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## There, Then Back There Again: A Personal Reflection on Environmental Responsibility While Traveling Abroad

STACY VARS

Kansas State University, [sjvars@ksu.edu](mailto:sjvars@ksu.edu)

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## There, Then Back There Again: A Personal Reflection on Environmental Responsibility While Traveling Abroad

### Abstract

In my personal journey essay, "There, Then Back There Again", I combine personal reflection with travel writing to explore my own conflicted feelings about traveling. I love to travel and hope to one day be able to travel more than I have been able to thus far. It is in my recent trip to Ecuador to study abroad that I started to grapple with concerns about the impact my traveling could have on the communities and environments around me. I began noticing the economic conditions of various neighborhoods we traveled through, as well as learned about environmental impacts of human activities in the Amazon and Galapagos. Couple this with a sharp awareness of the growing ecotourism trade and I found myself looking at my surroundings differently. Even in the presence of stunning mountain vistas with soaring condors, sitting atop rushing waters winding its way to join the Amazon River, or watching sea lions walking down the boardwalk to find a prime sunning spot, Ecuador opened my eyes to look below the mundane tourist traps and see the bigger, more complicated relationships of nature and humans, politics and culture, capitalism and survival. Before Ecuador traveling was about personal enjoyment. After Ecuador, it's about learning, growing beyond simple consumerism, and then sharing my journey with those who can't go themselves.

### Keywords

Travel Writing, Personal Reflection

There, Then Back There Again: A Personal Reflection on  
Environmental Responsibility While Traveling Abroad

Stacy Vars<sup>1</sup>

By the time I was a freshman in high school, I had attended seven different schools in two different states. My father had been an enlisted soldier, trotting me to Germany and Massachusetts before his medical discharge allowed him to return to his home state of California. Traveling had become such a norm for me that, as a young adult I would get an itch to change, something, anything. Hairstyles, the furniture layout, curtains, paint—things I had control of when I couldn't just pack up and move. New places and people have always fascinated me, feeding my natural curiosity while soothing the urge to move. As my interests have broadened through continuing my education, I still want to experience breathtaking vistas, share the boardwalk with sea lions, and sample local cuisine in places outside my comfort zone. With that growing desire to travel and see new worlds comes a growing discomfort that I could potentially leave as much behind as I bring home with me. Is it responsible of me to go then, leaving traces of my presence that could have far-reaching and negative impacts? That thought hadn't occurred to me initially.

When the chance to study abroad in Ecuador for two weeks presented itself, I knew I could not let this chance pass by. As I packed my bags, I envisioned day trips to volcanoes, hiking through the rainforest, and snorkeling with sharks. I had never been to South America, so exhilaration, apprehension, and impatience were jostling each other in and out of my thoughts even as I was preparing for finals week just days before we left. Exciting indeed, but I'm not the same wide-eyed, innocent, even ignorant young woman I was then.

The bus ride from our hotel in Quito to the volcanic slopes of Antisana would be the start of seeing through a new set of eyes. The young girl who had only seen the unfamiliar and interesting when visiting a new place, would begin seeing past the hollow allure of wealth and success, to the downtrodden, the poor; expensive condominiums with perfectly manicured grounds looming over buildings that looked like piles of rubble, leftovers from a long-ago war. I could not tell if they were buildings falling down, or in the process of haphazard construction. It wasn't the thing I expected to draw me in while visiting this beautiful country, but I couldn't ignore it. Do the occupants in those bright white stucco buildings with shiny floor-to-ceiling windows see the world outside? Do they turn a blind-eye, or does it spur them to fight for equality and social justice? What about me, as a foreigner in this land? What am I ignoring in favor of experiencing a "once in a lifetime" trip? If I want to travel the world, I am an accomplice to the ever-growing ecotourist industry. To believe I can travel and

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<sup>1</sup> Stacy Vars (B.A. 2019, M.A. 2021) is a first-generation nontraditional student with a passion for learning, travel, and experiencing new cultures and peoples. She loves connecting with others through humor, life experiences, and food. She currently lives with her two dogs and two cats while making frequent trips to visit her granddaughter. She is planning a trip to Italy in the next year to visit her youngest child.

not have some kind of impact for the good or bad is a lie I can no longer tell. I want to do as much as I can to be part of a solution, but how much more problem am I creating? Is there a happy medium that lets me travel the world while doing as little damage to it as possible?

