

Adam Levine: Winter Term 2007

This past January in Ecuador was perhaps the longest month of my life. Not because it was unpleasant or boring, but because I never settled into any sort of routine. Every day brought a new challenge, and pushed me further and further outside of my comfort zone. Challenging myself like that occasionally brought up feelings of homesickness, but also put me in amazing situations and places that I would otherwise never have seen. Throughout the month I worked with an environmental organization called Altropico, which does community advocacy and sustainable development work in the northern region of Ecuador called the Choco bioregion. The following is an explanation of where I went, what I did, and what I learned.

I arrived in Quito on the morning of January third. After all of the preparations and planning, I was finally there, and realized that I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. My sister describes it as the “now what?” phenomenon of traveling. Jaime, the man for whom I would be working, was away traveling for the first few days that I was in Ecuador. Completely by myself, I spent those days idly walking around the city, stopping at hole-in-the-wall restaurants and working on regaining my Spanish.

On my third day there, Jaime got back from his travels, and we arranged to meet at his house. He lived two buses and a taxi ride outside of the city (about 40 minutes), in a small house with a huge backyard full of puppies and chickens. I spent the weekend at this house with Jaime and his family, sleeping in a one-room guesthouse out back with Isabella, the family’s housekeeper. At the end of the weekend, I decided I would rather stay in a hostel in the city than live with Jaime for the month. So I packed up my clothes and went back into the city.

The following week, Jaime proposed that I travel with one of the Altropico workers to a community in the north of Ecuador near the city of San Lorenzo. I was excited to get out of Quito, and begin to do what this organization did, but the day that I was supposed to travel, I got extremely sick and spent the whole day in bed. After that it did not make much sense for me to travel that week, seeing as I would only have one full day to spend in San Lorenzo. However two good things came out of that situation. One was that I was able to travel with some people I had met to a Cloud Forest in the Andes for the weekend. The other was that I got to sit in on a fascinating meeting that was held in the Altropico office.

The meeting taught me a lot about what Altropico does and even more about its relationship with other environmental NGOs in Ecuador. The meeting focused on a proposed protected forest in the north along the border with Columbia called the Golondrinas National Forest. The completion of this forest would mean that all of the land, trees, and animals within the boundary would be protected and therefore off limits to farming, logging, or hunting. Most of the environmental organizations around Ecuador support this creation of this forest as a means of preserving the rich ecological diversity that exists there. However, the boundaries of this forest would include a wide perimeter of land that is inhabited by a variety of diverse rural communities. These communities depend on the resources from the forest to survive, and despite not having legal title to their land, these people have been living there for hundreds of years. For the past three years, Altropico has been working with local people in this area to map out the boundaries of their land, boundaries that have never before been defined. Now that that project is finished, Altropico has begun working with local governments to secure land

title for these people so as to preserve their communities and way of life. However Altropico has run into significant resistance from other environmental organizations who are more focused on the ecological significance of the land and are willing to sacrifice the human diversity that exists there. So during this meeting, representatives from various and disparate environmental organizations spoke about the future of this land. I was fascinated by the discussion that took place during this meeting. The discrepancy in opinions showed a stark contrast in people's environmental ethics and what they found important to protect.

The following week, I traveled with an Altropico worker named Marcos to San Lorenzo. The city has a population of 14,000 people and only one paved street. Nearly all of the residents of San Lorenzo as well as the surrounding communities are black, descendants of slaves. The city itself was a vibrant port town. As opposed to other cities of its size, San Lorenzo seems to have a fair amount of money coming into it from the commerce passing through its port. The bustling streets are always crowded with people walking to and from work, riding bikes, playing soccer or just taking a stroll. Throughout the city at any time day or night, reggae music can be heard blasting from the shops and houses. Much of the business in the city is conducted on tricycles that people ride through the city. Meats, fish, clothes, and juice can all be bought from sellers on tricycles.

