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An Eye-Opening Experience

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An Eye-Opening Experience

Introduction: Expectations for the trip

In my experience as a chemistry major I have learned to rely on the experiments performed in the lab for knowledge regarding the world around me. The really nice thing about chemistry is that in most cases the expected result on paper is generally what happens in the lab when the experiments are sound. As a result of this I have had a pretty bad habit of believing I have knowledge based solely on my expectations. Thankfully I had an experience that has caused me to re-evaluate. This Jan Term I had the opportunity to travel to Baja California Sur, Mexico, for the class Literary Biology in the Sea of Cortez. This took me out of my comfort zone of the lab and into the field, where I learned some important lessons about knowledge, especially when it concerns the natural world. John Steinbeck experienced similar lessons in his expedition to the Sea of Cortez in 1940. He wrote about his experience with the Mexican sierra in the introduction to The Log from the Sea of Cortez, saying:

For example: the Mexican sierra has “XVII-15-IX” spines in the dorsal fin. These can easily be counted. But if the sierra strikes hard on the line so that our hands are burned, if the fish sounds and nearly escapes and finally comes in over the rail, his colors pulsing and his tail beating the air, a whole new relational externality has come into being – an entity which is more than the sum of the fish plus the fisherman. The only way to count the spines of the sierra unaffected by this second relational reality is to sit in a laboratory, open an evil-smelling jar, remove a stiff colorless fish from formalin solution, count the spines, and write the truth “D. XVII-15-IX.” There you have recorded a reality which cannot be assailed – probably the least important reality concerning either the fish or yourself.

Steinbeck makes a claim that the information gained in the lab about the Mexican sierra is nowhere near as important as the experience with the sierra in the field. The same could be said for our trip down to Baja. Prior to our departure I thought I knew what to

expect. I had read the itinerary and familiarized myself with the places we were going. I could never have imagined that the difference between talking about the trip on paper and actually experiencing it would be so immense.

Part 1: Removing the blinders

The first leg of our trip found us camping in the mountains outside of Santiago, Mexico, about half way between Los Cabos and La Paz. Having grown up in Reno, Nevada, I felt as though I knew exactly how this experience would go. I have camped in the mountains in a desert climate numerous times, enough to feel very comfortable in that setting. I did not expect to have Don Faustino and his dog Oso lead us up the side of the mountain to the indigenous rock paintings above his ranch. He was in jeans and a flannel shirt in sweltering heat, and he constantly had to wait for us to catch up. He obviously knew something we didn't about traversing up the side of a mountain on minimal water. Our discussion about epistemology that evening started a thought process in my mind that was very unfamiliar. I wondered for the first time if my personal methods for gathering knowledge were as effective as I had previously thought. The inability to follow the trail at La Victoria Ranch without the help of Don Faustino and Oso caused the first cracks of doubt to seep in.

The next day at Chorro Canyon the seeds of doubt grew into an introspective thought process I had never experienced before. I was meta-thinking, evaluating each thought prior to taking action. This was extremely important as we were basically climbing along the walls at the base of the canyon. The trail was completely overgrown, and even the guides were out of their comfort zone. This experience was significant for

me because I was able to implement the ways of knowing that we had discussed the previous night into a real life experience.

The final day on this leg of the trip took us out of the mountains and onto the beach at Boca del Alamo south of La Paz. Snorkeling here allowed for the introspection to continue, and I was reminded of the mountain goat hunting experience that Steinbeck describes in The Log. Over the course of the chapter Steinbeck criticizes the human need to assert dominance over the creatures of the natural world. I understood his point in collecting the mountain goat droppings first hand as we took pictures and videos of the fish and other organisms in the reef. We have evidence that they were there, and last time we checked they were alive, healthy, and very robust. The result of all of this is that I was starting to see the natural world around me in a new light for the first time. Gone were the blinders I had developed after countless laboratory experiments, and they were replaced with an open and reasonable disposition when it came to gathering knowledge about the world around me in the midst of my experience. This mindset would become very important throughout the rest of our trip.

Part 2: Truly seeing for the first time

The next part of our trip took us to Espiritu Santo Island, where we would attempt to circumnavigate the island in kayaks. Having had a great deal of experience in kayaks previously in my life, I again thought I knew what I was doing. How different can kayaking on a lake and in the sea be? While the first leg of our trip had caused me to re-evaluate the way I viewed the world, the beautiful weather we had the first two days on the island only fed my arrogance in a kayak. Mother Nature blew it all to smithereens the

very next day. We were faced with a three-hour paddle into three to four foot waves and a fifteen-mile per hour head wind. This was literally one of the most physically demanding experiences of my life, but it forced me to truly see for the first time. I focused on the way the waves crashed against my boat and how the wind could easily push me off course like a rag doll. I had both feet working on the rudder to keep me moving straight while my entire upper body strained to keep me moving forward. After this physical struggle I experienced a deep mental peace. I noticed each grain of sand, every small ripple in the water, each spine of the cacti, and so much more. Additionally, as a result of our class discussion about Steinbeck's chapter regarding the island in The Log, I noticed the lack of abundance of life from what I had expected coming into the trip. In describing the specimens they collected, Steinbeck makes it seem as though they couldn't set foot on the beach at low tide without stepping on an organism they were trying to collect. In 1940 the sea creatures were everywhere, and I didn't see this in 2014. This knowledge was very disconcerting, and the question as to why the change was something I hoped to answer by the end of our trip.

