

# ICWA LETTERS

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THE AMERICAS

*Chenoa Egawa is a Fellow of the Institute studying the marketing of Native American products, crafts and produce in MesoAmerica.*

## Of Ecotours and Forest Fires

GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala

June 1998

Chenoa Egawa, our Lummi Indian Fellow studying the efforts of indigenous mesoAmerican people to develop and maintain environmentally and economically sustainable enterprises, was forced to take a month off from her fellowship to cope with a bout of typhoid fever. Unable to return to Chiapas, Mexico, because of tension and security measures growing out of the Zapatista resistance, she has shifted her base to northern Guatemala. The first enterprise she is examining is ecotourism—PBM

By Chenoa Egawa

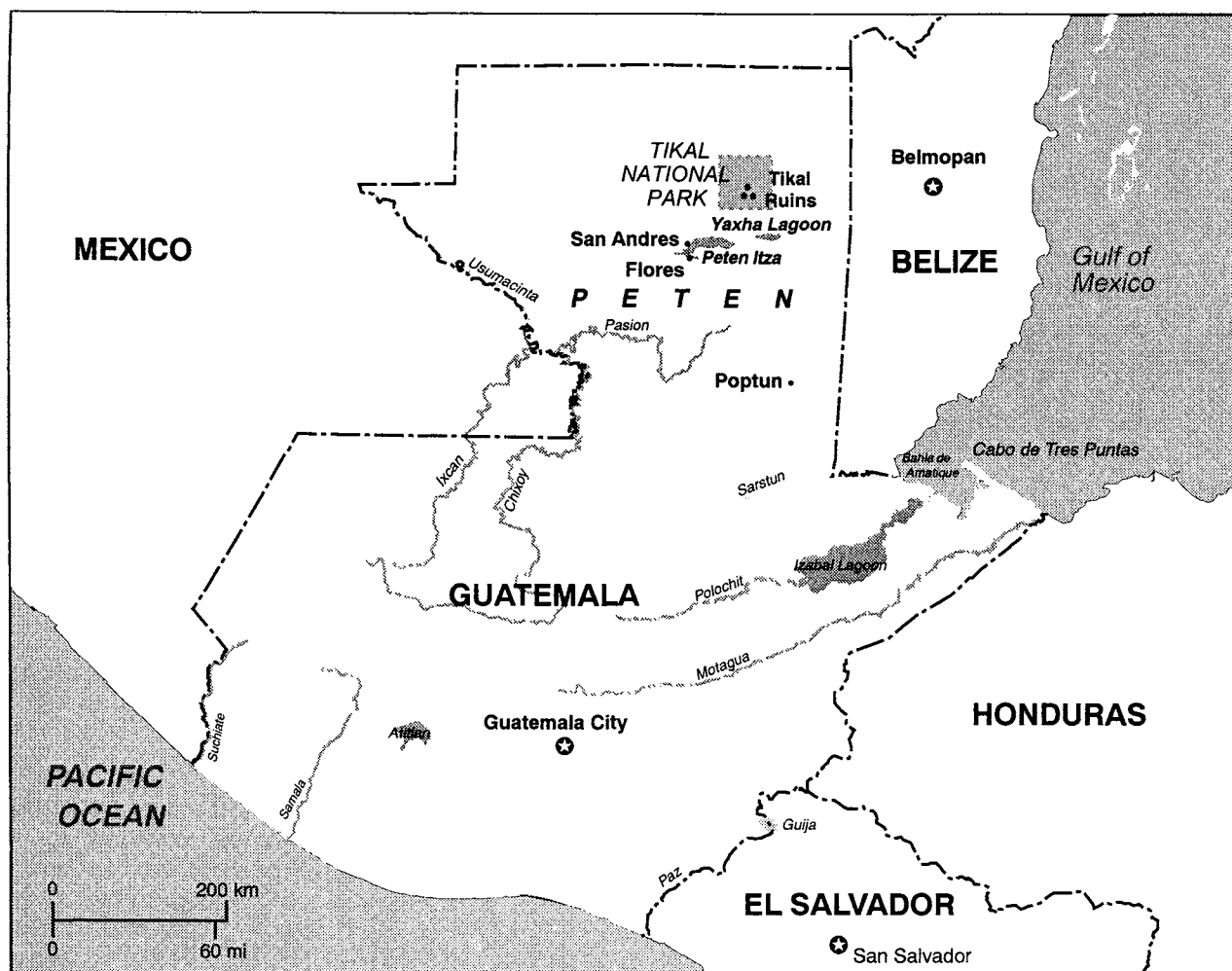
By one broadly accepted definition, ecotourism is "purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the culture and natural history of the environment, taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem while producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of natural resources beneficial to local people." When it's done with a clear conscience and a sincere concern for the environment it strives to contribute to the preservation of Earth's fragile and complex ecosystems through education, awareness and alternatives to current patterns of destruction. Within this game there is a complex cast of characters, with diverse and often conflicting interests, each player with his own idea of what "la selva" (the forest) means.

