

Kakamega: Living and Learning in Kenya's Last Remaining Rainforest

JAMIE POTTERN '09

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.*

— Adrienne Rich, from *Natural Resources*



The taxi ride from Kakamega Town to the village was 40 minutes long. Peter sat in the front next to the driver, and I sat in the back, my elbow leaning out the open window. We had left town by mid-morning to avoid the daily afternoon rain that would soon turn the roads into an impassable sea of mud. Our beat-up vehicle rattled away as we swerved to avoid massive potholes, cows, and people.

I had met Peter one week earlier when I arrived in Kenya, dazed after a series of long, sleepless flights from Washington, D.C., to London to Nairobi. Peter Khamusali Ingosi, who is the program director of Foundation for Sustainable Development (FSD), is a bright, good-natured man in his forties, recognized by his wide, million-dollar smile. He, along with the two American Program Coordinators, had taken me and the other FSD interns on a whirlwind trip through Nairobi and then onto Kakamega Town, a 10-hour bus ride north along a dusty, treacherous road. After our week-long orientation and Swahili language lessons, we were all set to begin working with different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with whom FSD had partnered us. We were being dropped off, one by one, at our host families' homes in different regions of Kakamega. Because I was to be working with the Kakamega Environmental Education Programme (KEEP), my host family was located the farthest away from town, in the village of Isecheno, at the edge of the Kakamega Rainforest.

Outside the confines of the dirty town, the air was deliciously refreshing. Instead of the ever-present vehicle exhaust that burned the back of my throat and stung my eyes, the air blowing into the taxi window was noticeably cooler and thick with sweetness. I was overcome by the lush greenery everywhere and the rich red color of the earthen embankments on either side of the road. Everything, spatially, felt wide open. Contrasting all the places I have been to in my life with this unbelievable

patch of earth, I was headed, quite literally, into the unknown. I could not draw on any memory, any past experience that could hint at what was about to happen. All I knew was that somewhere, at the end of this road, there was a family with whom I would be living for the next nine weeks. Wide open too were all the possibilities of what the summer would hold and how it would, inevitably, change me.

As I gazed out the window, my whiteness drew the stares of locals, who were either walking or sitting idly on the sides of the road. I could not hide my face—my *otherness*—so I averted my eyes, focusing instead on the way the light breeze rustled the leaves of the tall eucalyptus trees. I had spent the past week trying to come to terms with my new identity as a *mzungu*—Swahili for white person or foreigner—and what that new role meant for me. In the town, the *mzungu* name-calling was a constant, and although not threatening in any way, it was still hard to get accustomed to. I had *not* come as a tourist, but as an intern to help develop sustainable projects and work with the community to conserve Kenya's last remaining rainforest. As I left the constraints of the town, I hoped that—despite the color of my skin—I could also avoid this stigma.

Next to me in the back seat of the taxi sat my large blue duffel bag, which contained everything I could possibly need for my stay: malaria pills, a first-aid kit, clothing, bug spray, a pocket knife, books, batteries, travel documents, a flashlight, a shortwave radio, a laptop computer, an iPod, and a *Lonely Planet* travel guide. I was also preemptively armed with all the vaccinations for a tropical region: typhoid, flu, hepatitis, yellow fever, tetanus, and even rabies. Physically, I felt invincible, yet something about my dependence on all of these material luxuries was disconcerting. It felt excessive, privileged, and undeniably *American*.

The question that one might ask is; why was I, a white, middle-class woman from America, sitting in that taxi? What had moved me to pick such a remote location, a quarter of the way around the world from home? The truth is that I wanted answers, answers that I, as an environmental studies major and environmental activist, had to seek. In order to learn how to improve ecological conditions in developing countries and promote more sustainable development, I needed to glean an understanding of what I—and other advocates around the world—are up against. The Foundation for Sustainable Development, I felt, could afford me just that opportunity: to work on the ground with a local NGO and the surrounding community to learn about the ecological problems and to come up with sustainable projects to tackle them. FSD's mission, after all, is to "raise international awareness of the economic challenges in developing countries and support cross-cultural communities in finding more effective solutions to development issues."

This seemed to be a perfect fit for my passion for the environment and my desire to affect change around this issue. Yet in the back of my mind, a small voice prodded my conscience. It asked me quietly, but over and over, this question: what does it mean for a white, female environmental activist coming from the richest and most wasteful society on the planet, to go to a developing country and tell people who survive almost solely off firewood that *they* should be living more sustainably? Rattling along the bumpy road with all my amenities in tow, getting closer and closer to the forest, I could not answer this question anymore than I could predict what lay around the next bend. Instead, I quieted the voice for the time being, down to a persistent hum, almost undetectable.

Little did I know, as I sat there in anticipation of what was to come, that over the course of the summer my entire perception of sustainable development and NGOs would alter. Little did I know that I would become part of a Kenyan family and community, yet still maintain my role an outsider. Little did I know that I would subsist almost solely off two staple food items, or that I would truly come to know what it means to be resourceful. Little did I know that language comes in many forms, that it has the power to silence or liberate you. And little did I know that stirring up an organization would be infinitely harder than stirring up a large pot of *ugali*. I could not know any of these things as the canopy of the forest came into view and we turned onto another dirt road that led to my new home. The taxi slowed to a halt. I took one long deep breath, as I pushed the door open and stepped outside.

Nyumbani (Home)

A dirt path between two small plots of bright green tea leaves leads to my host family's compound. It consists of five houses with tin roofs—four made of mud and one made of cinderblocks. Outside there are two small kitchen huts with thatched roofs, a small garden, a dilapidated wooden structure for the cows, and a pit latrine and washroom that are hidden by a small plot of corn stalks.

My tiny room is in the sturdy, permanent house made of cinderblocks. It is simple, but cozy, and the large mosquito net that hangs from the ceiling is tucked under my thin foam mattress, making me feel as though I am in a warm, safe cocoon. The nights are the darkest I have ever known, there being no electric lights or light pollution. But on the rare nights when it is not cloudy, I see that the billions of stars extend to the very edge of the horizon on all sides. The moon beams down brightly, illuminating the path to the pit latrine, as I make my last rounds before heading off to bed.

Pamela

My host mother, Pamela, is 27 years old. Her short black hair is braided tightly against her scalp, and she always wears a long skirt with a floral pattern and an old T-shirt or blouse. Tall and thin, she exudes extraordinary strength: every muscle in her body is defined from having performed manual labor every day for most of her life. She rarely rests between the many tasks she must carry out.