By the end of our week on the island I had developed a much greater appreciation for all that I was seeing. I took every opportunity possible to snorkel, hike, and even sleep outside in order to try to see everything there was to be seen. However Mother Nature wanted to be sure that I had learned my lesson. We woke up before dawn on the last day in order to kayak across the channel from the island back to the mainland of Baja. The sunrise was truly spectacular. About 20 minutes after the sun had peeked its head over the horizon I found myself spacing out, losing focus for no more than 30 seconds. In this brief instant of inattention the waves caught me perfectly from the side and my kayak

was capsized. I barely had the presence of mind to take a breath before I found myself underwater. While I was probably out of the kayak and above water in about 45 seconds, it felt like 45 minutes. This seemingly near death experience was the greatest lesson of all – a poignant reminder of Mother Nature’s power in the midst of her beauty. Steinbeck says that association with the sea does not breed contempt, and I experienced this first hand multiple times during our week on the island. It was another lesson I would continue to experience throughout the rest of our trip.

Part 3: The nature of knowledge

The previous few weeks had opened my eyes to a new kind of knowledge. This was something that couldn’t be counted, measured, or treated like the forms of data I was comfortable with in the lab. The knowledge I was gaining in my experiences with the natural world was something much more visceral, a feeling very difficult to describe. The next leg of our trip only enhanced the connection I was making with the natural world. We made our way over the Pacific side of Baja to Magdalena Bay for a shorter kayak trip. On the first morning of the trip we awoke to find a dying sea lion on the beach with a nasty wound through one of its front flippers. I knew with every fiber of my being that this was wrong, and it was the type of knowledge that must be felt and cannot be quantified. This type of knowledge will never be found in the lab. That’s the point Steinbeck makes in his discussion about the Mexican sierra, and I only continued to see this as the trip progressed. The nature of knowledge is not as straightforward as I had once thought.

This lesson continued when we were at the Turtle Conservation Camp run by Red Sustainable Travel. Here I had an experience with a sea turtle akin to Steinbeck's experience with the Mexican sierra. The curvature of the carapace and the length of the tail of a green sea turtle can easily be measured. However these tell you nothing about how the turtle struggles when it's caught in a net, the sighing sound it makes as a rush of air enters for each breath, or how placing a gentle touch beneath its beak will calm it instantly. This "whole new relational externality" was created between myself and the sea turtle as I was in the water helping to untangle it from the net, as I carried it to land, and as I assisted with the measuring process while trying to keep the turtle as comfortable as possible. I don't know that I'll ever fully be able to detail the knowledge gained from such a holistic experience with one of the most ancient creatures found in the natural world. This was definitely something I would never have the opportunity of doing in the lab, and it only further opened my eyes to complex nature that knowledge has. It is rarely straightforward and tends to be more intricate than we expect. This trip had shown me this multiple times thus far, but it wasn't done yet.

Part 4: Learning more with each breath

January 27th, 2014, is a day that will stay with me for the rest of my life. We took a boat out of the La Paz harbor into the bay in search of whale sharks. We immediately found multiple feeding not even a quarter mile offshore. Before I had any chance to process what was happening the boat driver yelled jump and I was in the water in full snorkel gear. I strained to catch up with the behemoth while being awestruck by the grace and speed with which it swam. It seemed oblivious to the strangers in its environment,

and in a moment it was gone. We discussed the experience after the fact, but it was one of those things that words will never be able to accurately describe. Again a “whole new relational externality” was created between us and the animal, adding to the knowledge that it is the largest species of extant fish and a filter feeder. This was the first time on this day that we would be reminded of Steinbeck’s experience with the Mexican sierra.

The second reminder came as we took the boat up to the sea lion colony north of Espiritu Santo. Here we were again able to get in the water with the animals and experience them in their natural environment. Each time a sea lion swam by I was reminded that I was extremely out of my element. They moved with such agility and poise, and at times even seemed to be mocking our clumsy attempts to follow along. In Spanish they are referred to as “lobos del mar”, which translates to wolves of the sea, or sea wolves. We found this name to be much more accurate than the English version as the pups that came out to play were very dog-like in their demeanor. There is not a single word that will ever describe the feeling as a sea lion pup swims by blowing bubbles at you or tries chewing on your fins. Again this is a type of knowledge that I had no idea even existed prior to this trip. This experience was only enhanced by our class discussions about ways of knowing, the different readings from the texts, comparisons between the 1940s and now, and more. While I swam with these charismatic animals I felt as though I was learning more with each breath. These were lessons about the animals, but they were also lessons about myself, and even deeper thoughts about the world around me and my place in it. I feel as though this experience represented the culmination of a growth process in myself as I gather knowledge about the world around

me. It has taught me that there is something to be learned with each breath, regardless of whether or not you have a sea lion bearing down on you.

Conclusion: The significance of knowledge

This January I had an experience that changed my life. I traveled to Baja California Sur in Mexico for the class Literary Biology in the Sea of Cortez. I expected to have a fun time learning about a new place for a month. I did not expect to be rocked to my very core in the way I viewed the world. I have attempted to describe the growth process that I went through over the course of the month, but it's something I am still coming to terms with and figuring out. Reflection on each experience in the context of our class discussions only causes this science major to become more and more philosophical, which is something that is completely foreign to me. I remember when I first heard about the class wondering how UQ and NW could be combined, and that only further shows my blindness. Over the course of the month I learned to appreciate the significance of knowledge in every form that it takes, not simply what is found in the lab. I've been shown first hand that there is more to life than just the chemical reactions causing it to happen. Chemistry isn't everything, as much as it pains me to admit. It took multiple experiences similar to Steinbeck's with the Mexican sierra for me to come to such a realization. The experiences we had blew my expectations out of the water, and I feel as though I have come away from it a better person. This process took place at the edge of my comfort zone, but it's a process I hope to continue even as I return to the comfort of my "normal" life. Knowledge is a beautiful thing, but it takes implementation for any significant difference to be made.