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Beyond Textbooks and Statistics

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Beyond Textbooks and Statistics

Cover Page Footnote

From Mumbai, India and having lived in Europe for a while, Jahnavi loves adventure, the ocean, and meeting new people. She is a rising junior at Claremont McKenna College and you can spot her with a grin or giggle, and a colorful coffee mug. On campus, she enjoys tutoring at the Writing Center, researching at The Lowe Institute of Political Economy, and being a fellow with EnviroLab Asia. Jahnavi is passionate about the environment, social entrepreneurship, poetry, and the role of gender in the workplace that inspires her to run Claremont Women in Business. She wants to use science, writing, and personal experience to become a communicator and change-maker in the world.

Borneo: An Inside Perspective

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Abstract: This essay reflects the author's discovery of what makes studying a subject worth it. The clinic trip to Borneo brought textbooks to life and also enabled us to see beyond the numbers to a more human experience. As someone who grew up in a business family and with a certain mindset, Jahnvi the global and cultural perspectives that make studying the environment more tangible. A small surprise follows the short prose piece.

EnviroLab Asia was exhilarating and exciting because it gave me a very new and personal take on the subjects that I have been pursuing academically at college. I am a science-management major with an environmental focus and hope to enter the fields of environmental consulting, law and corporate responsibility when I graduate. Such subjects and careers can often become technical—based off just textbooks and case studies. Being on the land, which we were trying to impact, provided me the opportunity to see the tangible effects of such corporate decisions and inspired me to continue to pursue a corporate career with a humane interest. I have come to realize that I am an experiential learner and this experience really made me see a close parallel between the environmental issues faced by poverty-stricken areas around the world as more than just theory.

Growing up in India, I had the opportunity to do a lot of social-service work while in high school. I learned about the local issues such as extreme drought and flood, lack of soil quality, and deforestation and was inspired to take up studying their cause and solutions at an early age. The trip to Sarawak and Singapore gave me a more-global perspective on such issues that permeate every economy and country. I realized that our experience as a group was not inhibited by the language and cultural barriers we faced because we had alongside us locals who were willing to explain to us what they were going through as a community. This was unique to me because while they were strongly opposed to development projects such as the super dam, they were also aware of the international players in the issue and their need for a global movement and voice. It was this passion, this love for their cause in the indigenous people, that helped me realize how much courage springs from a powerful cause.

While it seemed to me that Borneo is completely insulated from the outside world as a result of their lack of technology, it made me realize a powerful message that they gave through their culture and lifestyle. The intense need to save a culture and community, especially one that is dying, requires

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immense efforts and a pure heart. These men and women, although poor, welcomed us into their *long houses* and gave us home-cooked food and hospitality beyond that they could afford. This showed me the power and goodness of humanity and gave me a stronger reason to fight for their human rights and environmental sovereignty. Coming from a country whose goals of development have led to several compromises for its people such as smog, a lack of space, etc, I tried to understand how the identity of a place goes beyond its development statistics.

What I thought was unique about our trip was the fact that we had an amalgamation of so many perspectives. We had the ability to feel empathy for the indigenous people, understand the efforts that the NGOs in the area were taking, learn about the corporate efforts in sustainability while recognizing that their profitability goals might complicate their sustainability efforts, and sense the role of the Government and its political corruption. Through this holistic approach, I realized the importance of studying and more-fully understanding the complexity of an issue before even attempting to solve it. As a student in a liberal-arts curriculum, I am able to appreciate the literature and the politics and the art and the science all at once. When I take up consulting in my future, this experience will definitely teach me the necessity of seeing all sides of an issue.

Another thing that I saw as unique in this experience was the interdisciplinary nature of backgrounds we came from and the necessity for these perspectives when studying an issue so complex. Having a professor of religious studies alongside us made me understand the religious and cultural impacts on the environment in the region and how this changes demographics more than we realize. Having a photojournalist on the trip showed me the way media can be used to skew messages but also showed me the power that media has in propagating messages and objectives. Having scientific researchers helped us collect data such as water purity and oxygen concentration, which could lead to more statistical evidence for environmental destruction in the area alongside the riverbank and over many years of destruction. These perspectives made me realize the value of my liberal arts education for I hope to have an interdisciplinary mindset when I graduate and enter the working world.

Meeting Philip, one of the founders of the NGO called Save Rivers, really impacted me and the foundation of my human relationships. While he was a man of great influence and had a lot of work in the country, he was very humble about it and actually spent time showing us around the area and explaining every aspect of the problem in an unbiased way. He actually spoke to us about the risks to his own life such as threats that have come his way but the way he has continuously put his purpose before himself inspired me. During one of our long drives with him, he was talking about his children and suddenly remembered that he was going to see his daughter after more than a year the day after we left. The fact that he forgot about his own family and his own joys showed me the selflessness with which he showed us Miri and his islands. Even after we left the country, Philip wrote me an email asking if I had reached college safely and sent me his wishes from thousands of miles away. This touched my heart and made me realize the power of human connections. I realized right then that the satisfaction of working for a humanitarian cause or one for the future of the earth is one of the most fulfilling things one can do because it connects you strongly to people who share those goals with you. Even the corporate sector, or the policy makers of the economy need to be constantly aware of such bigger goals and the ultimate responsibility of each one to other human beings.

On the whole, the trip reaffirmed and strengthened my future aspirations to enter the sustainability sector and fight for what I believe in. I was reminded of the day that I saw a bleeding, bleached whale on the

beach behind my house in Mumbai and the inspiration it gave me to protect my planet every day that I live. I now have a stronger determination to fight to stop further destruction while taking into account corporate and governmental goals because I believe that such compromise and understanding is possible. I think the key is for people to really understand the global impacts that are looming above us. On a whole, the trip showed me the morals that I stand for and reaffirmed my interest in the research and corporate work that I want to take up in these fields.

Following is a poem that our clinic trip inspired me to write:

Will my kids know green?

Borneo, 1997- Borneo, 2011- Borneo, 2016

The year I was born, the year the forest was green.

Untouched; logs, branches, brambles and bushes smothered in leaves, moss,
thickets and pines.

A lotusland: blooming exotic flowers, colors that have no name and a resounding
unison of bird calls.

I've grown now and so has the forest.

I am consumed by the woodland and still overcome by the abundance of green.

There are endless trees but not a bird to be seen,

I crave the orange peep of a hornbill's beak to be seen.

As I realize, it's the malice of us bird-dogging humans.

My lotusland: *desiccated, tamed, clean and humanized.*

I am welcomed by the indigenous.

A song played on a hand-crafted sape,

Sweet like the rhymes my grandma sang to put me to sleep.

Their costume vibrant with feathers, animal skins and beads of all colors.

The forest stands tall and glorious as a backdrop.

Not virgin, but for someone from the concrete jungle, astonishingly scenic.

'Resourceful' as large corporations would describe it.

The indigenous, an amalgamation of human interference and an embodiment of nature's voice, tell me,

“Lotusland: ruined, skanky, seemingly recovering, oh-so-close to dying.”