Pamela is married to Kenneth Azango, and they have two children, Jacobeth, 3, and Joel, 9. As the daughter-in-law of the grandparents—Mama¹ Phoebe and Mzee² Azango—who own the land and compound, it is Pamela's responsibility to cook, clean, collect firewood, tend to the crops, fetch water, take care of the children, and additionally, to see that I am properly cared for. The Azango family is being compensated by FSD for my stay on the condition that they provide me with three meals a day, a morning bucket bath, boiled drinking water, and a lock on my door. This contract did not require them to accept me as a member of the family, but my hope was that somehow I would find a way to bridge the cultural divide and the extensive language barrier.

Twende Kucheza (Let's go play)

I walk home from work, and when Jacobeth spots me, she jumps up with glee and sprints across the lawn and into my open arms. I spin her around in circles, and then tickle her until she giggles uncontrollably. I want to go into my small room, and lie down and rest, but she grabs my hand, and looks pleadingly into my eyes. "Twende kucheza!" she exclaims! Let's go play! She is completely irresistible in her little pink dress, and though I'm exhausted from a full day at KEEP, I play soccer with her and Joeli in the yard for over an hour.

I sit down on back steps to drink my strong tea that Pamela has prepared for me, and Jacobeth grabs my hand again. Twende kucheza! "Sawa sawa" (Okay okay!), I reply, as I put down the ceramic mug and swing her around some more. I take the vine that Jacobeth has found, and show her how to use it as a jump rope. After her many failed attempts and the resulting laughter from the whole family at her little spectacle, I let the children chase me around in a perpetual game of tag, in which the person who is "it" is never quite clear.

My Swahili is very poor—well below the level of three-year old—but it seems not to matter. I have always enjoyed games and sports, and here I learn that the "language of play" is universal, that it defies the bounds of traditional language. While my frustration at my inability to speak more Swahili grows when trying to converse with the grandparents, when I am with the children, I find that I am never lonely. With them, in an unparalleled feeling of love and acceptance, I forget that I am a mzungu.

* * *

I was happy to be home from work. Martin brought me some strong tea and peanuts that Pamela had roasted that morning. As I sat on a stool in the yard, I was entertained by Joeli and Jacobeth, who were spinning around in circles until they fell over. I am sure their mother is pleased I taught them that game....

After my tea was finished, I played with the kids, drawing designs in the dirt. I drew a hopscotch game and attempted to show Jacobeth how to play. I demonstrated a few times, but she didn't quite get the gist of it. Joeli and I had a good laugh over it. We were all drawing, and because Joeli is learning English in school, I drew out the alphabet and had him read me each letter aloud.

Somehow, we started game of tag, in which Jacobeth tried to catch me and I kept dodging her. This turned into both of them coming after me, as I took off barefoot across the compound, tripping over my long skirt. This game went on for about 20

minutes, and they couldn't catch me. We all finally gave in, laughing, smiling, and breathing heavily. Walking back to the yard, Jacobeth took my right hand, and Joeli took the other. It was in this exact moment that I finally won Joeli over. He had never held my hand before and had never come too close to me without running away. Who would think that you could win a 9-year-old's heart just by outrunning him?

Matatus, Boda bodas, and Bargaining

As I grow into a more integral member of the family, I also learn to navigate my way around by the various forms of transportation. The trip into town and back is daunting. Yet I learn that one can get used to anything and that one must accept the dangers as another fact of life. *Matatus*—the local "bus" system—are essentially old pickup trucks, with seats in the bed of the truck and a covering overhead. Over 20 people are crammed into these vehicles, which are nearly falling apart as they rattle down the muddy, rut-filled roads. Accidents are frequent, and because the roads into the forest are not paved, getting stuck in the mud is a daily occurrence.

After one night of especially heavy rains, the road into town turned into a six-inch sea of mud, causing the vehicle to slide back and forth. We nearly toppled, but then rammed, instead, into the earthen embankment, and stuck. Locals helped pull us out of the mud by tying a rope under the belly of the *matatu* and pulling; then we got back inside. I did not question this incident. These rides made me appreciate the amenities I have always taken for granted, such as seat belts and traffic laws, and forced me to renegotiate my definition of personal space.

Being a *mzungu*, the *matatu* money collectors labeled me as an easy target to be taken advantage of. I became more experienced at bargaining and holding firm to the price that I knew was appropriate to pay. I also learned how to negotiate the proper price when riding a *boda boda* back to the forest. *Boda bodas* are bicycles ridden by young men, sporting a cushion and handlebars on the back. My *boda* rides were often 30 minutes long, up and down dirt roads. I was forced to put my personal safety in the hands of strangers, and trust that they would bring me home without harm. This trust was out of sheer necessity, but even when caught in torrential downpours, I always made it home safely.

Maziwa Chai (Milk Tea)

*Wilma [another volunteer] and I finished using the internet café in town, and decided to head back to the forest before the rains came. At the *matatu* stop we piled into a nearly full *matatu* headed for Shinyalu. We were harassed by men trying to sell us various items through the windows. "Mzungu, mzungu..." I have gotten better at ignoring it.*

On the ride back, we saw that the sky was turning black. There was no alternative transportation, so we hopped on boda bodas toward the forest. Halfway there it started to rain, and then pour, in big, cold droplets. Our drivers were pedaling frantically to get us there. If we waited out the rain, we'd be stuck because the roads would become impassable. We were completely soaked when we finally arrived back at the gate. We must have looked absolutely ridiculous: two mzungus, utterly drenched, slugging through the mud.

My family laughed at me when they saw me trudging home like a sad, wet puppy. But actually, I wasn't sad or upset at all. I was so completely soaked and humbled by the situation. I went into my room, dripping everywhere, laughing at the hilarity of it all. I peeled off my wet clothes, dried off, and crawled into my warm, dry pants and my sweatshirt.

Pamela called for me to come drink some tea and I was pleased to find that it was milk tea—just the perfect thing to warm me up.

KEEP

The Kakamega Environmental Education Programme is located in a lone concrete building, at the entrance to the southern part of the Kakamega Rainforest. A colorful, life-like rainforest scene is painted on the front outside wall, and KEEP's logo, a large rainbow, is painted on the side of the building—bright, but beginning to fade. The sturdy structure, built about 10 years ago, has two rooms. One is an office, which contains a long wooden table, benches, a few desks for the office staff, and cluttered cabinets full of various files. A defunct computer and projector are stacked silently in the back corner.

The second room is a classroom with tables, benches, a blackboard, and cabinets full of various books that comprise a makeshift library. On the walls are outdated maps of Kenya and posters with endemic bird species on them. A child's sign made out of construction paper above the doorway reads, "We must understand the forest in order to protect it." Outside, a large plastic rain tank sits under the gutter, waiting expectantly to be filled. Atop the building, on the hot tin roof, lie three small solar panels, baking in the sunlight.

