



28 FCL



Karuara

People of the river

Press Kit

Original Title: Karuara , La gente del río

English Title: Karuara, People of the River

Format: Color, ultra HD and 2D animations

Genre: Hybrid documentary with animations

Year: 2024

Country of production: Peru

Duration: 77 min 30 seconds

Shorter version: 56 min 34 seconds

Produced by Asociación Quisca

in collaboration with Radio Ucamara and Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana, the Federation of Kukama-Kukamiria Women

Logline:

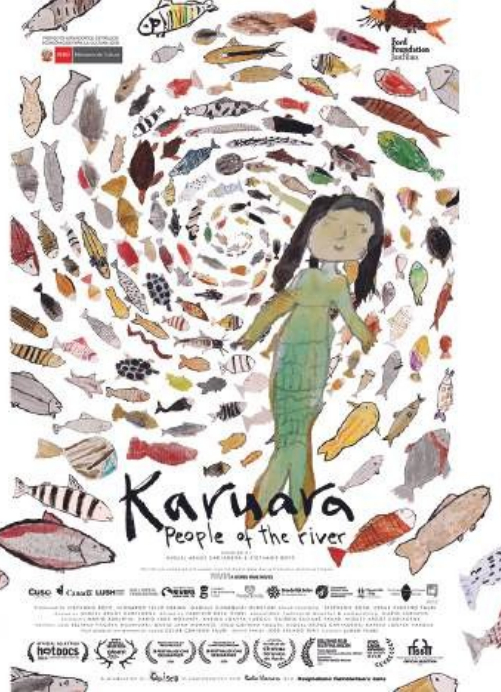
Beneath the waters of Peru's Amazon lies a world of spirits led by the Karuara, the 'people of the river.'

A brave Indigenous woman and her family confront powerful interests to save their river and these sacred beings.

Synopsis:

Mari Luz Canaquiri says her river is a more than just a body of water, it's a living being.

The Marañón River deep in Peru's Amazon region is home to a vast network of spirit villages ruled by the Karuara,





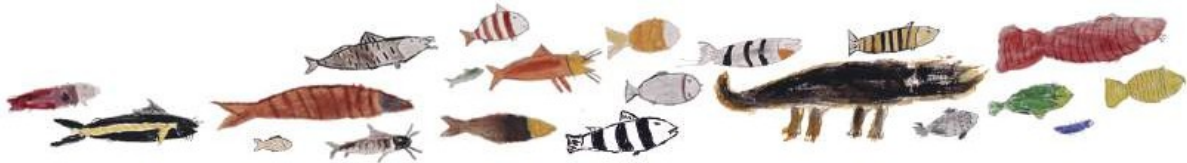
The Karuara's universe mirrors human society with an aquatic twist: river spirits lounge in hammocks made of boa constrictors, they smoke sardines and wear stingray hats and catfish shoes.

Laughing Karuara children ride to school on giant turtles or play football with an inflated blowfish in the film's stunning hand painted animations.

Behind their playfulness, the Karuara are powerful spirits. When a human is ill, indigenous shaman call on Karuara healers to cure their patient. Mariluz's uncle must ask the river spirits for permission before fishing or risk going hungry. The Karuara are metaphysical ecologists; they maintain the delicate balance of life in the Amazon's waterways. For centuries the Kukama people have depended on their rivers and spirit protectors for survival.

But Mariluz says the old ways are being forgotten and her people face cultural genocide. While foreign companies earn millions from the Amazon's resources, indigenous communities lack basic development like schools, health care and clean water. She leads a federation of Kukama women who file a ground breaking lawsuit demanding the Peruvian government recognize the Marañón River as a legal person, with rights.

In a world that puts a price tag on nature, this film takes viewers inside the magic and beauty of the Amazon region and reminds us of our sacred connection to water.







Background:

For many Indigenous people like the Kukama, their rivers are living beings with rights that must be recognized and protected. The Marañón River is the source of food, water, and transportation for the Kukama people; it is also the center of their spiritual universe. After watching their river suffer contamination over decades, especially from systemic oil spills that have destroyed its fragile ecosystem, a federation of Kukama women led by Mari Luz Canaquiri decided to take legal action.

In 2021, Huaynakana Kamatahaura Kana filed a lawsuit in a Peruvian court to have their river recognized as a legal person. The petition accused various government entities of violating the fundamental rights of the river, including Petroperú, the state-run oil company, the Ministry of the Environment, and the Ministry of Energy and Mining.



Members of Huaynakana and supporters march to the public hearing in Nov. 2023

Quisca, our non-profit film collective, submitted short videos and an illustrated book of Kukama histories (often mistakenly called “myths”) to the court as evidence. Throughout the process we worked closely with the women and their lawyers at the Instituto de Defensa Legal (IDL), a Peruvian nonprofit, providing media advocacy and campaign support. This included producing video spots and media kits, providing training and equipment for the women and organizing press and public awareness conferences and events.

