ICWA
LETTERS

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What's Worthwhile?

By Peter Keller

[Transcript of a speech delivered at the Members and Trustees meeting of the Institute of Current World Affairs, Monmouth, NJ, June 14, 2002]

Just a few weeks ago I was in Quito, Ecuador, the end of the road for me after more than two years in South America. During one of those days in Quito, another traveler joined me for lunch. She was from Germany and had recently arrived on the continent. I was trying to ignore the fact that my fellowship would soon be ending. So, when she pulled out a South American guidebook, I saw an opportunity to keep my memories alive and asked her the natural question.

Peter Keller

"Where are you going?"

"I am not sure exactly, but somewhere down through Ecuador and Peru, maybe Bolivia."

I said, "Bolivia is really beautiful."

"What did you like about it?"

"The jungle and the food," I told her.

"Are you traveling or working?"

"Working," I said with a smile.

"Doing what?"

"Writing stories about public and private parks in Chile and Argentina."

"Stories? Who pays you to do that?"

"A foundation in the United States." I said.

"What type of foundation is this? What do they get out of it?"

"They send my articles to the members of the foundation."

"*Ja*, but what do they do with the information?"

"Whatever they want," I told her.

"I don't get it. Why would the foundation do this? What's in it for them?"

My only answer : "They invest in people."

"So, tell me if I have this right. They pay you to travel from park to park in Chile and Argentina and write something about it? I still don't get it."

As many of you know, this is a common conversation for an Institute Fellow. For me this was replayed over and over, especially with South Americans — because an ICWA-type organization does not exist there. As a means of trying to understand this strange concept, I was often asked about ICWA in the sense, "What's their angle? What's the foundation trying to promote?" And, "What's the purpose of your fellowship?"

Sometimes — well, actually, often — I wondered myself. Was I a writer, a park ranger, a reporter, or even an environmental activist? I had to remind myself from time to time — simply by reading the description of my work in the newsletter, which says I am "Comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by pri-

vate persons and non-governmental organizations."

"Ah huh, well, that explains it," I thought. "Now get to work, Peter."

An ICWA fellowship is not your everyday opportunity. It allows one to follow his nose wherever it goes. Therefore it must be used wisely. It truly is a gift of freedom — and freedom of this type is a very dangerous present. I began to ask myself what life was all about, and I would try to understand the relationship between humanity and nature. How does it all fit together — this web of modern-day society?

I knew it was a luxury to have this opportunity, to take a step back and look around, and then let curiosity wander. Questions naturally began to rise. Why does it have to be a luxury to observe and question your surroundings and explore your interests? Where did our society go wrong? Shouldn't everybody experience this at least once — to know what a wonderful feeling it is to wake up each morning and ask yourself, 'What should I do today?"

What I did was to explore some of the most beautiful and biologically diverse wild lands in the southern cone of South America. In Chile, I often encountered the phrase in Chilean slang, "*Oye huevon, te oido, tu tienes la major pega en mi pais*." Basically, "Dude, I hate you. You have the best job in Chile." And I did. Never did I come across another job that I would rather have. Obviously, for that reason it was hard to leave. But, being a gift with fixed parameters, I guess it had to end sometime.

Even though I had the best job, I still had some complaints. As one Argentine friend half told me, half jokingly, "Peter, you wouldn't be from the United States if you didn't complain." One observation about my fellowship is that I questioned whether my research and writing changed the outcome of issues I wrote about or how decisions were made. Not seeing tangible results or hearing if I had a positive impact, I wondered whether I was making a difference. However, I only have myself to blame because I didn't pursue options to publish my articles widely or take a role as a hard-driving activist.

What provoked this thought was the rarity of feedback received, other than that from Peter Martin, my family and avuncles Willy Foote and Stephen Maly. From what I understand, this is common sentiment among fellows. I imagine many former fellows have asked the same rhetorical question, "Hello. Is anybody out there?" Luckily, early on, I read a very insightful newsletter by ICWA fellow Chenoa Egawa, who wrote something on the order that, 'Newsletters — more than anything — are for the author. We write for ourselves.'

