“The Lost Amazon” Opens at the 
Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History

Harvard botanist Richard Evans Schultes (1915-2001) spent twelve years in the Colombian Amazon during the 1940s and early 1950s with the goal of exploring territory previously untraveled by any modern naturalist. He spent these years mapping uncharted rivers, living among two dozen Indian tribes and collecting some 25,000 botanical specimens, including 300 new species and more than 2,000 medicinal plants. Schulte's was able to capture some of his discoveries and observations on camera. His photographs and memorabilia are the focus of a temporary exhibition at the National Museum of Natural History entitled, “The Lost Amazon: The Photographic Journey of Legendary Botanist Richard Evans Schultes,” on view April 17 through October 31, 2008.

“Richard Evans Schultes is a towering figure in the field of “ethnobotany,” the science which studies how plants are used in various cultures,” said Cristián Samper, acting secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. “As someone who knew Dr. Schultes and admired his work, I am gratified that the Smithsonian is honoring his legacy with this tribute to his extraordinary life.”

The exhibition is based on the biographical essay “The Lost Amazon: The Photographic Journey of Richard Evans Schultes” written by ethnobotanist Wade Davis. Thirty-eight black-and-white photographs by Schultes are on view, as well as his Rolleiflex camera, several herbarium specimens from the museum’s collection that he collected and personal items from the Schultes family. The exhibition highlights Schultes’ journey through the Amazon that led him to become the world’s botanical authority on natural rubber and medicinal, toxic and hallucinogenic plants. His photographs evoke a lost era when the tropical rainforests stood immense, and the peoples of the forest relied on plants not only for sustenance, but also for their medicinal and spiritual needs.

The exhibition was curated by Smithsonian botanist John Kress, with guest curators Wade Davis, explorer-in-residence at the National Geographic Society and author of “The Lost Amazon”
and “One River,” and Chris Murray, founder and director of the Govinda Gallery in Washington, D.C. The photographs were printed by Adamson Editions.

In addition to his famous journeys to the Amazon, Schultes also had a prestigious academic career that spanned six decades at Harvard University. Among Schulte's students and associates were Cristián Samper, Michael Balick, Wade Davis, John Kress, Timothy Leary, Mark Plotkin, Timothy Plowman and Andrew Weil.

“Richard Evans Schultes’ travels in the Colombian Amazon during the 1940s and 1950s opened our eyes to the vast environmental and cultural riches that existed in that area of our country,” said Carolina Barco, ambassador of Colombia to the United States. “He raised alarms that the rain forests and their native cultures were in danger of disappearing. Those alarms have not been sufficiently heard and the knowledge that he documented is rapidly being lost. We must join efforts to preserve the cultures and environment of the rainforests.”

The exhibition was made possible by The Embassy of Colombia in the United States and the Latino Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, located at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue N.W., in Washington, D.C., welcomed more than 7 million visitors in 2007. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Beginning Friday, May 23 through Sunday, Aug. 31, the museum will remain open until 7:30 p.m. every day. Admission is free. For further information, call (202) 633-1000, (202) 633-5285 (TTY) or visit the museum’s Web site at www.mnh.si.edu.

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