ON my first day in the surrounding rural communities I went with an Altropico worker named Dumar to a community called La Chiquita. The community consisted of about ten families living about an hour outside of San Lorenzo. The houses, mostly consisting of just one room, were made of bare wood with holes cut in the sides for windows. Dumar and I walked around the community visiting with people that lived

there and talking with them about the projects that Altropico had been doing. The two main projects in this area were domesticated fish ponds and bee hives for honey. Dumar and I looked at the hives and fish ponds and talked to the community members about how they were doing and how to raise the animals. As we walked around, Dumar showed me all of the edible fruits in the forest. At one point we stopped to pick coconuts, which Dumar peeled in about 30 seconds with his machete; we sat and drank fresh coconut milk. Later on, an elderly couple invited us into their house for lunch. We ate eggs and fried plantains and drank sweet tea. As we ate, we talked about family and life in Ecuador and the U.S. I was amazed at how easily I could communicate with these people with whom I had nothing in common except the Spanish language. It was an amazing experience to be able to sit with these people and talk about our lives despite everything that separated us.

Speaking with people in the community, I learned about the battle that they are currently fighting. Until about five years ago, the river that ran through La Chiquita provided fish, fresh drinking water, and place to bathe and do laundry for the community. Since then, however, a palm oil manufacturing plant was built just upriver. The crops that the company grows are treated with deadly pesticides, and when it rains, these pesticides run off into the river, which contaminates all of the water downstream. Because of this company, the fish that once lived in this river have all died, and the people of La Chiquita can no longer drink the water or even wash their clothes in it. Altropico has been working on a lawsuit against the company for years, but none of the workers seemed very optimistic about their chances of winning.

The next day, I went with a different worker named Frisman to a community called Las Minas Viejas. Our goal was to talk to the president of the community and see if he would be interested in working with Altropico. But as it turned out, the president was in San Lorenzo that day. So we took a swim in the river and went back.

The next day was Friday and Jaime and a few of the Altropico workers came to La Chiquita for a party. The celebration was held in commemoration of the day that the community won their land title. Since Altropico had worked with them for so many years on winning the title, they are invited every year to the party. I spent the day playing soccer with the kids from the community who made me look like a total klutz (though in my defense we were playing on a muddy field with a flat basketball for a ball). Later they held a ceremony for the graduating first graders who received diplomas and bags of candy. After that they held a raffle fundraiser, the prize being a chicken and a bottle of coke. I had bought a ticket to the raffle, in hopes of losing. But sure enough, when they picked the number out of the hat, number 122 was called and I had won. I received my prize with great humiliation, and later gave it to the teachers of the elementary school. The rest of the day was spent eating fruit, listening to people play music and trying to decline shots of aguardiente that people offered me (the liquor was about 95% alcohol).

Before heading back to Quito, Marcos, Dumar and I took a trip to an indigenous community about an hour from La Chiquita. There we observed some fish ponds and beehives that were being raised. Some of the fish ponds seemed to be struggling, and Marcos spoke with some members of the community about ways that they could help revive the fish populations. Altropico is always walking a fine line between doing work that helps people and simply adding more work and stress to people's lives. When a

project fails, it makes it that much harder for Altropico to convince people that the next project will in fact be worth their effort. Moreover, Altropico is always trying to engage the community and to work through participatory planning. So if they lose the faith of a community, there is only so much that they can do to try to regain their trust.

I spent the weekend in Quito and on Monday I left with yet another worker, Christian, for a town along the Columbian border called Chical. We arrived late in the evening and found a room in a woman's house who was offering room and board. On Tuesday I went with Christian and an American Peace Corps volunteer, Andrew, to the surrounding farms. The farms we saw were nothing like the monoculture that is planted in the United States. Walking through these farms felt more like a walk in the woods, however most of the plants were there intentionally. And of course no chemical or pesticides are ever used on these farms. The idea of such chemicals would be abhorrent to the people who lived there. As we walked, the farmers would tell me about the all of the fruits and vegetables that they grew, most of which I had never heard of before: guanabana, yucca, maracuya, granadillas, naranjilla. We spoke with the farmers about how Altropico's assistance has been helping so far, and what else could be done. We spoke with one man about the boundaries of his property as part of the effort to define the territory of various communities. The discussion got very heated over a difference of opinion as to where his property ended. And without any legal title to the land, the dispute was essentially impossible to settle.