This questioning of purpose often prompted a struggle within myself. I enjoyed traveling and my research on environmental issues, yet felt a desire for stability to settle down, to be "normal," even possibly start a family — like all my friends back home had already done. I would sometimes think, 'Why is it that time continues on, and yet it seems I am still the same?'

During moments of doubt, Robert Service, who wrote about the Yukon in the early 1900s, reminded me of a poem. The poem is entitled *The Men That Don't Fit In.* Here is the first verse:

There's a race of men that don't fit in,
A race that can't stay still;
So they break the hearts of kith and kin,
And they roam the world at will.
They range the field and they rove the flood,
And they climb the mountain's crest;
Theirs is the curse of the gypsy blood,
And they don't know how to rest.

Robert Service has always had a way of making me feel I am not alone. And I was not alone, thanks to support from family, friends and ICWA staff. Thus I continued to follow the path I set out for myself. I have been following my dreams, but if I could live this portion of the dream again with the knowledge I have now, I would do the following differently.

First, I would take photography classes and use a hi-tech, single-lens reflex camera that would do justice to all the incredible scenery and wildlife I saw. Another would be to take Spanish classes at a professional level, not those designed just for travelers. Also, it would have been advisable to take journalism classes so I could learn about being a reporter and developing stories. At least then I could be aware of what ethical rules I was breaking.

Writing newsletters was constantly a challenge for me. I think I simply forgot about this requirement when I accepted the fellowship because I was so excited about living in South America. I questioned myself frequently on how to begin newsletters, how to form my ideas, whether my ideas were correct and whether my writing ability was good enough to meet ICWA expectations. When the editor of these newsletters, Peter Martin, would edit mine, I anxiously awaited his comments. One time when he wrote, "Peter, you committed the sin of all sins, a dangling modifier, in this sentence for example..." My first reaction was to make a beeline straight to a Strunk and White style guide to find out what he was talking about. Peter Martin, I thank you for your patience, guidance and occasional kick-in-the-butt to improve my newsletter content and style. You have an uncanny ability to point out mistakes, in a playful way that makes memorable impressions — hopefully, not to make the same mistake again.

Looking back on the writing process, I know I wasn't good company when I was actually writing. Stress would build up as my thoughts continually turned to the newsletter at hand. Whether I was at dinner, watching TV or taking a shower, I was mentally shaping the outline and individual sentences. Some of my best thoughts came while I was showering — unfortunately only a few stuck with me long enough to reach a notepad. Through time, little by little, my stress levels reduced and I began to have faith that my newsletter would come together. At a minimum, life in South American has taught me this: not to worry so much because things will eventually work out.

So, what was my work? Realistically, the theme of my fellowship was constantly evolving. It seems only fitting that one of the other presenters this weekend is Wendy Call, because at times I thought I had taken on her theme of "healthy societies." Although my focus was public and private parks, I often found myself examining the relationship between residents of small towns and the wild lands that surrounded them. I wanted to know, What were the common threads that preserved nature intact and maintained a healthy community? And why do some communities insist that development and growth are far better than current conditions?

Through this fellowship and past work in U.S parks and wilderness areas, I've been fortunate enough to see parts of the natural world where ecosystems are still intact. Such an area is the Northern and Southern Patagonian Ice Fields of Chile's rugged southland. Access to these steep fiords, lush green temperate rainforests and enormous glaciers is limited. It's possible to reach them, however, via the village of Caleta Tortel, a small community of only few hundred people, sandwiched between two national parks protecting these Patagonian Ice Fields.

Caleta Tortel is accessible only by a three-hour boat trip down the Baker River, the largest of Chilean rivers. As you approach Caleta Tortel by boat, the river widens as it empties into fiords leading to the wild expanse of the Pacific Ocean. You will not find any roads or cars or obnoxious traffic noise in Caleta Tortel. Miles of sturdy boardwalks along a rocky shoreline connect residential homes to the community grocery store, library and various shops.

Since the only transportation is by foot along narrow walkways, residents greet each other eye-to-eye. One Tortellini (yes, that's what they're called) told me, "You can't avoid your neighbors here; we have to rely on each other to survive." In this community, where life is at three-miles-per-hour, I found the friendliest, most outgoing happy people in all of Chile. They lead a sustainable, delightful lifestyle, which has little impact on the surrounding wildlands. As a side note, Prince William spent two weeks here on a volunteer project last year. Locals told me he was often smiling and whistling. Looks like he, too, found this a healthy and happy society.