KEEP is a small, locally-run NGO that was started in 1995. It was founded by a man named Wilberforce Okeka and other local forest guides who saw the detrimental effects of unsustainable practices on the forest: deforestation for agricultural purposes and firewood collection, cattle grazing, and gathering of medicinal plants. The mission of KEEP is to educate the community about the importance of forest conservation, and to provide a number of sustainable income-generating projects that attempt to improve community members' lives and livelihoods. KEEP is loosely organized into three departments: education, income-generating projects, and eco-tourism.

KEEP's education department performs outreach to local schools and provides lessons on the importance of forest conservation. The staff members also invite schools to the KEEP premises to give guided tours of the forest and environmental lessons in the classroom. Since KEEP was founded, it has educated over 10,000 local school children about the importance of the Kakamega Forest and the necessity for its protection.

The income-generation department is comprised of numerous "sustainable" income-generating projects, such as a tree nursery, a butterfly farm, a gift shop, fuel-saving basket stoves, a "botanical garden," a "snake park," and a "factory" located in town that processes sustainably-harvested *mondia*, a medicinal plant. Lastly, the eco-tourism department (also a means to generate income for KEEP), is comprised of KEEP's *bandas*, traditional huts that tourists pay to stay in overnight, with an on-site cook and basic accommodations. Tourists often pay for guided tours of the forest, increasing overall profits.

I began my work at KEEP by performing simple tasks upon the request of the KEEP staff: working in the tree nursery, sweeping the leaves outside the bandas, or pulling weeds. To me, this work seemed to be quite a futile endeavor in the middle of the rainforest, where leaves fall down and weeds grow back up as part of the natural ecological process. In my search for more meaningful work, I began to pursue ideas for a potential, sustainable project that would benefit the community. After all, this is what FSD has sent me there to do, and I wanted not only to uphold my commitment to them, but also to feel that my time there would be worthwhile and fulfilling—for KEEP and for myself.

Ninafanya kazi (I am working)

I discussed with Gabriel, the education department head, that I wanted to work on a project that would help the community. He suggested a needs assessment by way of a survey to community members, stating that one cannot develop a project without knowing what the most pressing needs are.

David (a German volunteer), Gabriel, and I wrote up the survey together, and Gabriel helped us make sure that the questions were culturally appropriate and would be understood by those being interviewed. The dual aim of the survey was to assess the living conditions in the communities as well as to gauge community interest in sustainable,

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income-generating projects. Our survey—comprised of 48 questions—was designed to show how these living conditions correlate with forest exploitation, and we sought to use the data on income-generating projects to find ways to reduce human pressure on the forest.

Trying to generate ideas for potential projects, I spoke with another FSD intern, who was working for an organization called CARD (Community Action for Rural Development) in Kakamega Town, which loans beehives out to farmers for income-generation. I thought this would be a perfect project for KEEP, since it was already up and running, and we added some questions about community interest in beekeeping onto the survey.

The next week, we all met with the chairman of KEEP to finalize each question. He was very open and amenable to our ideas, and was very pleased that we wanted to do this project. He was hopeful about the partnership with CARD, and agreed that it would be a worthwhile endeavor. We all agreed on sending six KEEP members to six different villages, which were chosen based on their relative proximity to KEEP and the forest. Together we planned a training session for the field interviewers during which we asked Gabriel and the Chairman to go over all the questions in the survey and stress how the interviews should be conducted.

Knowing we lacked a certain level of cultural awareness about Kenyan interviewing procedures, we made sure that Gabriel and the chairman were the ones to specifically touch on themes of cultural sensitivity, how to handle health-related questions, and thoroughness. We didn't want to appear as if this was written solely by the *mzungus*, and we really wanted KEEP to embrace it as their own project. While our presence at that training session showed we had a prominent role in the project, Gabriel did a phenomenal job of stressing why the survey was important and that each interviewer was given a crucial responsibility that would help the community.

Each of the six interviewers was asked to administer the survey to 40 people over the course of four days (ten families, four people from each family). While we were a little unsure of how realistic this goal was, after four days, we successfully got back all 240 completed surveys. Finally, after two weeks of compiling and sorting usable data and organizing all the numbers into charts and tables on my computer, we sat down to write a report of our findings. We realized, however, that we didn't necessarily know how to write a social science report or

even who our audience was supposed to be. Was the report for KEEP's edification, for CARD, or for requesting international funding? We finally decided to simply write an exact, factual report with everything we did, our results, and all our recommendations included. That way, KEEP could have all the information, but the report could be re-written at a later date to be used for funding or grant proposals.

The extensive data that we gathered for the report show that living conditions, levels of income, and education have a direct effect on the exploitation of the Kakamega Rainforest. In the communities surrounding KEEP, poverty, unemployment, sickness, and lack of knowledge essentially force people to depend solely on products from the forest for their basic needs. Thus, to help reduce over-use of the forest and conserve it for future generations, KEEP must provide the community with effective alternatives.

Sustainable income-generating projects, if done properly, provide community members with a source of income and a means to improve their social status. However, through personal experience, observations, and asking questions of the KEEP staff, we found that most of the existing projects are ineffectively run, and new projects are often started before old ones become sustainable. We concluded in the report that organizations like KEEP should focus on pre-existing projects and on improving their internal structure and capacity, instead of rushing to implement new initiatives.

KEEP needs to continue training its members and perform greater outreach to the community to educate villagers about these problems and to provide them with the skills necessary to reduce their own impact on the forest. One example is training them to make fuel-efficient mud stoves, which reduce the amount of firewood needed. While it is impossible to prevent members of the community from entering the forest, we concluded that education, training, and effective income-generating projects are potential solutions that address some of the root causes of forest exploitation.

Being the only native English-speaker at KEEP, I crafted much of the actual wording of the report. David, Wilma, and I would discuss what we wanted written in the report, and then I would come up with the appropriate, formal language. We were not social science researchers, and oftentimes, I felt that we were going at the process partially blind. Our resources were extremely limited, but we made extensive use of what we had at our disposal. We often referred to KEEP's library or asked questions of the other KEEP members, volunteers, or researchers on-site.

We had no access to the internet, except one day a week when we took the often treacherous journey into town, to the painstakingly slow internet café. Despite our lack of resources, we strove for as much accuracy and precision as possible. Though we sought answers from

the KEEP staff, much of our analysis was our own, as were the data we chose to include, the charts, and the pictures. It was KEEP's project, but we, effectively, owned it.

The report was forced into existence out of our sheer willpower to complete it. We wanted to leave a lasting document that incorporated all the data and could be used for a variety of purposes by KEEP or future volunteers. Yet in the process of generating the report, we had not only distanced ourselves from KEEP members, we had also generated a document of more than 30 pages that few there could easily comprehend. Who at KEEP would really take the time to read everything, and what information was actually useful or comprehensible to them? Our recommendations section discussed our advice based on the data we had collected from KEEP members and from the field, and on our own observations of which projects at KEEP were successful or unsuccessful. We had filtered the facts through our own lenses.