For my first Guatemalan experience I chose an aptly named company, Ecotourism and Adventure Specialists. Its owner and operator, Carla Molina, is well known throughout the country as an environmentalist and an ardent protector of wildernesses and the people and creatures who depend on them. Our ecotour included exploration of several distinct regions in Guatemala. The point of departure was Guatemala City, followed by visits to the Peten, Rio Dulce and the highlands, bringing us full circle 13 days later.

It was the Peten, the most diverse tropical rainforest ecosystem remaining in Central America that displayed — most vividly — the game being played out over land. There we saw forests and fires, wildlife and wastelands, conservation and exploitation.

In Guatemala City, the night before our departure, our six-member tour group met with Carla Molina to discuss our itinerary. Although I'd paid for my ecotour I was still hesitant to go. Frankly, I was scared. Guatemala City, located 270 km south-southwest of the Peten, was experiencing abnormally high levels of air contamination. Wildfires were burning out of control in Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua and parts of Guatemala. What would the air be like in the Peten, where Guatemala's largest fires were burning?

Smoke from the Peten fires added to the airborne contaminants in Guatemala City and residents in the country's capital had to tolerate higher levels of pollution than the ones already resulting from extensive use of cars and diesel-fueled



buses. To push the limit even further, Pacaya, an active volcano that sits some 80 kilometers south of the city, made its contribution to the chaos when it erupted, spewing and dumping black ash over the thick, gray blanket of smoke that already covered Guatemala City. The air became so thick it was like standing before a giant bonfire, one you could never walk away from. Breathing, an act taken for granted by most, became a laborious task. In fact, many people could not breathe at all and were rushed to the hospitals for emergency treatment of asthma attacks, bronchial spasms and eye and skin infections. Similar problems were also reported as far away as Texas from the same fires! Carla assured me that everything was fine where we were going.

On the plane to the Peten, I asked Carla what ecotourism meant to her. "Our idea for ecotourism is simple. My company and my network of close friends make up the most complete alternative to standard tourism in Guatemala. We have a strategic alliance. Most of us were friends long before we ever entered this business, good friends, with common interests, a desire to preserve and protect nature and to be able to make a living doing so. In many ways tourism is only one component. Through ecotourism we also strive to protect and preserve the sacred sites and biodiversity of rich ecosystems. This is not a standard

approach to business," she continued. "It is not 'dog eat dog;' instead, it is business with a conscience, business with a genuine concern, respect and love for the lakes, jungles and wildlife of the Peten region."

#### NI'TUN ECOLODGE – SAN ANDRES, LAKE PETEN ITZA

"Normally we only have one species of hummingbird at Ni'tun, but with the fires I have seen six different species that have come here seeking food and refuge," said Bernie. A cloud of hummingbirds buzzed around the feeder – Rufous tailed hummingbirds (*Amazilia tzacatl*), Buff bellied hummingbirds (*Amazilia yucateensis*) and Green Breasted Mangos (*Anthracothorax p. prevostii*) were among those identifiable, as Bernie and I flipped through his assortment of bird field guides. Fifty or sixty at any given moment swarmed around the sugary water, buzzing in and out of the open-air dining area, dive-bombing our heads as we sat beneath the cool shade of the trees that provided a welcome protection from the hot, white sun of the Peten.