This, however, may soon change. The Chilean government is building a road along the Baker River to Caleta Tortel. Politicians claim the aim is to modernize the village, and they've

done a good job convincing community residents. I asked one Tortellini her opinion of the project. She said, "We'll all have better health care, lower food costs and more vegetables, plus a better educational system — at least that's what they tell me."

Whether all of these goals are accomplished will soon be tested. On the other hand, I questioned myself. Who was I to scowl at their pursuit of a perceived better life? Even though I was just a visitor and couldn't fathom living in Tortel, I still felt something would be lost in the community — as if the new road were a pipeline of contamination from the outside world.

Continuing with this theme of communities and nature in harmony, let's move onto another country. One village that has worked hard to protect itself from outside influences is *San José de Uchupiamonas* in the Bolivian Amazon. Accessible by the Tuichi River and then a short walk, San José is the sole community within Alto Madidi National Park, which was established in 1995. The park is rich in biodiversity, with over 1,000 bird species and an assortment of monkeys, jaguars and other animals.

Over a decade ago village leaders began the idea of developing an adventure tourism program as a sources of revenue to support education and health care programs for the community's 450 residents. Community youth, with technical assistance from U.S.-based Conservation International and financial support from the Inter-American Development Bank, built an ecotourism site known as the Chalalan Ecotourism Lodge. Since the tourism project is community-owned and operated, all park guides and lodging employees are San José villagers. Funds raised from tourism revenue are split 50/50 between the community and ecolodge operation. Projects benefiting the community include clean water, health care, a library and the salary of a teacher.

On my visit to Chalalan, park guide Sandro Valdez led our group through the jungle that he has known all his life. Chalalan has been the poster-child of Bolivian ecotourism projects, thus Sandro has had the opportunity to be trained by some of the best tropical-ecology scientists in the world. When he was very young, he used to hunt monkeys, but now he has become one of the most ardent protectors of Amazon wildlife. A lifetime in the jungle has developed his senses well.

I remember during one night hike, he stopped our group in a calm manner and said, "I smell a snake nearby. Be careful. It could be in the tree just above us." The branches of this particular tree were scraping my head — I ducked down quickly. Sandro said, "Use your flashlights to see if we can find the snake." Sure enough, Sandro found the snake, a boa, straddled along a branch just one meter from us. The boa had eaten recently and was quietly resting. We backed away slowly and returned with heightened senses to the lodge. Throughout the week, Sandro pointed out sights, sounds and smells I wouldn't have picked out if he hadn't been with us. His connection with the Amazon rainforest made the trip an unforgettable experience. Plus, it didn't hurt waking up in the morning to the eerie, baritone call of a red howler monkey, which completely amazed me.

However, the ending of this story is not clear. In August 1998 the Bolivian National Congress passed a law authorizing a gigantic dam. It would be just miles downstream from Chalalan on the Beni River. If built, the resulting reservoir will flood thousands of acres, including the Chalalan ecolodge and nearby indigenous Tacana communities — one of which is where park guide Sandro lives.

The hydroelectricity project would create a surplus of energy beyond Bolivian power demands. Thus the real incentive would be to sell energy to Brazil. So far, inability to secure the necessary financing has tied up efforts to begin the project; hopefully, it will never see the light of day.

As we can see, governments can alter the protection of national parks at any time. Thus, an advantageous alternative for the protection of wildlands is through private means.

One example of protection by private means is Pumalín Park in southern Chile. Doug

Tompkins, the former Esprit clothing owner, took his millions south to Chile in the mid-1990s to put his wildland philanthropy beliefs into action. During an interview, he told me that biodiversity conservation is his primary interest and that's what his foundation specializes in. And it certainly does.