So, the film not only chronicles the campaign to protect the Marañón River, it is also part of the struggle.



Our movement quickly became international. [Canadian lawyers and academics from three universities](#) filed an amicus curiae in the Peruvian court to support the lawsuit. This legal document describes the growing importance of Indigenous law in Canadian environmental policies. Two additional amicus were filed, one by the US-based Earth Law Center and the other by the University of Essex in the UK.

After a lengthy legal battle, in 2024 a Peruvian court [emitted a historic sentence acknowledging the legal rights of the Marañón River](#). This was the first time a Peruvian court has recognized the rights of nature. Peru's government appealed the verdict, but a higher court upheld the original ruling, marking an end to the appeals process. In mid-2025 Petroperu's high-powered lawyers presented a "writ of amparo" (or appeal for protection) to the country's Constitutional Tribunal, claiming the sentence violates their right to due process. An amparo is usually used to protect citizens from rulings that violate their basic rights and freedoms, as protected by the constitution. A hearing is scheduled for December 2025, and could overturn the sentence.

While the lawsuit continues to play out in the courts, the film and media coverage has inspired similar movements. A campaign led by Aymara Indigenous women in Peru's southern Andes mountains [won legal recognition for Lake Titicaca in April of 2025](#). The regional government of Puno declared this sacred lake a legal person, with inherent rights.

Lake Titicaca is the largest freshwater lake in South America and the highest of the world's large lakes, sitting at 3,810 meters above sea level. Titicaca is one of less than twenty ancient lakes on earth, and is thought to be three million years old.







BIOGRAPHIES



Miguel Araoz Cartagena (director, cinematographer, animations)

Miguel is a visual artist from Cusco, Peru. This is his first feature-length film.

Miguel's paintings have been exhibited in more than 25 shows in France, Switzerland, Uruguay, Brazil and Peru. Two of his most popular works are part of the permanent collection in Cusco's Qoricancha Museum, the Inca's Temple of the Sun, and have been reproduced in numerous publications, including a recent book and exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington. His paintings can be viewed at: <http://www.miguelaraoz.com/>

In 2019 he directed the short animation "And that is how the rivers came to be," which screened at more than 20 international film festivals and won best animated film at the Montreal First Peoples' festival.

Miguel and two other painters from Cusco created over 2,000 paintings for this short, and learned 2D animation techniques along the way - none of them had previous experience in animation.

The animations for the Karuara film used the same painstaking technique of hand drawn paintings.





Stephanie Boyd, (director, producer, location sound)

Stephanie has been living and working in Peru as a filmmaker, journalist and educator since 1997. Despite having a severe hearing impairment, she has produced and directed four award-winning feature documentaries: "[Choropampa, The Price of Gold](#)" (2002), "[Tambogrande, Mangos, Murder, Mining](#)" (2008), "[The Devil Operation](#)" (2010) and "Karuara, People of the River" (2024).

These films have been screened at over 150 international festivals, including IDFA and Hot Docs, won more than 35 awards and been broadcast around the world on stations including the Sundance Channel, Outside TV, CBC Country Canada, Al Jazeera, TeleSur, Russia Today, Canal N (Peru) and the Knowledge Network (Canada). Her articles have appeared in publications such as The New Yorker online, Salon.com, the Toronto Star and New Internationalist magazine.

At the turn of the century, Stephanie co-created the "Media that Matters" initiative with several Peruvian non-profit film collectives including DocuPeru, Guarango and Quisca. This energized network gives film and media advocacy workshops and training courses to marginalized communities, helping them create their own short videos and audio-visual materials.

Stephanie is also a board member of the [Peru Support Group](#), an Oxford-based nonprofit that works with allies around the world to promote human rights, environmental protection and sustainable development in Peru. She loves our little blue-green planet and likes being referred to as a "citizen of the world."



Leonardo Tello Imaina (co-producer)

Leonardo is director of Radio Ucamara, an Indigenous media outlet based in Nauta, on the banks of the Marañón River. Over the past decade he has produced and directed numerous music videos and short films, including [“Two Demons and Many Amazonian communities at risk,”](#) which won an award at the Guatemalan Film Festival “Life and Territory” in 2020. He is also co-editor of [“Karuara, People of the River,” a book](#) of Kukama histories illustrated by Indigenous children and published in 4 languages, including Kukama-Kukamiria. The book was published in 2016 by Quisca, Radio Ucamara and Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana.

