

Of sloths and men

BY JAKOB SHOCKEY

Dawn is a brisk moment on the island of Escudo de Veraguas. So near the equator, the sun breaks from the Caribbean with vigor. The whole event hardly lasts a half hour, the time it takes to get a pot of water boiling and steep coffee grounds. We took turns making coffee in the morning, so that the others might only need to crawl from their mosquito net and hammock when it was ready. We drank it black, with lots of sugar. In the Applegate, I never put sugar in my coffee. None of us brought utensils, so we drank out of coconut shell bowls fashioned by our machetes. Only now does it sound like a cliché.

I am pursuing a career in wildlife medicine, and currently study at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. The pedagogy of this school is such that I am trusted with structuring my own education. This spring I took this education to the Comarca Ngöbe-Buglé, a roadless, indigenous region in northern Panama. I went to the mainland village of Kusapin, and 18 miles out to sea, to the island of Escudo de Veraguas. This story is not solely my own, for I traveled, ate and sweated with two other students, Samuel Kaviar and Peter Sundberg. Much of this is written in the plural voice, for it could not have been experienced alone.

We went as students of animal behavior (or ethology) to study the Pygmy Three-toed Sloth, yet also with a focus on conservation, for we had been well-versed in the issues of the island of Escudo beforehand. We stayed in Kusapin for a few days at a time between our trips to Escudo with a local boat captain. These expeditions lasted some six days in length; at this point we had often exhausted both water and energy and would return to town. As we went about surveying the pygmy sloth population and collecting behavioral data on Escudo, we used this time ashore to raise awareness of our purpose. Because we were white, and from the States, the immediate opinion of many

was that we were on a privileged vacation. Yet as students, we gave presentations in the classrooms of Kusapin and met with their mayor, talking always of Escudo's singular value. Eventually it was this investment in the community that shed our identity as tourists.

The island of Escudo is small, about 1.35 square miles, and lays low and dark green against the horizon, consisting of a densely vegetated forest with patches of mangrove, sheltered by a barrier reef. The island supports at least seven endemic species of animals—one of these is the pygmy sloth. Named to science in 2001 as *Bradypus pygmaeus*, it is the sixth extant species of sloth. The international Union for Conservation of Nature has red-listed the pygmy sloth as critically endangered. It is threatened by both the fragility of island biogeography and recent habitat fragmentation of the island's mangrove swamps within which the pygmy sloths live. These mangrove trees have been cut for the cooking fires of local fishermen, who fish from Escudo's reefs to supply booming tourism in the neighboring region. A simple enough story; change the names and it is the story of many animals and people upon our planet.

Although many scientific papers have been written about the island, we were the first researchers to share our ideas with the local community. Even the fact that Escudo's sloths were a distinct species came as a surprise to many of the locals. As we shared what we knew from our college library and our own research upon the island, we found the community to be greatly interested. More than that, our information on the singularity of their land, inspired pride. These people began to tell us that the island should be protected, for perhaps its biodiversity was a resource in itself.

The Namibian conservationist John Kasaona said, "Conservation will fail if it does not work to improve the life of its local community." We went to this community with these words as rhetoric, yet they became a clear truth in our time there. Although tourism currently drives overfishing on Escudo, perhaps it could also be its benefactor. This island is one of those last places of true wildness and its potential for science is great. Yet currently, both scientists and travelers charter expensive boats from the neighboring regions to reach its remote environment. If this travel could instead be organized through the Ngöbe people, the effect on their economy would be great. This would be the ultimate local incentive to protect the island. I believe this is also the only way its quiet pygmy sloth will avoid imminent extinction.

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Conservation is a big-money business and even now large sums are being collected to "protect" the island and its sloths from the Ngöbe. Conversations are taking place through the Internet and within expensive resorts. The Ngöbe are not part of this dialogue, nor do they have any knowledge about it. Within this conservation business, charismatic animals must be in imminent danger for people to donate money, yet if the problem is solved locally, there ends the need for donations. Europeans and Americans are efficient at finding beautiful land in need of "saving," and kicking out those people who call it home, just "for the good" of something. If history is any testament, this



Pygmy Three-toed Sloth

is what our race does. Perhaps this time we can take a different role.

The people of Kusapin have requested our results as soon as we can have them translated into Spanish, so that they might present our work before the regional congress in a bid for local protection of the island. This is, of course, but one step, yet it is in the best direction, and I would conclude with this thought: We are in a position of power due to our societal privilege in comparison to much of this world. Perhaps as more stories of ecological struggle abroad like this one accumulate, we can use this privilege in a more productive manner than we often do. We must utilize our access to knowledge and resources in support of conservation, while respecting the rights of the indigenous population.

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This photo was taken approximately 90 feet above the forest floor, while Jakob was learning to canopy climb on Isla Colón, Panama.



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