Blair

Into the Jungle:

Metro's Robin Blair Waged War Against Deadly Parasites

- Parasitic worms threaten the health of Nicaraguan children. Medical mission treated 1,851 patients during two-week mission.

By NED RACINE

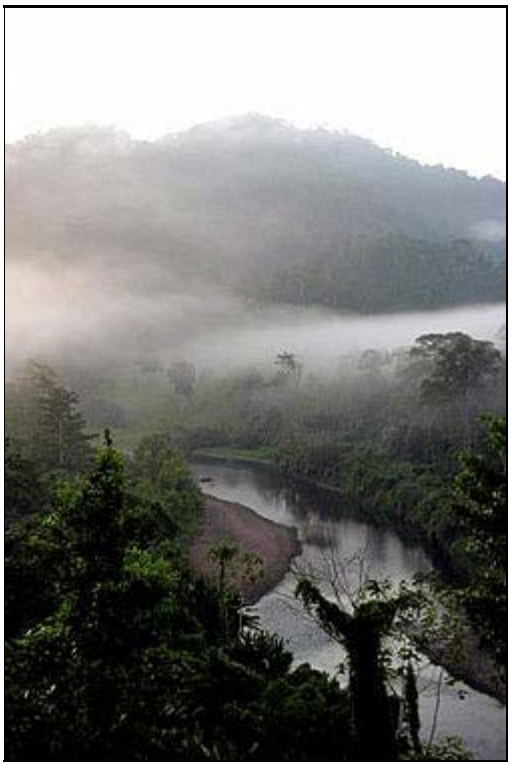
(April 24, 2007) In northern Nicaragua, where 18th Century English pirates hid, where workers earn approximately $1.10 per day and mahogany tree trunks sell for $10,000, Robin Blair spent early 2007 killing worms.

On and off for 10 years Blair, a transportation planning manager, has aided Mision Para Cristo's Medical Missions and the Children's Hunger Fund in their Nicaraguan campaigns. This year, from Jan. 22 to Feb. 2, Blair helped waged a war against water-borne parasites, particularly worms residing in humans.

"Worms thrive in the warmer climates of the earth," said Blair, 52, a 17-year Metro veteran. "Unfortunately, these are the areas of most of the world's poverty. This poverty is accentuated by the presence of worms that cause the depletion of already scarce nutrients in the body."

Working with the Nicaraguan ministries of Education and Health, Blair and his team members worked to improve the health of the Mayange people, an indigenous group living on approximately 1,000 square kilometers of pristine rain forest between Nicaragua and Honduras in Central America.

The Mayange land sits near the equator and the Atlantic Ocean. As a result, Blair said he experienced two kinds of weather: “There’s hot and humid, and then the really hot and humid.” At least he was there after the December hurricane season.



Rivers converge in Nicaragua’s Rio Bocay region. Parts of the region have altitudes up to 3,000 feet, perfect for coffee growing.

A remote village

Blair, who sits on the Transportation in the Developing Countries Committee of the Transportation Research Board, traveled to a remote village named Amak in the Rio Bocay region of Nicaragua. He brought his logistical and organizational skills to bear on two goals.

The immediate goal was establishing a temporary medical and dental clinic. His long-term goal was beginning the process of building a permanent high school. Short term, Blair had to plan for sustaining a crew of up to 30 people arriving in Amak, including a medical team of 14.

Traveling to Amak, Blair found, was not pleasant.

“This is a two-day trip just to get there, and it’s a miserable two-day trip.” The only paved road he saw disappeared one hour out of Managua, Nicaragua’s capital. “So I’m traveling in a beat-up bus for more than 12 hours on four-wheel drive.” The last 61 miles were covered in a dugout canoe.

Blair estimated that on the return trip down the Rio Bocay river, his team exited the canoes about 50 times to push them over the rocks. One of the team’s doctors broke her leg on the trek back while crossing a part of the river where her canoe needed_to be carried over rocks.

‘Extremely isolated area’

“It’s an extremely isolated area,” said Blair, who was touched by the area’s beauty. “It is one of the pristine rain forests of the world.” The extremely dense forests near the Atlantic Ocean were perfect hideouts for pirates.

Those 17th and 18th Century English buccaneers left a legacy in the Mayange’s unique language. Thirty percent of that language consists of Old English.

Blair’s brother, an accountant, made the trek to Amak and served as pharmacist, his pharmacy being a wooden table with piles of medicine. Blair estimated the team hauled in between 300 and 400 pounds of medicine contributed by a nonprofit group in Texas.

The team set up a basic pharmacy, a medical clinic, and a dental operation, “which is literally a guy pulling teeth,” Blair said.

Beyond addressing immediately health issues, Blair and his colleagues gathered census data, trying to ascertain how many children are in the area and their general state of health. “Over time you’re trying to evaluate whether there are conditions you’re helping or not helping.”

One of the goals of Blair’s two-week mission to Nicaragua was to measure the number of children in the area and the state of their health.

Treated 1,851 patients

After two weeks the team had treated 1,851 patients. “Everything from simple stuff” to people on the verge of dying, Blair said. The doctors said four to six people would have died within three weeks if the medical team had not been in Amak. “Primarily children, primarily issues of pneumonia—there is a high rate of infant mortality.”

A key target for those hundreds of pounds of medicine carted into Amak was the worms. Patients were given a worm-killing poison that cost approximately 50 cents per treatment. Humans are too large to be affected by the poison. The parasites are not so lucky.

Worms enter the body through various routes—the hookworm enters through the feet—and feed off their human host. Some feed on blood and others siphon nutrients from the digestive system. Those that feed on blood, like the hookworm, may cause anemia.

According to the Worm Project, an organization dedicated to improving nutrition among third-world children, a child who typically eats one pound of food per day can forfeit approximately 20 pounds of food in six months—if untreated. The parasites not only compromise the immediate health of the child, they compromise the child’s development into an adult.

The Worm Project website estimates that “one fourth to one third of the world suffers from worms to some degree . . .”

Worms steal nutrients

Because the worms are stealing 30 to 40 percent of the nutrient in the patient’s body—including the poison—they soon absorb too much poison to tolerate. They die or flee the patient’s body. The poison is good for six months, during that time it prevents the return of the worm or its larvae.

The team treated 500 to 600 children with the anti-parasite medicine.

Back in California, Blair works on building support for a permanent health clinic on Mayange land. “We’re there without a political agenda. We’re there basically with a human care agenda. That’s good for everybody.”

“I try not to bring back what I call ‘the terror of the place’ . . . the horror of the life and lifestyle,” said Blair, who helped with disaster relief after Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and El Salvador’s earthquakes in 2001. “What I try to bring back is the awe of the place.” The beauty of the Mayange land.

Blair is unsure if his experiences in Nicaragua have made him a better person, but he believes they have made him a more balanced person. “I think we are all better off helping another human being than just living ... a self-centered life.”