In Chile alone, it has put over one million acres into conservation and another 600,000 acres have been protected in Argentina. Combined, that is over 2,500 square miles, or roughly half the size of Connecticut. Tompkins told me, "Private areas generally can be managed with less political constraints, but they can be badly or poorly managed as well. Private doesn't assure better management — although in Latin America it's not difficult to do better than the government." His comments for the most part are on-target, although there are exceptions, one being Ecuador's Galapagos National Park, where Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection first took hold. A 1998 law increased the park-entry fee for foreigners to $100 per person. This revenue source makes up 80 percent of the park's budget, which is sufficient to maintain a payroll of over 250 employees. They manage park resources well, while tightly controlling impacts from the nearly 75,000 visitors that come to these volcanic islands each year. Possibly, this could become the model for high-profile parks throughout South America.

Now back to southern Chile and Doug Tompkins' main project, Pumalín Park. Because of his efforts to protect a swath of old-growth forests and mountains covering an area the size of Rhode Island, he has become the center of controversy — albeit less in recent years. Many politicians and business leaders complain that the land is being "locked up" and could be used more productively. When I hear these comments, it's obvious to me that these critics haven't been to Pumalín. On one trip to Pumalín, a friend of mine joined me who is a real-estate developer in Puerto Montt. He had never been to Pumalín and had doubts about the whole project. After a few days of hiking the trails, camping out and crossing the fiords by boat, he said to me in real-estate jargon, "I look around and now I am sure that Pumalín, as a park, is the highest and best possible land-use. The terrain is too steep to log, and besides the topsoil would wash away. A majority of the park is not suitable for housing or growing crops, and what land is suitable has already been developed."

Still, I believe that, if Chilean economic developers got a chance, they would find a way to use Pumalín to maintain "economic growth." In response to rising worldwide populations levels and the increase of such economic growth, Doug Tompkins once told me, "Any fool knows it just puts pressure on the carrying capacity of any given place. Those who still haven't seen this are the fools of fools."

But who is the fool? Everyone wants his or her businesses and economic condition to improve — even Tompkins and his wife. Over the last two years, I have seen an interesting dichotomy develop at Pumalín. Tompkins left the North American business world because he saw a grotesque display of over-consumption of the world's resources by a small percentage of the world's population. He wanted to leave that gobbling-growth cycle behind.

However, businesses evolve, and when run by entrepreneurs like Doug or Kris Tompkins, they get larger. As a means of reaching financial independence for their project, the Tompkins have developed a line of products made on the farms within Pumalín. They have developed a line of wool clothing and handicrafts, and jams and honey that are being marketed under the brand name *Puma Verde*. With the usual Tompkins touch, the labeling and design are done in classic style that distinguishes their brand as a high-value product. It's great they are developing financial streams of revenue to sustain park projects. However, knowing their track record, I wonder if this will lead to something they were once trying to leave behind.

Generally, our economic system is based on growth. That is how wealth is built. Often this growth is the fundamental source of threats to maintaining nature intact. So does that mean the natural world is doomed? Not necessarily, I believe there is a way to balance this out through energy conservation — in other words, reducing over-consumption rates, mostly in the wealthier nations. This is a key element, because energy projects — built to supply a growing economy — are often consuming or polluting our natural environment, whether it be from hydroelectricity dams, such as my Bolivian Amazon example, or from nuclear power

plants, or from from natural-gas lines, or from native-forest depletion for home heating as seen in southern Chile.

So what can be done? One solution is greater use of renewable energy sources. In addition, measures such as efficient stoves, sustainable architectural designs and insulation can help reduce energy consumption. Simple measures can also be taken. Do we really need to drive those six blocks to the grocery store? Couldn't we bike or walk? Or what about using air conditioning when it's only 80 degrees outside? Notto mention all the food we waste.

At the moment you maybe asking yourself, "Peter, what does this have to do with parks and the protection of natural areas in South America? From what I saw on my South American journey, we are the standard bearers, the model other countries follow. And now, with the recent election of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, four out of the six Andean countries in South America have a President who was educated in the United States. Like small children imitating the parent, they are adopting U.S. economic policies, which tend toward growth at the expense of biodiversity.

For example, one alarming statistic is that the United States has five percent of the world's population, yet emits 25 percent of all greenhouse gases worldwide. This concerns me for two reasons. First, quite simply, we as a nation consume too much. Second, other nations would like to follow our lead. We need to set a better example before it's too late, before our consumption patterns and cultural icons choke the environment we depend on for life and dampen diversity to a tasteless monoculture. Of course, not everyone is keen to take on U.S. economic policies. I encountered an underlying resentment among some, a sort of animosity toward the U.S. system because its culture smothers.