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To reach the Tiputini Biodiversity Research Station, my classmates, instructors, and I flew from Quito to Coca, a city sitting in the branches of the Napo and Coca Rivers. Once a small, secluded village it became a focal point for the booming oil industry pushing into the jungle. Today, tourists making their way farther into the Amazon basin can reach Coca by bus, boat, and plane. Because of this gateway position, Coca has been trying to grow its reputation as a tourist spot, building hotels and restaurants.

After a long boat ride from Coca further south, we crossed the private property of an oil company, the truck bouncing and jostling over the gravel road as we passed various dwellings belonging to the native peoples. The truck stopped occasionally, picking up and dropping off people along the route. Women and children tried to sell us tourists hand-braided bracelets, or woven bags and bowls for a dollar or two. Purchasing a few bracelets, I didn't know if my consumerism truly helped to improve their economic conditions. Several homes had groups of people gathering and playing football in the field sitting between the structures and the road. The truck reached the end of the road, dropping us at a boat dock, only one more leg of the trip left down the river. The remainder of the journey by boat was quiet, peaceful even. Before long, the boat rounded a bend, and the stairs rising from the surface of the water comes into view.

It's late in the afternoon when we arrive. Our group of eleven people lug bags, suitcases, and backpacks up the steep stairs from the submerged dock to the outdoor dining area. The small dock is under nearly two feet of water from the swollen river, fed by the heavy rain in previous weeks. The station's buildings are spread out, the jungle between the areas so thick that a dozen steps from a structure and it's lost in a sea of greens and browns. Electricity is on only a couple of hours midday and again in the evening, with the exception of the library. Housing books, computers, video equipment, and dry boxes for moisture-sensitive electronics like cell phones, the power (and air conditioning) runs all the time. It's a welcome respite in the evenings, drawing us in to gather around the table and play card games, thumb through the various books loaded with photographs and descriptions of animals we might see on our hikes, or listen to presentations from the scientists working at the station. Only cold water is available in the bathrooms, and no paper products are to be flushed down the toilets. The paths are a mix of tree roots and hewn stones. For the next two days this will be home. I learned to not look up when returning to the cabin at night. I'd rather not know if there is a spider above my head as I hurry to my bunk.

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The humidity makes my normally bouncing and frizzy curls hang limply around my head, as sweat runs off the ends of the coils and down my neck. I perpetually look like I have just stepped out of the shower and dressed without toweling off the entire time I'm in the Amazon basin. Several of us have left the

camp on the boat to explore more of the jungle. It's quiet sitting in the boat on the river, with a slight breeze dancing across my face and arms, birds calling out now and then. The breeze is enough to keep the smell of DEET from being overpowering but not quite enough to keep the sweat from continuing to fall. While my classmates and instructors were traipsing through the thick brush looking for a family of pigmy marmosets, I linger on the boat, nursing a bum knee. It feels peaceful, tranquil, secluded even.

I'm staring at the river, willing any strange fish I will have no way of identifying to poke its head above the water. After all isn't that what I'm here for; to see nature in its natural, ideal state? As I relaxed my chin on my arm on the edge of the boat, several slender, shimmering, rainbow-hued fingers caught my eye. They're stretching across the surface of the murky water, sliding around the side of the boat, reaching out into the water, and riding the current downstream. Oil.

Oil from the outboard motors of our boat ever-so-slowly bleeds into the water. And snap, my illusion of immersion in the wilderness is breached. While I know the amount isn't much, my mind quickly wondered how many other boats are on how many other rivers, all dispersing "small" amounts of oil. I know realistically the idea of a pristine planet evaporated the moment *Homo sapiens* started mucking things up, but I'm suddenly overwhelmed by the enormity of the scope of our influence on the world for the worse. Even on a trip that is educational in focus, our efforts to reach the locations we are studying demand great resources and exact a toll on the world around us. The planes, the trucks, the buses, the generators, even the food that's shipped in to feed us. Every moment spent in this paradise has consequences that demand payment. I wonder about my part in this, knowing if I wasn't here someone else would be. Should I sit on my comfortable couch in my air-conditioned home or go out and explore? Does one option have less impact over the other? The more questions I ask the more questions I have, and the scale of the interconnected problems becomes apparent.