My quick-fix partnership idea with CARD was determined to be infeasible at the time. Our data from the report, our observations, and a meeting with CARD had indicated to us that both NGOs currently lack the organizational capacity, accountability, and infrastructure to start the partnership. Still, Gabriel asked me multiple times about when we could start getting beehives from CARD. If these same observations written in the report were not grasped when expressed verbally, why would a written document make the information any clearer? We were so wedded to form and precision that we neglected to discuss how KEEP members could be more involved in the report-writing process. We neglected to incorporate the voices of those whom we were representing.

We had spent the vast majority of our time there generating the report, and left only 20 minutes on my last day to share and explain all that we had done. Though we wrote the report for KEEP, we used it as a vehicle to express how things are and our vision of how they should be. We wanted it to be KEEP's report, but in the end it was still ours.

The Solar Panel

A solar system works by converting the sun's energy directly into electricity and channeling the electric current through an inverter inside the building, which converts the DC voltage of the solar cells into AC for use with common appliances. The current, when not used directly, is stored in solar system batteries so electricity can be provided on cloudy days or at night. With KEEP's solar panels, however, this was not the case. If too many appliances were plugged in, or if a cloud passed in front of the sun, the inverter would arbitrarily shut off. Working in the office on my laptop computer, I would hear a loud click and then silence. From the corner of the room, where I sat nearest to the electrical outlet, I had a full view of the daily happenings in the office. When the inverter

turned off, which occurred quite frequently, most others in the office continued about their business, undisturbed. I would then get up and try to coax the inverter back to life so that the other volunteers and I could keep working on our report. Being far more dependent on technology than those around me, I felt physically and culturally distanced from the people at KEEP. I felt like a separate entity, disassociated from the others, wired to the outside world.

Often, when the solar power was not enough, we had to turn on KEEP's portable generator to use the printer, charge the laptop, show educational films, or charge cell phones. The generator made a loud whirring noise, disturbing the tranquility of the forest. It required petrol and oil, both of which were expensive and polluting. While my knowledge of solar systems was very basic, I knew that using the generator with so much free, available sunlight was impractical. I started to ask questions, and the more I learned about the history behind the solar panels, the more I became convinced that there were deeper, structural problems at hand.

The exact origin of the solar panels, to my knowledge, is unknown or forgotten. I imagine that they were donated a few years ago, like the other various expensive pieces of technology that KEEP owns, by a volunteer or by a grant from an international environmental organization. This dearth of information surprised me: I could find no record of who had purchased it, installed it, or if anyone had ever repaired it.

By the time I arrived, the batteries were already three years old. Solar system batteries are only made to last three years—unbeknownst to my fellow KEEP members and me—but the battery company only gives a one-year warranty. The used inverter that KEEP had purchased the year before had died within a week (inverters are supposed to last for decades), so they were borrowing one from the Forest Department that was only half the wattage needed. (There was some bitter dispute about to whom this inverter actually belonged.)

A fellow American at KEEP, who had returned for her second summer in a row to give health-related trainings to KEEP members, told me that the year before, KEEP's solar system was non-functioning and the generator had to be used to power all of KEEP's operations. Upon her return to the States after last summer, she had encouraged her students to fundraise to help get KEEP the money needed to repair the system. The students raised over \$2,000—well over what was needed—which was sent back to KEEP. When she returned this summer, she learned that the money had not gone to the solar system at all, but instead had been diverted to fund a snake park project, a mile away. The snake park is now a half-built building on an empty field. This woman felt hurt and betrayed that the money had not gone towards its intended purpose, in which she had invested a great deal of time and effort.

Despite the troubled history behind the solar system, the other volunteers and I determined that there was still a great need for it to be repaired. We wanted KEEP to be able to have the sustainable, constant stream of electricity that the panels were supposed to be providing, so KEEP could perform daily operations, charge appliances, and turn the building into a resource center in the evenings for the entire community to use. We set out to find a solar panel company to come evaluate and fix the problems. However, because there was no record of by whom or when it had been installed, what voltage the panels were, or any listing of companies who fix solar systems, we had to start from scratch. Complicating our search for a company was the fact that there are essentially no addresses in Western Kenya—at least that I saw—only P.O. boxes, and virtually no websites to find those companies, if they do exist.

We found one lead on a website for an electrical company located in Kisumu, the closest city from the forest, about a two-hour drive by public transportation. Our treacherous journey proved fruitful, eventually leading us, by way of a series of *boda boda* rides, to a battery company called Chloride Exide. We arranged for a repairman to come check the panels the following week. Upon arrival, he determined that the batteries were fine, but that we needed the contacts repaired and would have to transport them ourselves to Kisumu. We paid for a taxi for the long journey, only to have the company tell us that the batteries were in fact almost dead, and that we needed to purchase two new ones, in addition to the new inverter. The total cost for everything was under \$1,000.

The Chairman

The chairman of KEEP is a sharp, talkative man, recognizable by his white, knitted head covering. Thin, wide-eyed, and expressive, he spews out words a mile a minute and is always on the go. It was always difficult to track him down, yet in all of our meetings together, he seemed to be agreement with the ideas that I—and the other *mzungus*—suggested. However, while he technically runs KEEP's four branches and has the responsibility of making many important decisions, there never appears to be anyone in charge.

After multiple interactions with the chairman, I realized that our conversations remained almost strictly one-sided, with him usually deferring to my opinion. Seeing as I had far less experience than him at KEEP, I wanted an open dialogue. Yet although he agreed with me, there were never any action steps taken. The initiative was unquestionably upon me and the other volunteers to follow through with our ideas. Permission wasn't even necessary, and mostly we were left on our own to work on our projects.

When we addressed the issue of the solar system and the need for a new inverter with the chairman, he enthusiastically agreed that it was very important and should be purchased. Yet he refused to put forth more than half the money needed, claiming that the rest was reserved for the snake park—the very project that had taken away the money intended to fix the solar system a year earlier.

I reasoned, in my discussion with the chairman, that KEEP would be unable to function without electricity; he replied that we could not divert the funds and that we could just continue to use the generator. Having finally made all the appropriate contacts at the battery company and not wanting to leave without fixing the solar system, I made the decision to utilize some funds I had to pay the difference. The Chloride Exide repairmen came in a truck, bearing a brand new inverter and two new batteries. Everyone in the office seemed unsure of what was going on and why. They saw that I was handling the situation, and that I paid the repairman after the work had been completed. I felt isolated and alone, my huge wad of Kenyan shillings further distancing me from my colleagues in the room and reaffirming my role as an outsider.