Bernie Mittlestaedt and Lore Castillo, both native Guatemalans and close personal friends and associates of Carla's, own and operate Ni'tun Ecolodge and Monkey Eco Tours. Upon our arrival, Lore gave us a piece of the

history that brought her and Bernie into the ecotourism business. "We started with customized 'ecotour adventures' back in 1990 by bringing tour groups from Guatemala City to some of the less known, less frequented archaeological sites and parks in the Peten. We provided all of the necessary services along the way, ranging from transportation, food and camping gear to bilingual guiding."

According to Lore, Ni'tun Ecolodge was a more recent, logical expansion of Monkey Eco Tours. They had been looking for a piece of land to buy so that they could live and work in the Peten year-round. In addition, they wanted to be able to provide their visitors with a peaceful, beautiful place to relax and recharge before or after camping and trekking in the jungle. Ni'tun was certainly that. The two businesses complement one another well. Furthermore, they keep tourists and their dollars in the area a bit longer. However, Bernie and Lore's work goes beyond providing ecotour and ecolodge services.

In one of my conversations with Bernie and Lore, I asked them if Ni'tun has also benefited local indigenous people. Employment, although not too significant, was one contribution. During construction of Ni'tun they had hired temporary employees from five different local families, and purchased wood used in construction from local forest owners. Currently they provide permanent employment for only three people, two young women, and one man, all from the nearby village of San Andres. Both of the young women take care of the cabins and assist with food preparation (Bernie and Lore do most of the cooking). One of the young women is also being trained by Lore to run the business and has plans to go on to the University. All three were receiving significantly higher salaries than other employees holding similar positions on the nearby tourist island of Flores.

"Our place is small, so we cannot provide a lot of jobs for people, but we have tried to contribute locally in other ways," said Lore. "Sometimes we are successful and often times we are not. Having a good idea and the motivation, plan and resources to see it through does not mean that it will happen. For instance, we have tried repeatedly to work with local authorities to build a school that would provide training programs for park guards. There they could learn to protect local forests from further destruction arising from poaching, squatting, slash-and-burn [farming] and cattle ranching. We have been



*Don Zacarias with young "caoba" (mahogany) tree*

turned down repeatedly. We have also tried to work with local authorities to set up a national park or protected area, but were again turned down. We are in the process of certifying our land, which is 15.27 acres, as one of the first few private reserves in the Peten."

Most people who can afford to go on an ecotour come from middle- to upper-class backgrounds. Bernie, Lore and Carla also believe in 'spreading the wealth' that many tourists bring with local people who have their own projects that emphasize environmental preservation or alternative development. We had the honor of meeting Don Zacarias, an elder of the Maya Itza indigenous group who is working on reforestation of tropical hardwoods and sustainable agriculture. He, however, is a story in himself. As Carla told me, "We try to break stereotypes. We take our tour groups to meet real people in the area who are involved in their own interesting projects. They tell their story. You don't hear about them second hand from the tour guide. The people, themselves, are the stars of their own tour. In that way we try to lend our support."

## **EL SOMBRERO ECOLODGE – YAXHA LAGOON**

Our next stop was Yaxha, a pristine lagoon in a chain of many that together run approximately 12 miles in length. Yaxha is located next to the Maya Biosphere Reserve, which at least in theory is the largest protected area in Guatemala. It encompasses the world-renowned Tikal National Park and a number of larger, but lesser known, national parks and protected areas. Around Yaxha there are several Mayan archaeological sites where current research, excavation and restoration is being conducted. Tropical wildlife still thrives in the area. In fact, one night during our stay there, a family of howler monkeys came storming through the canopy over El Sombrero at about

4:30 am. They lingered in the tree right above my cabin. The dominant male's roar, a deep resonating sound with a volume equal to that of a lion's, broke through the pre-dawn silence.

