

From Paradise to Paradise Lost

In January my cousin and I ventured out to North Beach hoping to get a glimpse of migrating Grey Whales. We were thrilled to find many: hanging out just beyond the surf line. As our eyes scanned the sea for others we caught sight of another kind of behemoth on the horizon. A massive oil tanker was slowly making its way to the San Francisco Bay.

Less than two months ago, I landed in Ecuador. We had traveled from sea level to 9,000+ feet and I felt the very corpuscles in my blood stream opening, expanding and making me weirdly light headed. My mission: to push myself beyond my West Marin level of comfort and to experience something completely different. And I wanted to bare witness to the impact of North America's insatiable appetite for oil. I had signed up for the Global Exchange, Toxic Tour of the Amazon.

Ecuador is a place of extreme contrasts. Because it is the only country on the equator that has really high mountains, there was a natural opportunity for ancient cultures to establish site lines that allowed them to track the sun's path throughout the year. Consequently, there are many fascinating archeological ruins indicating past cultures living in inextricable relationship with the celestial universe.

Six hundred miles off the coast are the "enchanted" Galapagos Islands. I have long been a fan of evolution but I was really unprepared for what else I saw there: animals completely neutral to humans. Enthralled, we strolled alongside nesting red-footed boobies and ghost faced frigate birds. We had to remind ourselves not to accidentally step on primitive looking marine iguanas basking in the sun. And, on our first snorkeling adventure, I was delighted by two little Galapagos penguins that zoomed by my mask. We wondered; is this how animals would behave everywhere if they had never been hunted by humans?

Quito, a loud and busy city of three million people and terrible traffic was a jolt after this. But it also had its compelling history. On the eve of Christmas, we entered huge Catholic churches, testaments to the Spanish conquerors and their powerful influence upon the sun worshipers. The inner façade of one was coated entirely in gold, another in silver. Outside, six-year-old street children begged to shine our shoes for a couple of bucks. Here, we were also introduced to the work of Oswaldo Guyasamin, the remarkable nineteenth century artist and activist who depicted the heart-breaking story of human suffering like no other of his time.

In the name of the Spanish conquistadors, the Incas, and various corrupt governments; the Ecuadorian people have consecutively been enslaved, had their land stolen and been murdered, raped and displaced. More recently they

have seen their forests and rivers polluted and their families mortally sickened. It's hard to say who has done the most damage but, in the past 50 years, Oil certainly.

Shockingly, Texaco pillaged the rainforests of Ecuador with a total disregard for horribly negative human and environmental impacts. It came in offering jobs and money but what was delivered were fractured communities, ruined lands and destroyed health. What remains are deep, disgusting pits of contaminated sludge that still seep into rivers and streams – the lifeblood of Amazonian existence.

But sometimes it is in the direst circumstances where the heroes are found. In Ecuador, we discovered a people with an amazing resilience. In 1993, those most affected by the oil contamination, came together to form The Indigenous People's Alliance. They brought a lawsuit against Chevron (that had bought out Texaco). The day it was presented to the court, they walked into the frontier town of Largo Argo 10,000 strong. And, almost twenty years later, in the same place, the court ruled that Chevron must pay \$18 billion to the plaintiffs. 30,000 people are winning against the third largest corporation in America!

We met individuals of the highest caliber on the Tour: including lawyers, indigenous leaders and environmental activists. Never before have I witnessed such an absolute conviction in what's right and the tenacity to hold onto the belief that the best outcome will eventually happen. One of the highlights for us was a three-hour interview with Esperanza Martinez, of Accion Ecologica, who helped make the Rights of Nature part of the Ecuadorian Constitution – a planetary first. It is said that 80% of the country's people are sympathetic to the Lawsuit. All this has had a positive impact on the policies of current President, Rafael Correa.

The last part of our trip was spent in the Andean highlands. I felt immediately at home there: the lush green hillsides reminding me of West Marin in the winter. The small-framed people of the Octavalo region are farmers. There are crops planted, implausibly, on every available piece of vertically sloped land. These people work very hard, live extremely simply, walking almost everywhere, and appear to be relaxed and happy. Our planet could use more of this now. In the name of cheap energy, both our precious whales and we humans are in grave peril of losing everything. I am left with powerful questions. What can we do?

If we do not have the strength to grasp our hands with everyone's hands, if we do not have the tenderness to hold in our arms the children of the world, if we do not have the will to clean the earth of all its armies; this small planet will be a dry and black body in a black space." Oswaldo Guyasamin

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