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The biology online dictionary defines *niche* as, "(ecology) The specific area where an organism inhabits; (ecology) The role or function of an organism or species in an ecosystem." For example, the bacteria *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*) is happy and safe in its niche in my intestines where it efficiently begins to break down the pancakes my classmates and I ate for breakfast at camp, alongside hundreds of other species of microorganisms. This microbiome works together to keep each other's populations in check, to break down larger molecules for their survival, while providing much-needed nutrients that get packaged and shipped off to the areas of my body that need them. *E. coli* becomes something altogether unpleasant when it leaves its niche and finds itself in other areas of the body without the checks and balances that keep it in line within the digestive system.

From the moment we either crawled out of the ooze or were booted from the garden we have had to create clothing, tools, and communities to survive. One man and one woman would not make it very long in even the most hospitable habitat without modifying the world around them. Indeed, contestants on the show *Naked and Afraid* are survivalists who practice and prepare for the potential conditions they may face. The official description says, "For 21 days, one man

and one woman - meeting for the first time in the nude - are paired and tasked to survive in some of the world's most extreme environments... with no food, water or clothes.” Contestants prepare for various conditions, practice making fire with minimal materials, learn and practice water purification techniques, even walking barefoot. The harshest of conditions can be tolerated by humans only with elaborate investment in tools and supplies, items and skills developed in other communities. Our species’ ability in populating most corners of the planet lies in our capability to shape either the surroundings, tools or both successfully. Early humans didn’t have that luxury, and yet they survived, reaching an estimated 5 million people around 8000 B.C.

Two major advancements would see population numbers grow at unprecedented rates. Between the range of 8000 B.C. to 1 A.D., the birth of agriculture would herald one of the first major growth periods. Shifting from hunting and gathering to farming and animal husbandry provided stable and consistent food sources. Estimates for human populations in early history range anywhere from 200 to 600 million depending on the source. That’s a growth rate of under 0.05% per year. It would take all the time between the arrival of modern *Homo sapiens* to the 1800’s to reach one billion people. The second development would have ramifications far beyond exploding the human population numbers.

Industrialization would lead to urbanization, drawing people in from rural areas to cities looking for employment. Scientific advancements would improve agricultural practices and healthcare. Disparity between the rich and the poor would lead to changes in governmental and social services. By 1930, just 130 years, 1 billion people would become 2 billion. Thirty years later we would hit 3 billion, the fourth billion only 15 years after that, and the fifth billion in only 13 years in 1987. The good news though indicates that growth rates are slowing down, such that it may take over 200 years for the world population to double again.

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In the middle of this unique experience, there were reminders everywhere of our disposable culture. With the exception of group meals in the dining hall, everything packed for excursions is individually packaged in one form of plastic or another. Drinks are in plastic bottles or wax-coated boxes, sandwiches are in cling wrap, snack packs are tossed in our small white plastic bags by the handful. The only items not in packaging of some kind is the fresh fruit. Even though there were recycling receptacles back at camp, it did little to lessen the sting every time I opened a package and cringed inwardly at the wastefulness.

The few days we had there were packed with activities that took us into the jungle. From sunrise views from the tower above the canopy, boat rides up and down the river to various locations (with the added thrill of some brave souls jumping in with a life jacket and floating back downstream), to after-dark hikes through the jungle surrounding the camp. Many times, I would just sit, staring around me in awe and wonder, thinking, “I’m really in The Amazon. We’re eating a birthday cake made by the cook staff for two of my classmates, in the *Amazon!*”

Our last night we were treated to a presentation by Diego Mosquera, an ecologist from the Universidad San Francisco de Quito, and the manager of

Tiputini since 2005. Since 2004, Tiputini has been gathering data on the wildlife of the Yasuní National Park through camera traps. Through a grant from National Geographic, they started with a dozen cameras, triggered by heat and movement. Camera traps allow scientists to study animals in their natural habitats with minimal impact, at all hours of the day, in any climatic conditions. Not only are cameras relatively cheap, allowing teams to set up multiple cameras at each location for shots at different angles, but they also increase the likelihood of capturing images of elusive species. To date, around 50,000 photographs and 10,000 videos have been captured of animals ranging from white-lipped peccaries, giant armadillos, and capibaras to jaguars. This data is used to evaluate the condition of the jungle and educate the world outside its borders. The next phase of the project is to observe wildlife in the canopy, starting with ten cameras. While the photos are interesting, the thing that stands out for me from the whole presentation is the impact human encroachment is having on the wildlife. Roads cut through migration routes are negatively impacting a variety of animals, such as the Andean bear. A sense of despair lurks below the surface as I listen to Diego talk about how things have changed in the years he's been in Tiputini. On his website, he says, "We simply need to understand that our life depends on the lives of others and that we are not here to decide who has the right to live and who does not. The success of human beings as a species resides in the fact that many can reason. We can use that gift for good, to respect all the life forms of our planet. It is difficult to change, but not impossible." It wasn't all bad news. He reassured us the rainforest in this region is in good condition, but I wonder if this is because there is little human presence here. What about the rest of the Amazon, the regions that spread across eight other countries?