Yaxha is the third largest archaeological site in the Peten with more than 500 pre-Columbian structures and nine plazas. Much less has actually been uncovered and restored than was in Tikal, but as we walked through the park I could imagine how it must have been by the shape and location of the steep hills hiding pyramids and the cleared open expanses of the plazas. The ancient road, a beautiful broad walkway covered in fallen leaves, ran all the way down to the lagoon below with huge trees bordering the wide path, reaching up to the sky and coming together above forming a natural protective covering. Parrots, hawks, toucans and many other birds I could not name filled the forest. From the highest pyramid that sits upon the hill, there is a panoramic view of forests and lagoons stretching out in all directions for miles and miles. As the sun sets and the temperature drops the whole forest rings with the shrill yet soothing sound of cicadas and the deep rumbling echo of howler monkeys.

Forest fires were burning on throughout the Peten and from the top of the pyramid our entire view was shrouded in white haze, casting a muted light that stole the color from the lush green forests. Oddly enough, the sun was the most colorful object of all, its light pushing through the smoke as an orange-pink disc. As it sank closer to the horizon, it was as if there was no sun at all. Its light was completely consumed by the haze.

Gabriella Moretti, owner of El Sombrero, is originally from Italy, but married a Guatemalan years ago. She has since divorced, but Yaxha is home for her and her two children. "I want to work more with the establishment of national parks and less with tourism as time goes on," she told me. Most of the people that visit and stay overnight at El Sombrero are not typical tourists, because it is off the beaten path from the more popular, well-known tourist destinations. Many of Gabriella's visitors are serious bird-watchers, people with a strong interest in Mayan archaeology or people who have a desire to know the tropical forests. Because El Sombrero is out of the way, her business is impacted more heavily by seasonal fluctuations in tourism to the area than is Ni'tun. Whatever she earns in the high season has to last through the low. The business side of ecotourism is not very lucrative for Gabriella, but it is enough to allow her to continue doing the work that she loves.

became evident that her real interests lie in the preservation and protection of Yaxha. Currently, Gabriella is working on establishing a national park in the area. In agreement with Bernie, Lore and Carla, she also felt that private parks are far more effective means of conservation than national parks. Apparently, national land is not demarcated and well guarded; it is open territory that will constantly be invaded by a variety of players, from what I could understand. Some are poachers who carry on illegal trafficking of wildlife and/or timber; others are squatters, families in search of productive land practicing slash-and-burn agriculture. The forests of the Peten are under constant threat of destruction.

"Some of my neighbors and myself own part of the land around the lagoon," Gabriella said. "We are in the process of measuring the remaining land that we don't yet own and then we will look for persons to buy it. Of course, we are talking about people who are interested in preserving it, not developing it. In the establishment of national or private parks it is critical that there are large enough continuous tracts of land to provide biological corridors connecting forests and lagoons for migratory animals and birds. Islands of protected forests surrounded by degraded areas are not sufficient to support wildlife."

Local indigenous people have benefited in a number of ways through Gabriella's efforts. She has been working with teachers at the small local school to promote forest conservation and awareness in the classroom. Children are learning about the plants, birds and animals of the Peten. When possible, the Ecotourism and Adventure Specialists' network has helped raise funds and/or donations for the school. Donated items, as simple as crayons, colored pencils and paints have made a big difference for the kids. Now they are able to express, through colorful drawings, what they are learning. Each



*Ancient walkway from Yaxha ruins leading down to the lagoon*

As she talked to our group, it

year the school holds an annual art contest that is centered on scenes of the Peten's forests, lakes and wildlife. "Change is a slow process", says Gabriella, but she remains hopeful. If positive change is to take root, children will play an important part.

Gabriella also works with a local park's management school. Out of 30 women, ten are students, ten take care of the children and ten go out in the field to patrol the parks. They work on a rotating basis so that each person will have the opportunity to learn all the skills.

"We are working only with women, not because we are sexist or exclusionary, but because there are simply a lot more single women with children in this area than there are men," said Gabriella. Apparently, the school has

only ones who enforce the law out here," said the chief guard. As another guard explained, "Under normal circumstances, the [average] number of hectares to be guarded by each man at this CONAP station is incredible. Each one of us is expected to patrol an area of 44,000 square hectares," he claimed. Obviously, there is no way that one person, alone, can effectively watch over such a large area. As a result, a lot of 'protected areas' continue to be invaded. As we listened to them, I imagined that fighting fires is not exactly risk-free either.