T.V. Incident

With the solar system repaired, KEEP now had full electricity during the day. When I came back from lunch, I saw that nearly every single KEEP worker was inside the classroom, watching a movie on the television, instead of doing work. Even the Chairman was in there. I got up and turned off the inverter. I could hear the TV in the other room go silent, and then everyone filed out, since the excitement was over.

I asked to speak with the Chairman privately and I explained to him the situation and how upset it made me. He said that they really need to set out some rules, and I kept stressing that he needs to set out the rules and ensure that other people follow them. Then I discussed making KEEP into a resource center in the evenings, which was one of biggest reasons that ensuring solar power was so important. He always says how everything should be, but never how he's going to go about doing it. I kept asking who was going to arrange it and be responsible for it. I didn't get a straight answer.

The Mzungu Lady

An automatic assumption about *mzungus* is that they are well-educated, wealthy, and that have so much money that they can share it to help everyone around them. At least these first two assumptions, in most cases, are likely to be true.

In retrospect, I realize that I fulfilled this stereotype perfectly. With the solar panels, we did exactly what was expected of us as *mzungus*. We worked out all the logistics, and because we had the money, we used it to fix whatever we deemed needed fixing. In this instance, as well as numerous other times throughout my experience, I was put into uncomfortable situations, which required me to pit my wealth against the poverty of others.

I exhibited my wealth and perpetuated my outsider role every day, using my laptop computer and various appliances at home and in the workplace. At work, my ability to tap into funds created an unequal power shift, which often resulted in KEEP staff, including my superiors, deferring to my opinions or suggestions. While I strove for collaborative dialogue, they would often accept my ideas without giving their own input, thereby isolating me and reducing overall productivity. I felt that I was not understood, and the lack of open communication made it that much more difficult to bridge our cultural divides.

Structural Problems

The most prominent aspect of the rainforest is its intrinsic resourcefulness. Plants and animals live, die, and then their decaying matter creates the foundation for more life. The people who live there are equally resourceful, wasting nothing, living frugally out of sheer necessity. But KEEP as an organization lacks crucial resources that limit its effectiveness. While “we must understand the forest in order to protect it”—as the sign in KEEP’s classroom preaches— knowledge of the forest is not always enough to counter the many forces acting against its preservation. Knowledge alone will not bring sustainable development.

It was not until well after returning home that I understood the position of the chairman, and the reasons behind the attitude toward the solar panel itself. The discrepancy between my expectations of what KEEP’s priorities should be and the decisions that KEEP made stem out of some larger issues. One is that well-intentioned visitors or organizations frequently donate expensive equipment to KEEP without actually training KEEP members how to use these items properly. Thus, instead of KEEP members taking ownership of these valuable high-tech gadgets and having their maintenance be a top priority, they see the solar panel as a foreign object. They have not been given the experience or skills necessary to reap the benefits of such technologies. Instead of involving the other KEEP members, we took it upon ourselves to fix the solar system, thereby re-associating the technology with Western privilege.

Despite coming from a rich, technologically advanced country, I myself did not know much about solar system batteries or inverters. How could KEEP staff members be expected to focus their priorities on these complicated objects, which they were not given instruction on how to use and which need constant repair? It makes perfect sense

that they would put that money instead into something familiar and relatable to the environment; something like a snake park.

A second issue is that KEEP, and locally run organizations like it, lack the basic foundations—at least from a Western perspective—for success: education, leadership, organization, transparency, and accountability. Most KEEP workers and community members have only a primary level—perhaps secondary level—education. While free primary education was institutionalized by the Kenyan government in January 2003, secondary schooling still requires costly school fees for exams and uniforms. With limited education and a lack of exposure to Western, capitalistic practices, many people are not experienced on how to run an effective organization. Thus, in an office whose treasurer is not trained in accounting, where records are not always kept, and where most workers are volunteers, it is not surprising that money goes missing or ends up being diverted to other projects. It is no wonder that there was no documentation on the origin of the solar panel.

I realize now that the obstacles to achieving sustainable development extend so much deeper than mere financial assistance. Taken in light of its colonial history, these problems extend back to the very roots of poverty itself—unemployment, corruption, lack of free and proper education, and lack of access to adequate health care—for which there are no blanket solutions. For small NGOs like KEEP, these same structural problems have parallels all over the world. While these issues are vast and complex, a gleam of hope resides in concrete measures that can be taken. From my experience at KEEP, actions such as more trainings, workshops, advertising, and focus on long-term solutions can help improve the effectiveness of these organizations and pave a more sustainable route in the wake of such incalculable forces.

Martin

Martin, one of Mama and Mzee’s many grandchildren, is 30 years old. There is no work to be found and he cannot afford to go to training college, so he helps out in the field or takes the long journey into town to look for a job. He always comes home empty-handed, yet still cheerful enough to help Pamela with some of the cooking. Martin is fascinated with America. He asks me if there are forests where I live. I try to explain shopping malls, the four seasons, Big Macs, and big cities. Almost everyone I’ve talked to here wants to go to America. They think it’s the land of plenty; that it’s made of gold, and I suppose the television would not have shown them otherwise.

Martin says that one day he wants to go to America because it has a lot of opportunities and you can work your way up the ladder by working hard. I try to explain that, just like in Kenya, there are different social classes, and it is often the people who have the money that get the opportunities at the expense of those who don’t. I tell him how there are still issues of poverty and health care and poor education systems

in America, although of course on an entirely different level. In a world that is becoming increasingly desensitized, at least here I sense a strong importance placed on family and community. I want to tell Martin never to go—to keep him here in his world that somehow exists, despite the odds against it. But what right do I—the white American at the top of this social hierarchy—have to say this?

In My Mind's Eye

I am sitting in my usual spot at my host family's house, in the living room, on the sofa by the back wall. The sun is setting and the rain is tapping lightly on the tin roof. In the fading light, I relax and sink down into the seat cushion, letting my eyes rest upon the various objects in the room. I have the time here to weigh each item: to take into account its shape, its significance in the larger context of life in Isecheno.

I notice the familiar armchairs, positioned around the periphery of the room: five of them in all, along with two sofas, covered with bright blue and green floral tablecloths. Matching napkins are draped over the small stools that convert the room from a sitting area to a dining room and kitchen. In any Western country, these simple pieces of cloth might appear tacky, out of place. But here, they have a very practical touch, keeping the couches, tables, and stools clean in the midst of so much mud, spilled stew, and children.

In nearly every household I enter, I see a similar setup. Cleanliness, I have learned, is a sign of respect, and great value is placed on taking care of expensive items that one owns. Very few people can afford to buy new furniture, so each piece is constantly protected and repaired when necessary. One day, I saw two men construct a gorgeous set of sofas out of wood, foam, and nails, using only a hammer and a panga (a long, curved blade). It looked like it could have been purchased in a Western department store. One can do a lot with very little, especially when other options are limited or non-existent.

