

New Eyes

Katie Stevens

I smell the crisp air as the wind curls around me like a chilly blanket. Atop Loveland Pass in Colorado, I was 11,990 feet above sea level and standing along the Continental Divide. The concept fascinated me. The Divide is a series of mountain ranges that separates rivers that flow into the Gulf of Mexico and those that flow into the Pacific Ocean. I watch the water flow out from my water bottle, broken by the sharp rock, hoping that eventually the water would run into the ocean. Closing the lid, I then looked out across the range into the sky- it was a shimmering blue here. I always thought it was because Colorado was just magical and everything looked more crystalized. Turns out the higher elevation means there is less water vapor in the air, therefore less scattering of light. I still like to believe it's magic.

Growing up, I liked the mystery of science. In school they always presented a topic and then we decoded its existence or the reason for the event. I credit my enthusiasm to my love of Agatha Christie novels. This was easy to do in grade school because you always knew what you were looking for; now, it could be anything. Instead of searching for something's existence, I am always digging deep to figure out why something has left or has been destroyed. The mystery of science is almost a somber topic because it has become easier to solve- human involvement.

I have always been blessed to have amazing influences on my sustainability and one of the most influential is my dear friend Jadya Sethna. I remember back in elementary school she would travel around the world with her family- China, Thailand, Costa Rica, and Canada.

Sometimes she would bring me back clothes or handmade keychains- little remembrances of her journey. Whenever I would visit her home down the street, their walls were filled of photographs from their travels. These photographs included dense rainforests, smiling faces, and interactions with different species they came across. The walls always reminded me that there was a large world out there-- more than I could ever see in my lifetime. Jadyn did not just have a passion for traveling, she had a passion for nature and the conservation of species. When we were in high school, she traveled to the coast of Georgia to help sea turtles and then in Sumatra to study orangutans. Currently she is studying at Georgia Tech for completion of a certificate in environmental science. While studying, she has worked alongside biologists at Zoo Atlanta, along with volunteering with Comunidad Protectora de Tortugas de Osa (COPROT) in Costa Rica. I could write an entire book about the impacts Jadyn is making on this earth, but it is people like her that have influenced me to start walking on my own environmental warrior journey.

In 2014 Jadyn and I along with our families made the journey to Alaska. We started in Homer and then began working our way down the coast eventually to finish our journey in Vancouver. This trip opened my eyes to natural wonders that I never thought I would witness. We observed a moose and her calf, black bears eating wildflowers in the Yukon, and whales off the coast of Sitka and Ketchikan. The one thing that stood out to me the most was the glaciers and sea ice. Almost every day we would watch ice break off in chunks and plunge into the ocean. On land we hiked both the Portage Glacier and the Byron Glacier near Anchorage. Compared to the amount of snow and I had seen up to that point, it seemed like there was an infinite amount of ice reaching into the mountainside. However, the visitor centers told

another story. There were diagrams of how large these glaciers once were and the reality I had just witnessed was shocking. Recently, glaciers in Alaska are facing record losses, scientists even suggesting they are melting at a rate significantly more than what they previously predicted.

Glaciers are one of the climate change indicators and it examines the balance between snow accumulation and melting over time. These changes significantly affect changes in sea level signifying a positive feedback loop. What I was witnessing in Alaska was the natural river of a glacier losing mass as ice breaks off and floats away into the lake, or plunging into the ocean. The hope is that this cycle is balanced with snow accumulation during the year, yet unfortunately, in recent years that has not the case. The frontier state's glaciers are quickly retreating, and locals fear the day where they are nothing but a lake of memories.

Alaska left an impact on my life and gave what others call the "travel bug." In February of 2018, Jady and I along with 20 other students in our high school science department traveled to Ecuador. We spent two days in Quito and then the rest of our sustainability tour traveling the Galapagos Islands. One of the starkest differences between the United States and the islands was how they treated the balance between the natural environment and their built environment. There was very minimal technology and the materials holding up structures mimicked the nature around them. It was as if the island breathed alongside the locals. The native species such as the sea lions, blue footed boobies and marine iguanas walked among the people and there was a respect that I witnessed between them both. I had a very special moment as I sat down on a swing in a park and on the swing next to me was a sea lion. It acknowledged my presence but did not fear my being there.

Since Charles Darwin's discoveries upon the Galapagos Islands, a wildlife sanctuary was established in 1935 and in 1959, and it officially became the Galapagos National Park. This placed 97 percent of the Archipelago under State ownership for the preservation of the native flora and fauna. The establishment of the park propelled the reach to conserve the natural wonders within and surrounding the Islands. The Galapagos is often cited as the place where ecotourism originated and is defined as the "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people" (Honey, 2008). It is a balance between creating economic benefits to the local population while also providing incentives for conservation and environmental research. Travelers, many from Europe, began coming to the Islands 150 years ago as scientists. The Archipelago was seen as one of the most precious ecosystems on earth and contained local species that are found nowhere else such as the Galapagos tortoise, marine iguana, blue-footed boobies, and the Galapagos penguin. Since the late 1960s, a balance of scientific research, educated park management, highly trained naturalist guides, and a well-regulated and responsible nature tourism industry have "helped ensure that the wildlife of the Galapagos has been little disturbed by the steep rise in visitors" (Honey, 2008).

After this trip, my eyes became new and I realized that there is a way that human and nature can live among each other without ultimately destroying the natural world. The next summer I went back to Colorado and I hiked a 14er, or a mountain that is over 14,000 feet above sea level. It was one of the most physically and mentally challenging things that I had pushed myself to do. Colorado still had the magic in the air- in fact I felt the presence more than I ever had in my childhood. This time however, I met the magic with gratitude. Every step

that I took up the mountain was a gift. In order to scale the peak with low oxygen, I had to adjust my breathing- I had to learn to breathe with the earth. As I stood on the top of Quandary Peak and looked out upon the Rocky Mountains, I felt a sense of mutual understanding.

That fall, I began courses at Appalachian State University and ultimately decided to major in business management with a double minor in sustainable development and experiential, integrative learning with the hopes of one day increasing the sustainability presence in the corporate business world. That is where the change needs to happen. I believe that everyone can have new eyes- all they have to do is let in the magic of the world around them. My solution? Motivate people with their lived experience to not give up on the world and to not give up on each other. With opened eyes it becomes more plausible to live like those on the Galapagos Islands. In reality, the earth is breathing where we are too- we are just suffocating it. If we release our grip on control and adjust our own breathing, we too can begin to act on a sense of mutual understanding.

“The Galapagos Islands: Test Site for Theories of Evolution and Ecotourism.” *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development Who Owns Paradise?*, by Martha Honey, Island Press, 2008, pp. 121–159.