

No Environmentalism Without Social Justice

I flick the switch to roll up the passenger side window as my dad pulls into the dirt parking lot at the Desolation Wilderness trailhead. I catch the distinct smell of pine needles and tree wax before the car window seals me off from the dust storm our Subaru has created. It is my first ever backpacking trip. I feel my stomach turn as I focus on preparing my mind and body for the miles of hiking and elevation gain ahead of me.

We both get out, make sure our water bottles are full, hiking boots laced tight, and sunscreen applied (quite a rare moment for my olive-skinned Mediterranean father.) I can tell he is thrilled to be away from his computer and the work, daily barrage of emails, and news it entails. I, however, remain nervous. The ski pole feels awkward in my right hand as we wind our way up the first few switchbacks of trail. My backpack pinches my hip bones and immediately induces a pool of sweat at my lower back. The first few miles are by far the hardest. I feel especially distraught as I watch as groups of hikers with kids half my age laugh and bound down the trail back to their cars, content after a few days of seclusion.

Eventually, my dad and I achieve a rhythm. The crunch of gravel, dirt, and detritus under our boots creates a beat that I can follow mindlessly. Four hours later, we make it to a welcoming platform of granite that surrounds a miniature lake, nestled away in the Sierra Nevada mountains. After we pull off our thick wool socks, stiff and dry from the sweat and dust, we lie back in silence, appreciating the feathery breeze while munching on dehydrated apricots.

That night, tucked into our sleeping bags, looking up into the cosmos through the tent's delicate screen, we sing Simon and Garfunkel's "El Condor Pasa." Neither of us can sing on key, but we dutifully switch off between chorus verses:

I'd rather be a sparrow than a snail
Yes I would, if I could, I surely would
I'd rather be a hammer than a nail
Yes I would, if I only could, I surely would

The next afternoon we leave our tent and extra gear to climb the granite dome nearby that has been calling to us since the previous day. We traverse over old fallen pine trees, circle around boulders, and avoid deep cracks. Once atop, the view that fills my entire line of sight is dazzling.

Up until that moment, I don't think I had ever realized that so much space could exist free from human-made buildings or roads.

I plop down cross-legged and stare out onto the pristine valley that was cut by glaciers more than 10,000 years ago. I end up sitting there silently for hours, taking intermittent swigs of filtered mountain water from my Nalgene.

Cut to a few days later and we're on our way back home. This time, we drive with all of the windows down, and they stay that way the whole drive back. As we gradually re-enter into

“civilization,” I can’t help but cringe at every commercial sign we pass and every moment of traffic congestion that reminds me of our own contributions to greenhouse gas emissions.

And so goes the summer between my first and second year of college. I visit my friend in Idaho, where we hike and swim daily, and ultimately take my second ever backpacking trip, this time in the Sawtooth Mountains merely an hour away from her home. I devour books like Yvon Chouinard’s *Let My People Go Surfing* and fantasize about the rest of my life as a dirtbag, living one with nature and staying fit by hiking, biking, and climbing. I read *Outside* magazine like it’s the bible. I listen to the podcast *Dirtbag Diaries* on my daily morning run, pretending that I am the one traversing deserts and mountains as these great adventurers are narrated right into my ears.

At this point in time, I was totally over human beings. Through my exposure to the magnificence of nature and the way humans have systematically destroyed it since the dawn of society, I was ready to forego learning anything about people and the societies they had created. Anthropology... feminism... political science... forget about them.

I had already been considering changing my major to environmental studies anyway after taking a course where I soaked up all there was to know about how the relationships between humans and their environment have changed throughout history. Then, the big, fat straw that broke the camel’s back landed. I attended a guest lecture where the speaker declared that eating meat was akin to the enslavement of Africans or the oppression of women. I now know that such comparisons are problematic and touchy, but back then, I was instantly convinced. I immediately became a strict vegan. And it was decided: humans were the worst things to happen to the planet and I would devote my college and post-grad careers to finding the fix to the environmental problem that is the human race.

It took me about a year to realize that this thinking was wrong and that there cannot be, and should not be, environmentalism without equity and justice. This reality trickled into my subconscious little by little. One cloudy afternoon I was outside the local food co-op, waiting for a friend in the checkout line. Out came another friend, whom I proceeded to chat with about classes and our plans for the next quarter. He told me about his class on food systems.

“I’ve come to realize that being vegan without considering the workers who toil every day to pick your lettuce and strawberries is pretty hypocritical,” he said to me. Guilt encompassed me. He sure as hell wasn’t wrong. While I avoided any and all food products that entailed the exploitation of animals, I really hadn’t been thinking about the exploitation of those who were harvesting my fruits and vegetables. *I’ll just have to start eating more local and paying attention to where my produce comes from*, I thought to myself.

But it isn’t that simple. Not only are people being taken advantage of in the agricultural fields, but entire communities are unable to maintain a healthy livelihood due to lack of access to quality produce. While I munch away on raw uncut carrots and organic farmer’s market hummus, people in food deserts are living off of Hot Cheetos and soda. While I drive to Whole

Foods after every work shift to treat myself to a salad bar dinner, entire neighborhoods are lucky if they can find a head of lettuce at the local gas station.

And it doesn't stop there. I once watched a documentary that brought to light the white homogeneity and privilege of the outdoor recreational community. It reminded me that my ability to appreciate nature in the first place comes from my access to a dependable car, gas money, camping equipment, knowledge, and free time, not to mention the fact that I don't have to face the racial or class discrimination that pervades the outdoor industry to this day. How could I have ever hated people so much for treating the environment poorly when the same power structures and industries that are responsible for environmental degradation are also responsible for segregation, redlining, and the wealth gap?

I wish that I had realized all of this sooner. I wish that even before I had stepped foot on that trail for the first time I had considered what a privilege it was to be there at all. I wish that I had thought about what I could be doing to get kids from marginalized communities out there as well. I wish my early introductory courses in environmental studies had told me that discounting the livelihood of humans in environmental discussions was contradictory and even regressive.

That is why I write this piece: to hopefully remind those who care about the preservation of endangered species and our national parks that people matter too. Humans are a part of our global ecosystem. To separate them from the rest of our world and try to ignore them entirely, as I once did, does the environmental movement no favors. The next time you get pissed off when you see litter while on a hike or by someone eating meat when there are environmentally-friendlier options on the menu, step back and think about where they might come from and how their experiences are likely different from your own. When we environmentalists are able to take a look at the big picture, we can only grow stronger as a movement.