

Tulane anthropologist awarded Guggenheim Fellowship to study Amazon rainforests

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Learn more about Professor Balée's work uncovering how seemingly pristine tropical rainforests have been shaped by people and cultures over centuries. Video by Carolyn Scofield.

Tulane University anthropology professor William Balée has been named a 2019 Guggenheim Fellow by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation to document the historical ecology of the lower Amazon basin.

The [Guggenheim Fellowship](#) is given annually to a select group of scholars, artists and scientists who have demonstrated exceptional capacity for productive scholarship or extraordinary creative ability in the arts. Almost 3,000 applied for [the 168 fellowships awarded](#) in this year's competition.

"We are exceptionally proud to have William Balée honored with this award, which represents one of academia's highest accolades," said Brian Edwards, dean of the Tulane University School of Liberal Arts. "His research on the interaction of humans and the environment in the Amazon could not be more timely or essential, and is a superlative example of how great scholarship with a localized focus helps us to understand and address issues of global relevance."

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William Balée

Balée is a renowned expert in historical ecology who has spent his career tracing how the tropical rainforests and lush landscapes of the Amazon basin have been shaped by people and cultures over hundreds of years.

The fellowship will enable him to spend a year compiling research for a book about the lower Amazon basin, which includes parts of Brazil and the Guianas. The area spans over 500 miles leading into the mouth of the Amazon River where one-fifth of the world's fresh water pours into the Atlantic Ocean.

"I feel very fortunate in getting this award," Balée said. "It will be a major help to me in completing a book project about the long-term impact of people on different environments of the lower Amazon. That area is one of the most fascinating areas in the world to me. It is so diverse, not just in terms of species, but in terms of the cultures that have come there. Luso-Brazilians, Afro-Brazilians, Africans, and indigenous societies have created distinctive configurations of cultures there that make it really fascinating to look at in terms of how they've interacted with the landscapes over time."

Balée has documented how ancient societies managed orchards of Brazil nut trees and other crops like cocoa and rubber trees that proliferated in rainforests only to be rediscovered by more recent inhabitants. “They are actually using the resources that were bequeathed to them, in a sense, unconsciously by these prehistoric, indigenous societies,” Balée said.

“Many people when they see the tropical forest in the mouth of the Amazon, they think these are forests that were never impacted by people,” Balée said. “But my research shows that many of these forests that have been mapped as primary — essentially pristine — have been influenced by people's occupations in the past and going back hundreds, even in some cases, thousands of years. I've been working in one site in the Xingu River basin of the lower Amazon that has had people there for at least 4,000 years. And yet it seems to be the middle of nowhere. But it isn't. Actually, it's a somewhere.”

Since its establishment in 1925, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation has granted more than \$360 million in fellowships to over 18,000 individuals, among whom are scores of Nobel laureates, Fields Medalists, poets laureate, members of the various national academies, and winners of the Pulitzer Prize, Turing Award, National Book Awards, and other important, internationally recognized honors.