Such tablecloths, along with all types of clothing, are purchased in town. No clothing stores exist. Instead, garments are yanked from massive piles of used clothing, which appear to have somehow been transported from distant Salvation Army stores and Goodwill bins in America or Europe, to the small, bustling market place in Kakamega Town, Kenya. These piles lie adjacent to wooden vendor stalls, filled with the most eclectic assortment of fresh fruits, vegetables, flashlights, knives, thermoses, ropes, and any other item imaginable with a functional value.

To me, everything looks mismatched, a patchwork quilt. Yet I realize that in a place where nothing matches, consequently, everything matches. In fact, the concept of color coordination appears not to exist. I recognize that I have a different conception of what dressing well means. Here, expectations are defined by the status quo. Everyone wears used clothing, and so, effectively, it is not "used." Expectations are based on what is most resourceful, on what is necessary. A businessman, returning to visit his birthplace in the village, may be admired and respected for his fancy, pressed suit and gleaming tie. However, he does not represent the average person. Practicality and the idea of repair and re-use still win out over fashion sense.

This ingrained resourcefulness, which I have observed from the purchase of used tablecloths and clothing, also reminds me of the children in the village and the toys that they make out of seemingly nothing. Plastic bags bunched together and tied with string make a ball, a vine makes a jump rope, a stick and the red earth make a drawing pad. Toys and games are left up to the pure imagination of the children. I have seen an old bicycle tire and an old dull blade used interchangeably as props for impromptu games. Such inventiveness reminds me of stories I have heard along this vein: an American child opens a birthday present and disregards the actual toy inside, in favor of playing with the box that the toy came in. A box has infinite possibilities, while a manufactured toy has an innate purpose, and thus limits a child's imagination.

The sun has lowered in the sky, and my eyes now move and fix upon the black-and-white television atop the wooden bureau, opposite from where I am sitting. The TV is run by a small solar panel on the roof, and it sits next to a large stereo player with a long antenna. The television will be on all evening, watched religiously, as the whole family sits under the dim, solar-powered light. Diagonal lines of static run across the screen, and foreign sights and sounds jump into this quiet, rural scene. Loud jingles are sung, promoting Western products. They say you cannot live without Coca-Cola, without vegetable oil, without skin products.

Much of what my host family sees on TV is a world completely outside of their realm of experience. It temporarily transports them to places they have never been, and most likely will never go. They are bombarded with advertising for products they can never afford and that they surely don't need. Much of the nightly shows are 1990s American sitcoms that reveal a culture full of violence, drama, romance, wealth, and relative luxury. This television is a portal to a life that exists elsewhere. It exemplifies what globalization means for many—it means they get just a taste. It implies "look but don't touch."

Lining the upper section of the walls are family photos, most black-and-white and not smiling, tipped forward as though they are looking down, sternly. Their eyes seem to fall upon a foreign object in the room: me. They seem to sense that I don't belong; that I am otherworldly. It now occurs to me that I belong to the world of that television, the world that they cannot have, but perhaps, the world that they most aspire to be a part of. I came to stay only briefly, bringing a laptop, a digital camera, an LED flashlight. I ask too many questions, I don't understand the language, I have mixed-up ideas about gender roles and religion. I have altered the very fabric of the room itself.

Despite being very happy with my living situation, I have been feeling more and more like an outsider. My inability to communicate has caused me to retreat more often into the safety of my small room. A silent wall has been built between me and my host family. I realize, finally, that I am a direct product of globalization. I begin to understand the source of the discomfort I felt from the very beginning in bringing such luxury items with me to Kenya. My personal sense of excess for owning such goods means nothing when I exhibit—flaunt even—my dependence on those goods. I realize that I am exactly what they cannot have. The barrier that I sense is not just my whiteness—my mzungu status—it is the stereotype that I constantly reinforce.

The world to which I belong is one I often resent, while still retaining the benefits of having been raised and educated in it. It is a world that gives me the privilege of sitting in this very room, oceans away from home, and question at whose expense I—and others like me—are living. It gives me the privilege to see, to ask, and to learn, and then return to my world, even after stumbling upon the painful answers.

The Closing Circle

In 1971, biologist Barry Commoner wrote a book titled, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man and Technology*. While a bit arcane, this book discusses many issues that are still pertinent today, including the growing disconnect between the demand of short-term profits and the actual needs of mankind, which is contributing to our current ecological crisis. More specifically, it touches on the role technology has played in separating us from our environment and the way we perceive it.

Commoner discusses an “ambiguity” in our relationship to our environment. We participate biologically in the environmental system, yet “human society is designed to exploit the environment as a whole, to produce wealth” (Commoner 28). Here we have a paradox, in which we are at the same time participant *and* exploiter in our natural environment. This duality distorts our perspective of our environment and our relationship to it.

However, when Commoner writes about “human society,” he is referring to advanced nations, not—however culturally insensitive—to all the distinct cultures and nations that comprise the human race. In highly developed countries, our sophisticated technologies have led us to believe “that we have made our own environment and no longer depend on the one provided by nature” (29). Our seemingly endless flow of running water, air conditioning, electricity, refrigeration, and fresh foods create a “nearly fatal illusion” which is a root cause of our mass exploitation of the earth’s resources.

People who live in Isecheno, outside the Kakamega Rainforest, have no such illusion. Those who live there are directly dependent on and in tune with their environment. They are both participant and exploiter, but their situation calls for a keen awareness of nature, day to day. The biggest difference between those living in advanced nations and those living in Isecheno is choice. Advanced nations can *choose* whether or not to waste or conserve; they have that freedom. In Isecheno, there are few alternatives because resources and the means to acquire them are limited.

Based on data I collected and compiled for KEEP, those who live around the Kakamega Rainforest rely almost wholly on firewood to sustain themselves. Some who can afford it purchase charcoal, and an almost negligible number purchase gas. It would seem that such sources of energy, as compared to the power plants and electrical grids of developed nations, would be highly sustainable. But due to increasing population pressure around the forest, combined with growing rates of unemployment and disease, the forest is being over-utilized for fuel wood, medicinal plants, building materials, crops, and grazing for livestock. All of these factors have caused the forest to be reduced by over 50% in the past 25 years. As the last remaining forest in Kenya dwindles and population pressure increases its exploitation, what other options are there?

