

Human Diversity in Colombia

Patricia Kahn's News & Comment article "Genetic diversity project tries again" (4 Nov., p. 720) and a lecture on the topic by S. Pena at the Latin American Congress of Biological Anthropology (Rio de Janeiro, November 1994) have made me think that perhaps our experience in Colombia may help in developing programs like the Human Genome Diversity Project. For 7 years, we have been conducting a diversity project in Colombia. Although initially restricted to genetic studies, it soon became clear that the needs of the people being studied were broader because many of them are in the process of becoming extinct. Therefore we redesigned our project. The second phase began in 1991. This time we asked the faculty of the Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá and other Colombian institutions interested in cooperating to think of the enormous human diversity in Colombia and to suggest a research or care project they could develop. More than 100 proposals were received, and our fieldwork began in 1992 with nearly 60 projects in almost all areas of human endeavor. During the next 10 months, we visited 26 ethnic groups in Colombia. Medical, dental, and nutritional assistance was provided, and a clinical lab-

oratory and small surgical facilities were also available. Architects, designers, philosophers, experts in music, artists, and nurses, among others, took part. In all, some 10,000 individuals received medical and dental care in regions that are geographically or politically isolated. The last 1½ years have been spent analyzing data. The way in which we are handling the results of our investigations is somewhat different from traditional scientific work. Rather than proceeding to publish them in international journals at once, we are producing a series of books explaining our results in simple terms. These books are sent back to the people we visited, as well as to the state and private institutions that handle problems of Indian or isolated communities in Colombia, and they are also available to the general public. In that way, they may be useful to the communities for setting up action projects, in which we are willing to help, and to the institutions, providing them with information as to what sort of problems they have and, perhaps, how to address their needs. We also hope they may help us in generating some knowledge of and interest in human diversity among our fellow countrymen and women. In other words, we have tried to think of the problems of the people first. After all, we should not only be

interested in the human genome but also in the human beings that carry it.

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Nicaragua's Research Agenda

I read with great delight the News & Comment article "Latin America: A personal technology transfer effort in DNA diagnostics" by Marcia Barinaga (25 Nov., p. 1317), which chronicles one of many individual contributions made by American scientists to Latin America. Barinaga asks two important questions, namely, whether polymerase chain reaction techniques can be integrated into Nicaragua's public health system and whether the use of modern DNA technology is sustainable in developing countries without continuous outside support. There is another problem. Because of economic difficulties, the Nicaraguan health and education systems are facing serious troubles, and local researchers have found themselves

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