Leonardo’s poetic and indepth writing has been published in several publications including “Ojo Publico” and [“Inquire First - Traces of Oil in the Peruvian Amazon”](#). The Inquire First series won a Fetisov journalism award in 2024 from the Swiss-based foundation. In 2016, under his directorship, Radio Ucamara was recognized by Peru’s Ministry of Culture with the National Award for Culture for its work to preserve the Kukama-Kukamiria language. “Karuara,

People of the River” is his first feature-length film.









Director's Note:

The issues raised by "Karuara, People of the River" - the sacredness of water, the rights of nature and of Indigenous self-determination - are even more relevant today than when we began this project in 2014. But this is not just a film about an Indigenous woman's quest to save the Amazon region; [it is also a film made by that same Indigenous woman and her community.](#)

A decade ago, Leonardo Tello, director of a Kukama Indigenous radio station, asked Miguel "Miki" Araoz and I to make this film. He had watched my documentaries, seen Miki's paintings and felt he could trust us.

Miki and I didn't want to misrepresent Indigenous stories so we designed a participatory method with our Kukama partners. Leonardo became a co-producer and script writer. Mari Luz Canaquiri, the film's inspiring protagonist, is also a co-producer and writer. Every phase of production brought Indigenous artists, elders and journalists together with experienced filmmakers. This is revolutionary in Latin America where most films are still made about Indigenous communities, and not by and with them.

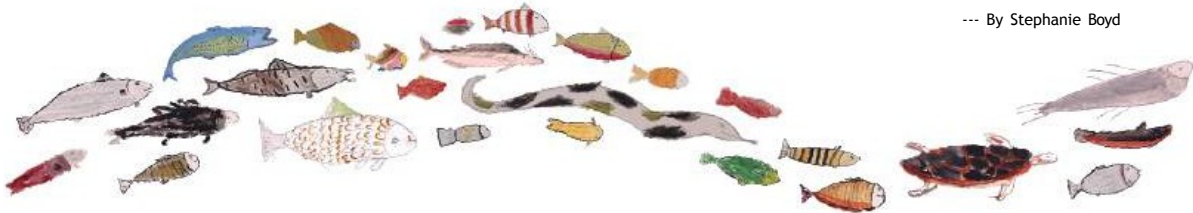


I've been living and working in Peru since 1997; it's where I've spent my adult life and career as a filmmaker. But my birth and upbringing in Canada have given me a privileged knowledge of North American culture, allowing me to communicate between both worlds and create bridges.

As I delved further into the Karuara's magical underwater world, I began to discover my own connections. The Kukama's stories are unique and precious but there are also universal elements. My grandmother's first husband disappeared while fishing on a lake in northern Ontario, Canada, in the ancestral territory of the Anishinaabeg people. Two decades later his son, my Uncle Lonny, was lost while boating in Lake Ontario near land stolen from the Mississauga and Ojibwe nations. Their bodies were never found. Would their loved one's grief have been lessened if they believed in water spirits?

Whether my uncle and his father transformed into lake spirits, or simply decomposed and were eaten by aquatic creatures, they became part of Canada's fresh waterways. Physically or spiritually, they are in the lakes. And since roughly 60 percent of the human body is water, in essence we are all Karuara - water people. Isn't it time we join our cousins in the Amazon region to protect our common home?

--- By Stephanie Boyd



Media Coverage:

Times of India: ["From Amazon's Marañón to Goa's Mhadei, Peruvian filmmakers say rights have rights"](#)

CBC, Canada: ["How B.C. lawyers helped an Indigenous community in Peru get a river declared a person with legal rights"](#)

The Guardian (UK): ["Indigenous river campaigner from Peru wins prestigious Goldman prize"](#)

New Internationalist Magazine (UK) 6-part series by Stephanie Boyd

["Searching for the River People"](#),

["New Life Amid Grief"](#)

["The Storyteller"](#)

Point of View Magazine (Canada) ["Tinkuy: Encounters on a River in Peru's Amazon"](#) On making Karuara, People of the River, by Stephanie Boyd

William's Lake Tribune, Canada: ["Indigenous Chief finds shared experience with Peruvian community"](#)

Classical FM, Toronto, Review of Hot Docs films by top critic Marc Glassman: ["Shine on, Brightly"](#)

The Link (Montreal, Canada), ["Revolution starts with a screening"](#)



Awards

28th Lima International Film Festival, Peru - [Audience Choice Award](#) 28th
Lima International Film Festival, Peru - [Jury Award for Best Peruvian Film](#)
38th Bolzano Film Festival Bozen (BFFB), Special Prize “Dolomites UNESCO World Heritage Site”
27th Cine Las Americas International Film Festival, Austin, Texas, Jury Award for Best Documentary Feature
WACC-SIGNIS [Human Rights Award 2025](#)
27th International Film Festival of Punta de Este, Uruguay - Honorable Mention, Best Documentary Latin
American Studies Association - LASA 2025 Film Festival, Award of Merit in Film
16th Paris Festival of Peruvian Film - [Jury Award for Best Documentary](#) 11th
Festival of Censored Film, Arequipa, Peru - Best Peruvian Film
3er Festival of Amazon Film, Pucallpa, Perú - Best Amazon Feature Film