Wednesday, Andres, Christian and I went to visit a panella-manufacturing factory outside of Chical. Panella is a sugar cane product, similar to brown sugar but with a stronger taste. The factory was a room with a large stove for boiling the cane juice and

machine that ground the cane and extracted the juice. The factory was run as a growers' co-op where a collective of local growers contributed to the building of the factory and now can use it once a week to make their panella. Altropico also helped out a lot with the funding and construction of the factory. Throughout the day that I spent at the factory, various workers invited me to sample the product that they were making. I was treated to a glass of cane juice when I arrived there. Later I was offered some toffee-like product as well as some hard candies that they were making and a plate of cheese with sugary syrup. By the end of the day, I was through with the taste of panella. We had lunch with a couple of local growers, fresh Tilapia fish that we caught out of the fish ponds in their back yards.

Throughout the visit to Chical, Andrew spoke with various groups about starting a system of community banks. The idea of these banks is that members of the community would deposit 50 cents to a dollar every week. After a while, once there is enough money in the bank, members can take out small loans to cover some of their expenses. At the end of each year, the bank would be emptied and divided among all of the members that contributed to it. Andrew gave his speech about these banks to various groups: women in the preschool, men in the panella factory, etc. I was surprised to see that each time, people in the community seemed to be extremely receptive to this idea. They recognized right away how helpful these banks could be. As one man put it, there are times we they need ten or fifteen dollars, but don't have the money. This bank would be a way for people to afford the things that they need but often cannot afford. For people that contribute but do not take out loans, the bank would serve as an added income because of the interest that others pay on the loans they take. Andrew also told people about a plan to

provide micro-loans through Altropico based on some grants that they were applying for. This project was still being formed though, so he did not go into much detail talking about it.

My last day in Chical, I went to see a marmalade factory run by a group of women from the city. The woman that was showing us the factory told us about the difficulties they have had trying to get funding and legal permits to sell their jam. After 15 years of struggling to get this company running, this group of woman was still tied up in legal and financial battles.

We went back to Quito on Friday afternoon. The next day I went with some other travelers I had met to a town in the South called Quenca. We spent a couple of days touring the city and another day at nearby Inca ruins called Ingapirca. After Quenca, we turned westward and headed for the coast. I spent my last two days in Ecuador in a couple of beach towns just north of Guayaquil hanging out with street artists and swimming in the Pacific. It was an interesting contrast to go from traveling in the rural campesino communities of the north to these wealthy tourist towns. I feel like I really saw both extremes in people's living conditions in Ecuador.

During the month I spent in Ecuador, I learned how to make rope out of plantain tree leaves (the trick is to wind the leaves into strands going in opposite directions), how to eat a tamarind (open the pod and suck the mushy pulp off the seeds), how to dance meringue (sort of), and where to go for the best street art in Quito (Parque El Ejido on Saturday mornings). But the most interesting thing I learned was how conceptions of rural development and environmentalism differ among seemingly similar organizations and how these differences shape and drastically change the way that people approach



such issues as conservation, cultural preservation, sustainability and land management. Speaking with people from Altropico as well as people in the communities where I traveled, I learned a lot about how people live in rural Ecuador and what it means to protect that way of life. Learning about the controversies regarding land rights and forest preservation, I was reminded of the William Cronon article *The Trouble with Wilderness*, in which he said: “The dream of an unworked natural landscape is usually had by people who never had to work the land to eat.” Seeing the farms and land on which the people in these communities depend, I was struck by how natural and sustainable their practices were. These communities have much to teach about agriculture and land management. Loosing these communities in exchange for cheaper palm oil or even a larger protected forest would really be a detriment to us all. Altropico knows this and has been working to protect their ways of life while helping them adapt to a changing world. I was truly fortunate to be able to spend this month with them and learn what rural development in Ecuador means.