

dwight grandia

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Subject: travel piece

I wrote this as part of the op-ed writing group I'm participating in through ELP. The assignment was to write a travel story, so I put this together. I'm not sure whether or not to try to publish it somewhere, but at the very least, I hope you find it funny. Love, Liza

Conservation Cowboys Go Camping

by: Liza Grandia, November 13, 2001

It was my third year working for Conservation International in rural communities in northern Guatemala. I had done my share of slogging through swamps, squeezing my almost six foot body into a hammocks made for a five foot person, bathing behind a bush with bucket of water. So, an invitation from the DC staff to an organizational workshop outside of San Francisco to discuss linkages between health and environment sounded grand.

It started off well. My colleagues from twenty various tropical countries and I spent a luxurious evening at a Holiday Inn. Clean sheets! Running water! Telephones to call friends and family! A deli across the street with huge hunks of chocolate cake!

After I had basked in these luxuries, I went to the lobby to meet the the folks flying in from the D.C. office who were planning the workshop. They arrived with backpacks, boots, tents, and lots of fleece - in short, Mucho Outdoor Gear. I had a sinking realization that I had packed terribly wrong.

The next day we headed by bus to the Lost Coast, the longest stretch of roadless beach in the United States. I had been vaguely warned that we would have to walk 15 kilometers along the beach to get to the retreat center. So, I had anticipated something like a Florida beach stroll along smooth, hard packed sand and thought - no problem, I might even walk it barefoot. No one had prepared me for the rocky beaches of California with sand that sinks in above your ankles.

It was undeniably beautiful, but I was too miserable to enjoy the view. But, I trudged along without complaining because there is a distinctly macho culture in the international conservation community and I didn't want to reconfirm their stereotypes about wimpy women.

After this grueling walk, we arrived at the "retreat center" - a surfer lodge really. There were two indoor rooms with four ratty couches, two outhouses, two picnic tables, and one shower for 40 people. We were told to set up tent outside on the beach. Luckily, a few people had brought extra sleeping bags. Being the Atlanta girl I am, who doesn't break a sweat until its at least 95 degrees (in other words, I get cold very easily), I took two sleeping bags the first night and three thereafter.

Now, about the outdoor hippie showerš. It was wood-fired, so only three people at a time could get hot water. The real kicker was that there was no door. After a bit of cajoling from the women, we convinced them to string up a piece of plastic. I found myself getting up well before dawn in the hopes of getting warm for just five minutes and to avoid having my bosses see me dash across the yard in a towel.

The DC-folks kept commenting all week on what a great place it was. They had escaped their cubicles after all. The international field staff though, I noticed, didn't share this enthusiasm. Perhaps we were shivering too much to notice the beauty. And, half of us had sprained our ankles walking in and didn't feel much like hiking anyhow.

The funny thing is Conservation International always seems to do this. The DC-staff pick some remote and inevitably cold spot for the organization's planning retreats - so as to escape their offices, phones, emails --

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and, because, hey, it's an excuse to go camping. But I think the pattern is indicative of something else. It's a view of nature as something exotic and "out there." When we see nature as an escape, it makes us less inclined to address the environment at home, in our own back yards. Millions of dollars go into wilderness protection around the world. How much money goes to ensure that people living near those parks have clean water to drink? This romantic attitude towards nature also leads us to see the "environment" as depopulated - as a place without a human presence. Yet, where does that worldview leave indigenous people who consider the forest their home? It was precisely that mentality that led early conservation leaders in this country to remove systematically every Native American group living in the areas that Congress decided to declare as national parks (as Mark David Spence so brilliantly documents in Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks).

All this a roundabout build-up to my big confession:

I'm an environmentalist, but I hate to go camping.

That's not to say I can't handle "roughing it." I'll sleep in any mud hut anywhere in the tropics with even a few pigs grunting under my bed - whatever (whereas ironically, my DC-conservation colleagues when visiting my project in Guatemala always seemed to want to get back to their air-conditioned hotels as soon as possible). Somehow, I am not inspired to lug the trappings of civilization - i.e. Camping Gear- to a sublime but peopleless area. Take me on a stroll through the woods anytime, but don't ask me to pretend it's my home or to conquer it by camping.

A postscript: After an environmental retreat a couple of months ago at Point Reyes in northern California, I went sea kayaking for the first time. I showed up in what I had worn that day - khaki pants, sandals, oxford shirt. The kayak guy stared at me and demanded, "Where's your gear?" He looked disgusted when I said I didn't have any. I went kayaking anyhow and had a marvelous time without any gortex, fleece, latex, or energy bars. Granted I didn't conquer miles of shoreline. I'll leave that to the conservation cowboys.

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