In Brazil alone, deforestation of the Amazon continues at nearly three football fields a minute per former Director-General of the National Institute for Space Research, Ricardo Magnus Osório Galvão, a well-respected physicist. A public dispute between current Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and Galvão arose over the claims, resulting in Galvão being fired on August 2nd. Bolsonaro accuses the scientist of using the data to defame Brazil and its government. So is the Amazon really being cut down at that alarming rate? Rosie McCall claims, "According to satellite imagery, some 7,900 square kilometers (3,050 square miles) of Brazil's Amazon rainforest were lost between August 2017 and July 2018. That is equivalent to a landmass five times the size of London, 10 times the size of New York, 75 times the size of Paris, and 6.3 million times the size of an Olympic swimming pool." Shocking statistics when taken together with the fact that Brazil is home to nearly two thirds of the Amazon. The shift in the later part of the 1970's from subsistence farming to industrial and large-scale agriculture escalated the rate at which the rainforest was cleared. A downward trend began in the early 2000's, "...fueled by a number of factors, including increased law enforcement, satellite monitoring, pressure from environmentalists, private and public sector initiatives, new protected areas, and macroeconomic trends." Brazil's increase in clearing land could be signaling a reversal with dire consequences. My heart is heavy in my chest as we leave Tiputini. The water levels have dropped significantly in the two days that we have been here. Trunks

and branches of trees along the water, previously submerged, are wrapped in silt and a shoreline is visible. To our delight, a caiman is basking in the warm sun on one of the recently exposed beaches, one last hoorah as we make our way back to Coca.

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Galapagos is a community of islands off the coast of Ecuador trying to walk a spider's silk fine line between the economics of tourism and environmental conservation. In 1968, after the establishment of the Galapagos Island National Park, guidelines were set for around 12,000 tourists coming through in a year. By the 1980's the limits were increased to 25,000, and by 2015 the number of tourists visiting the islands had risen by ten times that number. The positive impacts center around financial gains both the Ecuadorian government and the local island communities reap. While increased economic capital is a positive, the impacts of all those extra people bring several downsides.

More people mean an increased demand in accommodations. Small villages begin to explode in development, such as Puerto Ayora, building hotels and restaurants, losing part of the draw of island life. The increase in tourists mean the farmers can't keep up with the demands and food has to be shipped in from the mainland, around 850 miles away. Tourist companies specializing in activities ranging from horseback riding to swimming at Kicker Rock to sport fishing and kayaking adventures add to the growing demand for employees, drawing individuals from the mainland to islands for work. The migration numbers to the islands between 1974 and 1998 has increased 375%! Some of the tourist activities have yet to be studied as far as what impact they have on the environment.

Easily mistaken for boulders along the beach, Playa Mann is dotted with sea lions soaking up the sun in the late afternoon. Close enough to walk up and touch, they couldn't care less about the humans lying feet away, soaking up the sun themselves. It's a little surreal to waffle back and forth between staring at the sea lions (they're RIGHT THERE!) and the approaching sunset. Eventually the sunset wins out for my attention as it's fleeting, and the sea lions aren't in a hurry to go anywhere. This little stretch is far enough removed from the marina that all I see before me is the beach, the bathers, the ocean, and the dipping sun. A little sliver of paradise right outside the front doors of the Universidad San Francisco de Quito in Galapagos.