Distinctions

World premiere at Toronto's Hot Docs International Film Festival, May 2024 IDFA
Pitch Forum selection, 2020
Production Award from Peru's Ministry of Culture
Completed with support from JustFilms of the Ford Foundation and the Women Make Movies Production Assistance Program



Crew list

Directors: Miguel Araoz Cartagena & Stephanie Boyd

Producers: Mariluz Canaquiri Murayari, Stephanie Boyd & Leonardo Tello Imaina Script:

Leonardo Tello Imaina, Stephanie Boyd, Miguel Araoz Cartagena

Editor: Fabricio Deza Iturri Cinematographer:

Miguel Araoz Cartagena

Animators: Karina Loayza Vargas, Dario Jara Morante, Mario Auburtin, Miguel Araoz Cartagena

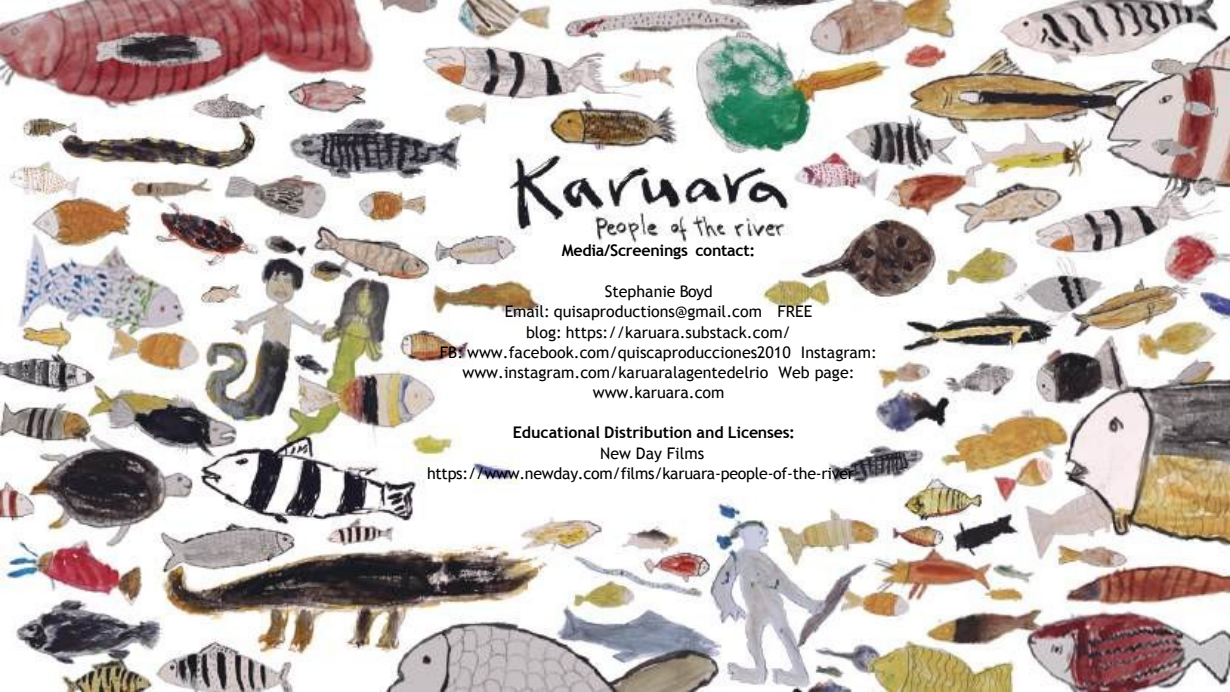
Narrators: José Manuel Huaymacarí Tamani, Doña Maria Nieves, Miguel Angel Tello Morey Original

Music: Danna Gaviota Tello Morey & Illary Nuñez del Prado Bruckmann

Sound recording: Cesar Centeno, Stephanie Boyd Sound

Design: Jose Balado Diaz





Karuara

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FB: www.facebook.com/quiscaproducciones2010 Instagram:

www.instagram.com/karuaralagentedelrio Web page:

www.karuara.com

Educational Distribution and Licenses:

New Day Films

<https://www.newday.com/films/karuara-people-of-the-river>

PROYECTO GANADOR DE ESTÍMULOS
ECONÓMICOS PARA LA CULTURA 2018



PERÚ

Ministerio de Cultura

Karuara

People of the river

A production of

Guisca

in coproduction with

Rafael Ucayali

and

Huaynakana Kamatahuara Jiana