Working for KEEP, which promotes and educates the local community about the importance of forest conservation, I often asked myself how effective our efforts were. The reality is that everyone around me—KEEP members included—all took firewood out of the forest, despite it being an illegal act. Every day, I spotted men, women, and children carrying huge bundles of firewood on their heads out of the forest and back up the dusty roads to their compounds. My host mother, Pamela, carried such bundles. How else could these people eat and sustain themselves? But at the same time that I was witnessing this firewood removal, I was, by default, contributing to the very exploitation of the

As the last remaining forest in Kenya dwindles and population pressure increases its exploitation, what other options are there?

forest that I was trying to curtail. The irony, at least for me—as an environmentalist and a proponent of sustainable development—was that despite the firewood used to cook my meals, this was the closest to sustainable living that I had ever been.

While one of KEEP's main objectives is to promote and train community members to begin their own sustainable, income-generating projects, they run into a series of problems. First, KEEP lacks basic funds for educating its own members on these projects in order to do outreach and training to the community. If they are able to train their members, they still have to inform the community about the trainings, and often community members will not come without an incentive because of the far distances or the fact that they are busy working or tending to their children. If both of these initial steps are successful, the same problem arises where the community member does not have the available capital necessary to invest in the project. Even when projects are started, their maintenance is difficult, and people will often resort back to their unsustainable habits.

This observation has led me to the question of what it means to live sustainably. In the United States, our lifestyles are inherently wasteful, by nature of our comparative luxuries and excess. To live sustainably, one must actively use less. If one is determined enough, he or she can go so far as to live off the power grid or utilize renewable energy sources. Some of us have the luxury of being able to *afford* to live in a more holistic, sustainable fashion. Again, the difference is the freedom to choose.

“It’s better to be buried alive”

My last night in forest before returning to the States, I stopped by Wilberforce Okeka’s house to bid him farewell. He is the founder of KEEP, and though he no longer works there, his opinion is highly valued and respected. I wanted to share with him all that I had learned in my nine weeks at KEEP, and convey the many structural issues and problems that I had observed. He listened and nodded in agreement.

It grew dark, and one of his daughters came out with a large bowl of ugali and fish, and I was then obligated to eat with his family. We talked and ate by the light of the oil lamp, as the rain began to pound on the tin roof.

Wilberforce told me this saying in Swahili: “It’s better to be buried alive.” He explained that when someone is sick, no one has any money to give him for treatment or to take him to the hospital. However, when this person dies, suddenly everyone starts fundraising projects to buy him a casket, pay for the funeral, and get him a nice suit. Why didn’t they clothe him when he was alive

or pay for him to get better? That’s why it’s better to be “buried alive.” I chuckled, but I realized that he was right. People have the means to help others, but not always the will.

“The Impossible Will Take A Little While”

What we often neglect when we think of sustainable development are the realities on the ground. Telling individuals who are unemployed, sick, and only moderately educated to stop making use of their only source of fuel and sustenance is unrealistic. Under such circumstances there isn’t even a question for those people as to whether or not to take firewood or medicinal plants from the forest: they will do it because they must.

In reality, KEEP is faced with an almost impossible situation: population pressure is growing, people need to eat, and the forest is therefore dwindling. The longer I worked at KEEP, the more this fact began to weigh down heavily upon me, until a deep pessimism set in. But Commoner, writing at the beginning of the momentous U.S. environmental movement, found a source of optimism that still rings true today— even in this increasingly complex world. In fact, it is the “very complexity of the issues generated by the environmental crisis” that gives us a flame of hope (32). “Once the links between the separate parts of the problem are perceived, it becomes possible to see new means of solving the whole” (32). When we can see the direct link between lack of access to adequate health care and increased forest use, we can therefore try to address the problems within this specific, narrower framework.

Another source of optimism lies in the fact that the very nature of the environmental crisis is not as a product of man’s biological capabilities, but of his “social actions, which are subject to more rapid change” (32). Our agency is therein restored. If we can learn to better manage our global environment, we can effectively transform the utilization of the world’s resources to be more equitable. As Commoner wrote over 30 years ago, human beings have broken out of the circle of life by “conquering nature,” and following the rules of profit-seeking instead of those that “govern nature” (33). In order to survive and reverse our own destruction, we must actively work to close the circle.

Commoner believes that “crisis means change.” Yet after the energy crisis in the 1970s, when people rallied around greater environmental protection and lifestyle changes, it was assumed that conditions would ultimately get better. Although unprecedented environmental legislation has been passed since then, the state of the world has ultimately degraded to disastrous proportions, with 3 billion additional people to support. Global greenhouse gas emissions are increasing astronomically, and as a result, our atmosphere and oceans have become dangerously warmer. Global climate change is the greatest threat to the health and future of our planet and ourselves.

With increased global warming, we are already feeling the effects all over the world in the form of melting glaciers, rising sea levels, more numerous and severe hurricanes that have devastated coastal areas around the globe, droughts, heat strokes, floods, the extinction of thousands of species, and a resulting loss of biodiversity, deforestation, and numerous other environmental, economic, and social crises. The United Nations Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has confirmed what has been growing more and more apparent each year: that human activities in the form of burning fossil fuels, cutting down trees, and exploiting natural resources are inextricably linked to the steep rise in global temperatures over the past 100 years, and specifically over the past few decades. According to the IPCC, 11 of the last 12 years (1995 -2006) rank among the 12 warmest years in the instrumental record of global surface temperature (since 1850).

The IPCC, which recently won the Nobel Peace Prize—along with former U.S. vice president Al Gore— has come out with a serious of four climate change reports over the past 20 years. Each one of these has been more scientifically convincing and dire than the last about the current state of our planet and future implications. They predict that global emissions must be reduced by 80% by the year 2050 in order to mitigate some of the worst effects of climate change. Yet every year emissions are increasing at astronomical rates, turning scientists' climate models into devastating realities.

In light of these frightening predictions, it may seem that focusing our energies on a small, dwindling rainforest in western Kenya would be an insignificant drop in the bucket. Yet we must realize that we cannot look at these problems in isolation. Often we forget that our environment is a vast, interconnected system. Environmental degradation in one part of the globe is integrally linked to all the other parts.

However, while we are all literally and figuratively in the same boat, climate change will not affect everyone equally. It is consequently the world's poorest who are suffering—and will continue to suffer—the greatest. These are often the people living in the worst, most vulnerable conditions, with the least means to relocate or handle the severe environmental, economic, and social effects. Yet the United States, the richest nation in the world, has refused to take the necessary actions to curb its emissions. In fact, with less than 5% of the world's population, the U.S. contributes to 25% of the world's global warming pollution. The United States must utilize its vast resources and wealth to change its unsustainable practices, thereby curbing the largest sources of pollution and degradation.

Although the realities of this interconnected global system are detrimental and unavoidable, we can also use the interconnectedness in a positive way to *mitigate* the effects of environmental problems.