Around the marina I have trouble separating the paradise from commercial intrusion. The restaurants, hotels, shops, and ecotours vie for precious tourist dollars. The marina is full of ships, dozens and dozens by my estimation. If I had to bet, I'd say most of them were probably owned by the tour and adventure businesses up and down the blocks around the boardwalk. The sea lions weren't bothered by the number of ships or people, casually walking along the boardwalk to get to a choice spot in the sun next to the warm wall of a building or lying in the shade cast by the statue of Darwin and the Beagle in the square. The shops themselves were bursting at the door frames with thousands and thousands of trinkets and souvenirs tourists could pick up to commemorate their visit. Plastic keychains with an array of tortoises, sea lions, and blue-footed boobies, t-shirts,



hats, backpacks, jewelry, puzzles, and shot glasses to name a few. They beckoned shoppers from every other door, with displays now and then spilling onto the sidewalk, each shop's merchandise similar but slightly different, everything blurring together into obscurity. I bought some of them myself, stuffed animals for my nephews, a bag for myself, a keychain that broke within two weeks. Another cog in the wheel of the commercialization of paradise locations, grinding the life out of the local communities, the wildlife, and the environment they live in.

~ ~ ~

Now more than ever I want to travel. I sit here listening to the inner voices vying to be heard, to be right, to be on the chosen path.

*"You're part of the problem!"*

"I can learn more about peoples and places than I can just from reading a book or magazine or even watching television."

*"You use up resources, trod on delicate ecosystems, gobble up useless commercialized trinkets you'll just vomit up into the landfills and oceans!"*

"I don't have to. I can be mindful of my behavior, spend less on souvenirs, focus more on where I am and who I'm with."

*"But why? Why?? You're only one person, you can't make a difference!!"*

But I can.

I'm already looking into investing in carbon offsets. When I finally buy a house of my own, I'll be looking at renewable energy sources like solar and wind. I'm replacing single-use plastic bags with reusable canvas. I've already replaced many light bulbs with LED and smart bulbs. At the time I thought the benefit was a reduction in utility costs. It costs less because I'm using less, which now seems the biggest benefit. As a student on a tight budget the cost of switching everything over to efficient bulbs and appliances felt unachievable. By replacing items one or two at a time the immediate out-of-pocket cost has been more manageable. Living in a rental I can't replace the appliances, the insulation, or install renewable energy but I did install a programmable thermostat, I use solar-blocking drapes on the largest windows and run a dehumidifier on the muggiest of days to reduce the amount of time the air conditioner runs. I justify the added expense of a recycling bin knowing that about half of what used to go to the landfill now gets recycled. I'll continue to make changes in my personal life to lessen the negative impact my daily living puts on the planet.

I can also begin getting involved outside my personal world. A recent headline announced that both Coke and Pepsi had pulled out of a major plastic lobbying group, realizing that their public commitment to use more recycled plastics did not coincide with the lobby group's drive to prevent increased use of renewable plastic. As consumers we can encourage companies like Coke and Pepsi to continue to walk away from powerful lobbying groups to uphold their own green initiatives. We can encourage the companies that produce our favorite products to go green or greener or switch to companies that are green. Begin practicing intentional living not only in recycling but in purchasing goods that come in eco-friendly packaging. On top of these changes I willingly make, my abstinence from politics must come to an end. Candidates' stances on

environmental issues is now a top priority for me. The government, unlike corporations, has the power we the voters give it. Just like regulating the power in my home, I can monitor and try to make changes from the top down with my vote.

And I can write. I'm not the same wide-eyed, innocent, even ignorant young woman I was so long ago. My trip to Ecuador was science-focused for a group of college students looking to fill a couple of English and biology credits. Perhaps if tourist industries began to incorporate more educational material, tourists would also be motivated to preserve these beautiful places. I would certainly take my family on a vacation just like my study abroad trip, lectures and all! Several times I felt that one or the other of my daughters would have loved experiencing something I was doing. It's not enough to just go and lie on a beach anymore. I want to travel so I can see firsthand the intimate connection between people, their lands, and the wildlife. I want to bring the details of those trips back, the good and the bad, and use my writing to encourage others that you can balance traveling with personal responsibility. Every one of us can be mindful of our presence and impact on our surroundings. It's one commodity that we can take with us everywhere, doesn't take up space in a suitcase or bag, and doesn't cost us anything to carry.

In those moments when I close my eyes and am still for a moment, I'm back there, lying in my bottom bunk in Tiputini late at night. The curtains are wide open, and the cool air is quietly slipping over the ledge, sinking down to my bed and whispering across my bare arms and legs, the jungle alive with its symphony of nocturnal insects and animals, chirping, peeping, and rustling. Peace settles over me as my body cools and sleep carries me off into the next day of discovery.

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