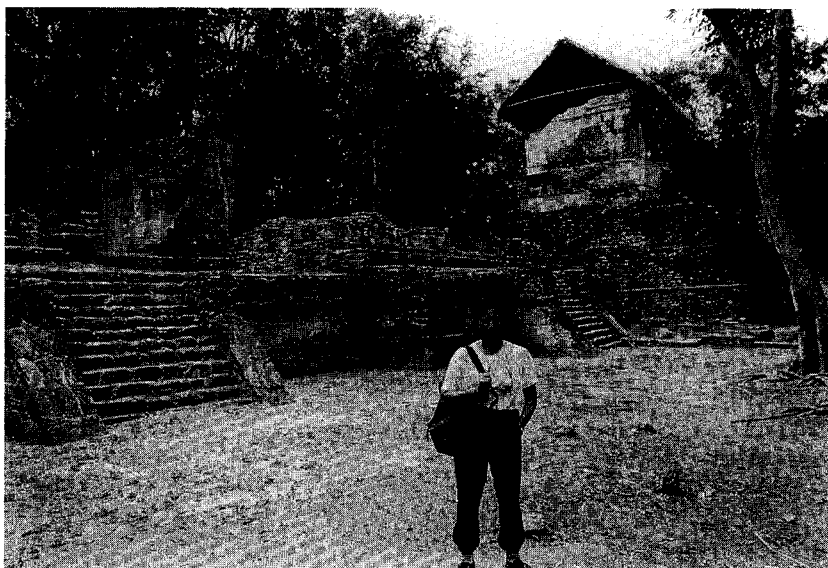
## HOTEL ECOLOGICO VILLA DE LOS CASTELLANOS—MACHAQUILA, POPTUN, PETEN

Our next stop was the Hotel Ecologico Villa de los Castellanos, where we met the very gracious host and owner, Don Placido. He is an older man with a shock of white hair and big, bushy, white eyebrows. He was born and raised near Villa de los Castellanos. On his land and in the surrounding areas there were hidden caves, containing pools and natural springs, three forest reserves, four Mayan archaeological sites and a wildlife sanctuary.

Throughout his life Don Placido has learned a great deal about local medicinal plants. I asked him about them and he took me for a long walk through his garden to show me all the different flowers, plants and roots that he was cultivating. He told me how they were used and what ailments they were good for. Next, he brought out the book in which he had documented hundreds of varieties of medicinal plants that are growing in his garden and on his land, with pictures and descriptions, their Spanish, Mayan and scientific names, and their uses and preparations. Don Placido's son is a medical doctor in Guatemala City who has incorporated the use of medicinal plants from his father's garden into his practice.

Don Placido's love for plants, birds and trees was expressed with an almost child-like delight, as if he were seeing everything for the first time. He showed me the family of mot-mots (*Eumomota s. superciliosa*) that lived in one of the trees nearby and the bee-hive, built inside an old log that he had hung from one of the beams supporting the restaurant's framework. He showed me the gatekeeper bee that guarded the entrance. This bee let the workers in and out of the hive. He made sure each worker came back with pollen. If they did, he let them re-enter, but if they tried to go in with nothing he would shuffle over, blocking their entry.

In addition to his work with medicinal plants, Don Placido has a reforestation program on his *finca*. To date he has planted 10,000 Spanish Cedars and over 3,000 trees



*Author at the Topoxté*

been quite successful in protecting the forests, providing jobs and education, while also meeting the needs of the participant's children.

On our second day in Yaxha, we went to visit one of the *Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas* (CONAP or National Council of Protected Areas) encampments, where some of the park guards stay while on duty. "We maintain a relationship with the park guards too," Carla told us as we walked down the road from El Sombrero toward the encampment. "They need a lot more support out here in order to do their job. They should have compasses, good tents and good salaries. Sure, there are a lot of parks on paper, but there aren't enough guards to protect them. Those who are working do not receive sufficient support."

Several of the guards were there when we arrived and we were able to talk with them about their work. We asked them about some of the difficulties of being a park guard. "Sometimes this is a dangerous job. If we come upon poachers we run the risk of being shot. We are the





*CONAP Park guards constructing a roof with guano palms*

of other local hardwoods, including Mahogany. Through reforestation along the Rio Machaquila, the river that runs next to his ecolodge, Don Placido has also been able to stop erosion of the river banks that had been left bare by earlier clear-cuts.