Combining scientific knowledge with growing international efforts, we as a global society now have the capacity to aid developing countries and foster positive environmental practices. This will take the initiative of wealthier countries—especially the United States—to creatively facilitate sustainable development projects, while at the same time drastically reducing their emissions and sustainably reallocating their resources. The U.S. and other “First World” countries must now practice what they preach, if they are to assist with the sustainable development of “Third World” countries. Throwing money at the problem does not work, as exhibited by my solar panel scenario. International aid alone is *not* effective: there must be an attempt to remedy the problems on the ground and train NGOs in a way that meets their cultural and financial needs.

Twende Nyumbani (Let's go home)

Jacobeth and I were playing in the yard after I got home from work. The sun was setting, and I climbed up on the wooden fence to get a better view of the great ball of orange-red fire, as it started to sink below the horizon. Jacobeth climbed up and joined me, a piece of chapatti hanging out of her mouth. I decided to hop down and explore the cornfield behind the house. Together, we followed the path, until we reached a clearing and spotted another house in the distance. Jacobeth stopped walking, grabbed my hand, and pulled me back in the direction of our compound. “Twende Nyumbani,” she urged. Let's go home. She said it again, and I realized that she had specifically said nyumbani (home), instead of nyumba (house). Sensing we had wandered too far, she wanted me to take her back to her home, to where she sensed that she belonged.

I looked around at the open field, devoid of trees, and sensed the encroachment of civilization on the forest itself. I picked her up and carried her back through the field on my shoulders. In 20 years, I thought to myself, will she still have a home? Will the forest still be here for her? I asked myself this question, but couldn't bear the weight of such a frightening reality. I gripped her little hands tightly. Unassuming and unaware of her future, she broke free from my grasp, and ran the last stretch home.

Mitigation Strategies

Listed under the Forest Sector as one of the “Key Mitigation Technologies and Practices Currently Available” in the IPCC's most recent report are: afforestation, reforestation, forest management, reduced deforestation, harvested wood product management, and use of forestry products for bioenergy to replace fossil fuel use. According to the IPCC, this is just a short-term step, and clearly one of many others: energy supply, transport, buildings, industry, agriculture, and

waste management. Tackling all of these sectors is necessary because they are all *fundamentally* interrelated.

In a place like Kenya, which is rapidly developing, it is critical to not only mediate the new industries, such as energy, buildings, and industry, but also to stress the importance of sustainable development in the pre-existing areas such as the Kakamega Rainforest.

Besides being home to exquisite natural beauty, a wealth of biodiversity, and a lifeline for millions of people, the Kakamega Rainforest is also a huge carbon sink, naturally soaking up carbon dioxide emissions at a time where technologies to perform this same service are not readily available. From my experience of living and working in the area, it is a source of sustenance, shelter, warmth, medicine, and income. The view of the Kakamega Rainforest through this lens of the ecological services that it provides is critical.

In an October 2007 *Scientific American* magazine article entitled “Conservation for the People,” Peter Kareiva and Michelle Marvier discuss a new approach to conservation. This approach takes the focus off specific “hot spots”— areas with the highest density of biodiversity in a particular region— and instead focuses on improving ecosystems that affect the health, livelihoods, and well-being of *people*.

Often, we tend to neglect the “ecological services” that our ecosystems provide: wetlands protect people from severe storms and flooding, and coral reefs and forests provide habitats for our food and resources to fuel our stomachs and economies. “These services include products for which there are markets, such as medicines and timber, as well as processes whose economic value usually goes unconsidered: water filtration, pollination, climate regulation, flood and disease control, and soil formation” (Kareiva & Marvier 53). When economists attempted to place a dollar value on those processes, they found that “the yearly value of such economic services outstripped the gross domestic product of all countries combined” (53).

The emphasis on preserving “life raft ecosystems” — areas with high rates of poverty, where a large portion of the economy depends on natural systems and where ecosystem services are severely degraded— is critical to protecting both the people who live there, and the ecosystems on which they depend for survival.

If we are to mitigate these problems, we must focus on how to best facilitate the improvement of environmental conditions in places like the Kakamega Rainforest, which can then serve as models for conservation measures and sustainable development in other parts of the world.

As an environmental activist, seeing what has been done to this planet, it is exceedingly frightening and disheartening. Yet in a recent *New York Times* article, Commoner, now in his 90s, stated that he still classifies himself as an “eternal optimist.” For someone whose warnings were largely ignored for decades, this sense of hope is truly remarkable. The United States, specifically has failed to step up to the challenge of reducing its ecological footprint. If crisis does indeed mean change, as Commoner claims, then the time to act is *now*.

“You must be the change you wish to see in the world”

I decided to plant a tree seedling at KEEP, to contribute to one of their income-generating projects. I was given a plank, on which I used a stick and black paint to write the tree species, my name, the date, and a quote:

Prunus Africanus

Jamie Pottern- Brandeis University, USA

August 8, 2007

“You must be the change you wish to see in the world”

I smiled with satisfaction at the plank, waiting for it to dry. I don’t know if I’ll ever get to come back, but the image of returning in a few decades and seeing my huge *Prunus Africanus* tree standing tall, with my faded sign and Gandhi’s inspirational quote beneath it, was comforting. It reminded me that summers always end, but our influence keeps on spreading throughout the world.

I don’t know what my time in Isecheno necessarily accomplished. I learned a great deal about the culture, about the forest, about being a *mzungu*, and about the forces impeding sustainable development. I don’t know what I gave back, except for a long report, two solar batteries, a solar inverter, and some foreign ideas. Somehow I gained the love of a family, especially two small children.

If nothing else, I had at least planted a tree that will hopefully grow into something bigger and greater than myself.

Kwaheri, ninapenda wewe (Goodbye, I love you)

Ned, my Program Coordinator, came to pick me up in a taxi. I stood on the side of the dirt road, outside the compound, my gigantic blue duffel bag at my feet. I said goodbye to the entire family, who kept expressing how much they would miss me. I knelt down and whispered goodbye to Jacobeth. She smiled at me. I didn’t know enough Swahili to explain that I was leaving and was probably never coming back. I couldn’t tickle my way out of this conversation, so I hugged her tightly instead, not wanting to let go.

The taxi arrived, I threw my belongings in the back seat, and we drove away, leaving my nyumbani in a cloud of dust. I sat with my arm resting on the window sill, getting my last look at the beautiful forest. Men, women, and children were walking on both sides of the road, all carrying huge bundles of firewood on their heads. With this wood they would survive another few days, weeks, months. Meanwhile, boda bodas swerved to avoid hitting them. At one point our taxi, inevitably, got stuck in the mud and we had to get out. Some local teenage boys, who had been sitting on the sidelines watching, jumped up with excitement and pushed the vehicle out of the hole. Our driver gave them a few shillings as compensation. I climbed back inside the taxi, and shut the door.

Notes

1. In Kenya, Mama is a respectful title for a married woman.
2. Mzee is a respectful title for an older man.

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