

## GEOGRAPHICAL FIELD NOTE

### AN ANTHROPOGENIC MEANDER CUTOFF ALONG THE UCAYALI RIVER, PERUVIAN AMAZON\*

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*When the river is rising fast, some scoundrel whose plantation is back in the country, and therefore of inferior value, has only to watch his chance, cut a little gutter across the narrow neck of land some dark night, and turn the water into it, and in a wonderfully short time a miracle has happened: to wit, the whole Mississippi has taken possession of that little ditch.*

—Mark Twain, [1874] 1923

In recent years a number of authors have advanced the discussion of human-environment interactions in the Amazon Basin by presenting evidence—both contemporary and archaeological—of anthropogenic management of an environment previously regarded as “pristine” (Balée 1989; Denevan 1992; Erickson 2000a). It is estimated that humans have intervened in Amazonia since about 11,000 B.P. (Cleary 2001). So far, attention has been given particularly to the management of (agro)forests (see Denevan and Padoch 1988; Balée 1989; Anderson and others 1995; Coomes 1995) and the widespread presence of anthropogenic black earths on both the floodplain and the *tierra firme* (Smith 1980; Woods and McCann 1999; Hecht 2003; Lehmann and others 2003; Glaser and Woods 2004). These works lend support to the active role of humans in shaping the forest landscapes and soils of the Amazon Basin.

Less attention has been devoted to the study of river-management practices among riverine populations (see Chernela 1989; Raffles 2002; Raffles and Winkler-Prins 2003). Almost four decades ago William Denevan (1966, 76) reported that meander necks were intentionally cut off to create shortcuts for canoes on the Río Negro, a small tributary of the Baures River in the Llanos de Mojos region of Bolivia. More recently, Hugh Raffles and Antoinette Winkler-Prins (2003) made the

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