

TAKE ME TO THE RIVER

When Cédric Gilleman decided to change his life, he began to change the lives of the river dolphins of the Peruvian Amazon basin too



Cédric monitoring dolphins in Peru

Life, it is often said, begins at 40. For some, that can mean taking up a new hobby. For others, it means sending the kids off to university and getting the house back. But how about giving up your entire career to go halfway round the world to protect wildlife that you previously didn't even know existed? It's only the rarest and most remarkable individual who does that, and Cédric Gilleman most certainly fits that bill.

Today, Cédric is the director of project management at Solinia, a non-profit organisation that he founded to protect dolphins and other inhabitants of the Peruvian Amazon basin. Just six years ago, however, he was senior purchasing specialist in Belgium with Swift, a provider of financial messaging services. That's quite a sea-change; but how did it come about?

'I had studied mechanical engineering as a young man,

and I soon found that I enjoyed managing groups of people on large projects,' he explains. 'After completing my education, I worked with Swift for about 14 years, first as an IT analyst while the company was developing its own software and then I moved into the financial department. It was a great experience, working on agreements with large companies such as Hewlett-Packard. Then, in 2009, around my 40th birthday, everything changed.

'A friend had recently moved out to Peru to open a restaurant, so it seemed like the ideal opportunity for an interesting holiday. I was doing a lot of sport at the time, including the iron man event in Germany, and I had my eye on what looked like rather a fun event while I was in Peru. It was a raft race: you and your team had a day to build the raft, then three more to race it across 180km of the Amazon. I had expected a great challenge and great sport; what I

had not expected was that I would make a great discovery.'

Starting young

When Cédric was a lad, he had a passion for the sea. 'I had posters on my wall of whales and dolphins, and I loved them. I had always really thought of them as living far out in the depths of the oceans, but during my time rafting on the Amazon I saw river dolphins for the first time. They were so easy to see! It was a true revelation, and I could not get them out of my mind.'

After the holiday, Cédric returned home. 'I was 40 years old, and I had already been wondering about a change of life, about leaving Belgium – ideally for

somewhere warmer – and suddenly the possibility of a life in Peru presented itself. I already had a love of nature, encouraged by my father with whom I used to take wonderful walks out in the forests, and those marvellous river dolphins of Peru seemed to beckon me. But what could I do?'

Cédric decided to take time to find out. Organising a sabbatical, he arranged another trip to Peru, this time for six months, in Iquitos. 'I spent my time exploring the rainforest and the river, and immediately knew that this was good for me, as long as I could find something constructive to work on. I met some scientists who were studying Amazonian fish at the

The Solinia Team during an expedition on the Amazon River



extremely impressed with their work. Their great education programmes and the way in which local people get so completely involved were inspiring. I went to Bolivia, too, where I met Enzo Aliaga Rossel, who is leading work in that country. It wasn't long before I discovered that WDC has played a very important role in helping to support the foundation of some of these South American projects, and I was given the name of Alison Wood, WDC's river dolphin lead.

"By now, I had plans for setting up an organisation in Peru, and Alison was my very first supporter. Thanks to her, I was able to get financial support from WDC and apply for a grant from the Rufford Foundation, and in early 2012, Solinia was born."

A great start

Named from a combination of the Latin names of the two species of river dolphin found

in the Peruvian Amazon – the tucuxi and the boto – Solinia set to work. An education programme for the primary schools of Iquitos, teaching the children not only how to recognise the two species but also understand the problems faced by the dolphins, particularly plastic litter pollution, was instrumental in Solinia's foundation. Once a boat had been donated, the group began a dolphin monitoring programme to build up a picture of population sizes and movements. Cedric assembled a team of volunteers – more than 20 of them – from local universities to work on education, communication, conservation and monitoring programmes.

"We started to grow, and to have an influence," says Cédric. "In March 2014 we were able to arrange a workshop with the government and the Omacha Foundation at which we put

forward our proposal for a long-term action plan. Such a thing is the responsibility of the Fisheries Department, but in 2015 the government changed, so we had to meet again. The signs are good, and I am really hopeful that the current government will make our action plan live this year."

If it does happen, it will be a remarkable tribute to Cédric and his Solinia colleagues. Whatever the outcome, he sees hope. "When I first came out here, I was inspired by the sight of these beautiful river dolphins, but so sad to see that they faced so many problems. Plastic pollution and fishing issues are among the threats they struggle with, and it is more than important to me that their futures are improved."

"The support from WDC has been great, and I really want to thank Alison for her help in setting up Solinia. It has made me optimistic. From the work that we are doing with local communities, I can already see that young people really want to make a difference."

He pauses and smiles. "You know, back in Belgium, people aren't really connected to wildlife, because most of them don't live among it. Here, in Iquitos, the communities are surrounded by it, they're already connected to it, and that's half the battle. I am so glad I came here."

And so, Cédric, are we. ■



time, and they were extremely encouraging. "See what you want to do," they said, "and we will see if we can help you."

Returning to Belgium after his sabbatical, Cédric did further research, looking into the various river dolphin projects that were already up and running in South America. He discovered that some countries had long-term action plans for the protection of Amazonian river dolphins, but not all; Peru had yet to adopt an action plan. At last, here was something that, with his management skills and enthusiasm, he could really get his teeth into.

So, Cédric being Cédric, he wrote one. It was in French, of course, and he realised that he would have to learn Spanish, so back out to South America he went. "This time, I visited the Natútama Foundation in Colombia, which works on the conservation of that country's stretch of the Amazon, including the river dolphins, and was

ACTION POINTS

Peru's action plan supports the two species of river dolphin – the boto and tucuxi – as well as the Amazonian manatee. Its key points include:



complete diagnosis of the status of the three species in priority areas.

- Determine ecological patterns, distribution, abundance, diet and population genetics, through satellite transmitters, stranding autopsies and other means.

- Compilation of existing information (published and unpublished) to develop a

- Assess fish stocks in priority areas, identify fishing practices that adversely affect the three species and work to mitigate them, plus monitor activities such as illegal hunting.
- Study habitat conditions including water quality, habitat destruction and contaminants.
- Identify priority areas for conservation.
- Identify priority areas for ecotourism, including building

- protocols for observing the three species, and develop agreements with travel agencies and tourist guides to promote responsible tourism.
- Create a participatory study of the relationship between the three species and local communities.
- Use crafts, such as woodcarving, painting and stories, to tell the story and build stronger understanding of the three species.