

Ending Poverty: A Great Idea Whose Time Will Never Come

Contributed by Lorna Salzman
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The past three weeks I and my husband Eric spent in Peru, birding in cloud and rainforest, primarily in the high Andes east of Cuzco, along the Madre de Dios River, and at lodges just outside the boundaries of the Manu Biosphere Preserve, a million acres of lowland rainforest that has been set aside for strict ecosystem preservation.

It was a tough slog - up at 4 am, breakfast at 5, on the trail by 5:30, birding for three to six hours morning and afternoon on muddy trails and seeking out not just the colorful "poster birds" like macaws and toucans and motmots and hummingbirds (which are most numerous in the higher cloud forest, though we saw many of these among the nearly five hundred species we logged), but Little Brown Jobs (LBJs) and Little Grey Jobs (LGJ) called antbirds, antwrens, antthrushes, antshrikes, which follow army ants and eat the bugs that flee from the ants. The antbirds, as well as larger brown Furnarids which prefer trees, creep silently along the forest floor, vines and shrubs. They are devilishly hard to detect. You usually have to hang around for half an hour before they can be glimpsed for a split second as they dart between the vegetation.

Luckily we had an extraordinary guide, Silverio Dury, from a local indigenous community in the Puerto Maldonado area, a tourist center providing access to lodges on the Tambopata River, and a center for gold panning in the river. Silverio is a former hunter and as such has sixth, seventh and eighth senses that the rest of us lost eons ago. He is able to detect the presence of a specific bird in a specific spot without any detectable sound or motion, at least from our viewpoint, and he kept us on an extremely rigorous regime for virtually all the days of our trip, except for one at the beginning and two at the end. He even produced a jaguar lounging on a fallen tree high above the river, which we saw quite well from our boat (most of our trip was by boat after the winding dirt and rock road from Cuzco up to 13,000 feet and and down the other side of the Andes ended). Monkeys were of course common everywhere. We also saw the Giant Otter, sloth, agoutis and capybaras, both black and white caimans, and hordes of butterflies. No snakes though. It is the first and last days that I want to describe below.

We spent the first and last days of the trip birding areas to the south and to the north of Lima, on the coast, first to a small fishing village where we hired a small boat to see shore and ocean birds, including Humboldt's Penguin, Blue-footed Boobies, pelicans, etc., and on the last day to an interesting preserve about 100 kilometers to the north, a bit higher up, and inland where a foggy climate has allowed unusual vegetation and animal life to thrive. Both of these trips involved a hired car and driver, and several hours of driving on what passes for the Pan American highway. Unfortunately, it also involved a close and painful look at the ugly Peruvian coastline, its residents and its commercial development.

The Pacific coast of Peru and northern Chile is a desert, getting essentially no rain whatsoever. During the austral winter a dense damp fog hangs over the entire coast for six months. Houses are built without real roofs because it never rains. The coastal zone is completely bereft of vegetation of any sort. Let me repeat: on most of the coastline north and south of Lima there is NOT ONE tree, shrub or blade of grass except where upscale beach clubs have planted it for their members. The desolate dead landscape consists of nothing but a huge high vast series of brown sand mountains, some hundreds of feet high, as far as the eye can see. Because of this landscape and the climate, the coastal land is essentially worthless. A few surfers can be found there. It is repulsively ugly.

But hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of Peruvians, have squatted in this area. Except for the industrial area around Callao, the Pacific coast's chief port near Lima, where industry and shipping is located, the rest of this wasteland, which resembles nothing less than the surface of Mars, is occupied by humans. Humans living like animals or prisoners, however, not humans living under humane conditions. Nearly every foot of these brown dirt mountains is covered with a small hovel that serves as a human dwelling. These are stacked up one above the other, in rows going up to the tops of the sand mountains, with dirt paths in between. Not even a pigsty would accurately describe these dwellings. They are often tiny, perhaps eight by eight feet, and sometimes larger, maybe fifteen by fifteen feet. The floor is dirt. The sides are scavenged wood or plastic tarps. A lucky few have cement blocks or stucco walls. They lack a roof, windows or door.

These hovels climb hundreds of feet up the sand mountains and are reached on foot on dirt paths. There is no water, no electricity, no sanitary facilities, nothing but hovels. Children play in the dirt. The people are not outcast peasants, however. They are simply the workers who in fact have jobs in or near Lima. I saw several men in suits carrying briefcases, coming down to the highway to get their colectivo to their job.

These people make a living of sorts, selling oranges for a few pennies' profit, repairing tires, selling drinks, doing anything that can produce a tiny profit. They live hand to mouth. They have no social or health services in their "communities", though the children do attend school. Some may be lucky enough to have jobs in Lima or Callao, scrubbing floors, working in small restaurants, driving the taxis that consist of a motorcycle with two rear wheels and a plastic or canvas enclosure for people to sit.

There are MILLIONS of these people living like this in and outside Lima, and in other parts of Peru. There are TENS of millions of people like them living outside all the major cities of the world in Africa, Asia and the rest of South and Central

America and Mexico. Anyone who has traveled to these continents has seen them. This is how the vast majority of humanity lives. This is how HUNDREDS of millions of human beings live out their lives.

The rest of us, especially Americans, haven't got a clue to how most people in the world really live. The sight of all this produces both shock, compassion and then incredulity, followed by the inescapable conclusion that nothing can be done. Let's just take Lima for starters. How and where would you begin to relieve this poverty? How and where would you build homes for these people? How would you bring them potable water, sewage systems, electricity? Where would you locate these new housing developments even if you had the money? Not in Lima, which is located on high sand above the coast and can only expand along the coast. Because the coast is worthless, devoid of life, it attracts only industry and squatters. Where else can these people go? You tell me. Where can they find jobs? Most of them are untrained and uneducated, though not all.

And then after you leave Lima, check out Lagos, Nigeria, or Rio or Sao Paulo in Brazil, or Cape Town and Johannesburg in South Africa, or Mexico City, or Caracas, Venezuela. Or Calcutta, India. Or to any of the southeast Asian cities teeming with tens of millions of people. And then ask yourself again whether anything can be done to end this miserable existence of the majority of people in the world.

The answer is evident, but when you read the pompous statements of governments, researchers, businessmen, including those whose MISSION is to address and relieve poverty - the Millennium Development Project comes to mind and boasts of success in helping small African villages but never mentions big cities - you realize that we are all being lied to. If the governments of these squatter communities can't and won't help their people, it isn't likely that good intentions from the wealthy industrial nations is going to make any difference. And all the talk about how globalization will lift up the poor? Globalization helps those who don't need help: the middle class, the entrepreneurs, the businessmen, the technocrats, the managerial elites. The millions squatting in hovels derive NOTHING from globalization. It is infuriating to realize - actually to have our worst fears confirmed - that globalization is a total scam for the vast majority of the world's people.

Every American should be forced to take a trip to one of these cities and given a close-up bus tour of these hovel communities. Without such firsthand experience, it isn't likely that Americans will give a moment's thought to their wasteful lifestyle and overconsumption, made possible on the backs of these people living on dirt floors next to plastic tarp walls. They might start to understand things when they see the children playing not in playgrounds or parks but in the brown dirt outside the place where they spend most of their lives, without toys, bikes, games, or recreational facilities of any kind. This location is the only future they will ever have.

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