This is best illustrated in the impressive power of Hollywood and the U.S. dollar. Imagine you were from another country, like Bolivia, and all your life you watched television. U.S. films and programs were fed to you daily, dubbed or subtitled in Spanish. Imagine knowing the exchange rate, as if it were some statistic about your favorite sports team, for how much your money — the Boliviano — is worth compared to the U.S. dollar.

Given the proliferation of globalization and resultant rates of consumption, what can be done to protect biodiversity and maintain local cultures? I believe our challenge is to promote education that looks out, rather than just in. The average U.S. citizen knows very little about the rest of the world and has little interest in it. This reminds me of one of my pet peeves. We in the United States are not the only Americans. Everyone from Point Barrow, Alaska, to Puerto Williams, Chile, is American. The word describes a hemisphere, not a country. In South America students are taught that there are five continents — America, both North and South, being one. So remember when you hear our President say, "God Bless America," you can thank him for speaking on behalf of the whole continent.

Perhaps you can say I am preaching to the choir now (or not), but our country needs to take a broader interest in other nations and not just an economic *self*-interest. Hopefully, through greater empathetic awareness, we'll better understand and respect other cultures — Perhaps even realizing that we share this planet with a growing mass of humanity. As for me, I only wish that I had taken an interest in other cultures earlier in my life. We need to encourage our citizens and leaders to be interested in international affairs, urging kids to learn foreign languages and study other cultures. How do we do this? Through provocation we can entice friends and family to become involved. Perhaps we can travel abroad, learn another language and begin to develop positive relationships. The mission of the Institute of Current World Affairs has set a standard worthy of emulation, and we must continue and expand such efforts.

How can we develop this curiosity, to know what lies beyond our village, beyond our country? I am not entirely sure, but for me it developed simply enough. We lived next to a slaughterhouse and meat-packing plant in a mid-size Minnesota town. I remember watching loaded trucks continually pass my house, headed up the hill, away from the Mississippi River toward the setting sun. Curiously, I wanted to be in the cab of one of those trucks going

somewhere, out there. It's this itch to know what's beyond the next ridge that keeps me moving. In this case curiosity propels life and does not necessarily kill the cat. But why? Why do I have to know?

Throughout this fellowship I have been trying to find a reason for why I keep exploring. One day I read a quote sent to me by my mom attributed to Sir Wilfred Grenfell. He was a medical missionary at the beginning of the last century who raised funds for the first hospital in Labrador, Canada. He said, "Real joy comes not from ease or riches or from the praise of men, but from doing something worthwhile."

Through these past two years I've been searching and wondering if I was doing something worthwhile. I sure wasn't getting rich and wasn't a recipient of broad praise. However, it wasn't until recently that the answer came to me and from one who knew. She pursued her dreams in long-distance flights all the way to her disappearance in 1937, somewhere between New Guinea and Hawaii. It was the explorer, Amelia Earhart, who gave me the answer with her bit of wisdom that "Adventure is worthwhile in itself." And oh, what an adventure it has been.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank ICWA staff (Peter, Ellen and Brent), my family who are here tonight and the John Miller Musser family for starting this fellowship. And, of course, I thank ICWA board members for this adventure of a lifetime.

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[Postscript]. A Special thank you to Mountain Hardwear, especially Gaston McMillan, for donating much of the equipment and outdoors clothing I used over the past two years. The tent was a lifesaver during many soggy nights and against pounding-Patagonian windstorms. To Scott Hall, Lila Musser and Bill Wendt, thank you for opening your address books and providing me a list of essential contacts in many South American protected areas. In-country help from Milena Sosa Schmidt (Argentina), Urbano Gonzalez & family (Chile), Karina DeStefano (Argentina) and Carmen Alejandra Blumberg (Chile) helped open many doors in situations where 'it's who you know that counts.' Finally, my sincere thanks to Kishma Patnaik for reviewing many of my newsletters, and her constant friendship and insightful wisdom.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and Their Activities

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**
A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**
With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**
A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Musevene. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**
A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **Southern Africa**
A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of freshwater supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his six years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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