His skills in gardening and reforestation come naturally to him, but as he told us, he has been less fortunate running his ecolodge business. Villa de los Castellanos is three hours away from the standard tourism routes in the Peten, which means less traffic and fewer tourists. Recently, Don Placido joined the Ecotourism and Adventure Specialists alliance and through a broader network of

like-minded people hopes to share his work with more visitors, while enhancing his business.

\* \* \*

Before going on the ecotour, I was hoping to learn whether or not ecotourism could serve as a viable means of sustainable economic development. That was part of it; however, there was a lot more. I saw, first hand, just how complex and sensitive the issue of environmental protection and preservation is, how a few people can make a contribution small or large, and how a network of those few people can unite forces toward bringing about positive change on many levels. I saw that each person has potential to be a piece of the puzzle toward providing alternatives to environmental

degradation. I saw that change in that direction is a painfully slow and sometimes dangerous process. It seems that there are still more people interested in exploitation than conservation of the Earth's natural resources. The value of this Earth is being measured in what can be extracted from it, instead of how it supports all life forms when it is left intact or sustainably managed. Somehow we have forgotten that our state of health is in direct correlation to the health of this Earth, that ours is a symbiotic relationship. I was fortunate to meet so many individuals on this ecotour who are genuinely committed to the hard work of preserving the forests, lakes and wildlife of the Peten. □

# Institute of Current World Affairs

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## Institute Fellows and their Activities

**Adam Smith Albion.** A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Christopher P. Ball.** An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

**Shelly Renae Browning.** A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia and the indigenous peoples of Vanuatu to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology. [SOUTH ASIA]

**Chenoa Egawa.** An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

**Paige Evans.** A playwright and former Literary Manager of the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York City, Paige is looking at Cuba through the lens of its performing arts. With a History/Literature B.A. from Harvard, she has served as counselor at the Buckhorn Children's Center in Buckhorn, Kentucky (1983-84), as Arts Editor of the International Courier in Rome, Italy (1985-86), and as an adjunct professor teaching a course in Contemporary American Playwrights at New York University. She joined the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1990. [THE AMERICAS]

**Whitney Mason.** A freelance print and television journalist, Whit began his career by founding a newspaper called *The Siberian Review* in Novosibirsk in 1991, then worked as an editor of the *Vladivostok News* and wrote for *Asiaweek* magazine in Hong Kong. In 1995 he switched to radio- and video-journal-

ism, working in Bosnia and Korea for CBS. As an ICWA Fellow, he is studying and writing about Turkey's role as nexus between East and West, and between traditional and secular Islam.

**Marc Michaelson.** A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

**Jean Benoit Nadeau.** A French-Canadian journalist and playwright, Jean Benoit studied drama at the National Theater School in Montreal, then received a B.A. from McGill University in Political Science and History. The holder of several Canadian magazine and investigative-journalism awards, he is spending his ICWA-fellowship years in France studying "the resistance of the French to the trend of economic and cultural globalization."

**Susan Sterner.** A staff photographer for the Associated Press in Los Angeles, Susan received her B.A. in International Studies and Cultural Anthropology at Emory University and a Master's in Latin American Studies at Vanderbilt. AP gave her a wide-ranging beat, with assignments in Haiti, Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexican border; in 1998 she was a co-nominee for a Pulitzer Prize for a series on child labor. Her fellowship topic: the lives and status of Brazilian women.

**Tyrone Turner.** A photojournalist (Black Star) whose work has appeared in many U.S. newspapers and magazines, Tyrone holds a Master's degree in Government and Latin American politics from Georgetown University and has produced international photo-essays on such topics as Rwandan genocide and mining in Indonesia (the latter nominated for a Pulitzer). As an ICWA Fellow he is writing and photographing Brazilian youth and their lives in rural and urban settings.

**Daniel B. Wright.** A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duiyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andrae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [EAST ASIA]

Chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise, Institute Fellows are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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