

Leave No Trace

Photo by Giselle Rahm '07

by Kate Meatyard, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Maryland Heritage Project

For the eight students who journeyed to some of the most remote reaches of the southern hemisphere, the adventure began simply enough. They read my call for a few hardy souls willing to travel thousands of miles and pare down creature comforts in order to rethink their place in the world:

Is a rock simply a rock, or is it something infinitely more meaningful, like a garden or a monument to a lost culture? Is a highway simply a road that takes one from point A to point B, or is it a life-altering, culture-changing phenomenon? Can you explore world heritage sites without leaving a trace? Find out what this has to do with a liberal arts education and why we might care. Spend winter break pondering these questions; receive Leave No Trace (LNT) Master Certification; and see the most remote places in the world.

Above: This cinematic landscape is Chile's Soler River Valley. The white "mountain" in the distance is, in fact, a snow pack which, further down the valley, gives way to a full view of the glacier.



Courses are based on seven principles that, at first read, with the exception of number four, recall something akin to what your parents told you before you left on those family camping trips at the beach. By that I mean that they make perfect sense when you stop to think about them.

Four-wheel drive is a must when traveling this new road. Once finished, it will connect the Carretera Austral highway to the Pacific.



Shane Hall '09 bonds with his new Patagonian friend.



Wet feet became a way of life as the group hiked through country dotted with streams and glacial lakes.

If one had to describe the intellectual make-up of St. Mary's students, one would surely include, among other attributes, highly motivated critical thinking, a desire to explore diverse cultures abroad, and a passion for all things green. I knew students would be interested. I also knew that I had instructors and the blessing of LNT and the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) and great colleagues to guide me through the red tape. All that was left was to plan an adventure that safely took students to the most remote places in the world and back again under the rubric of environmental archaeology training, outdoor ethics, and a healthy dose of boot camp.

The National Outdoor Leadership School lists Leave No Trace Masters training as a selection in their professional programming. NOLS partners with the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics in Boulder, Colorado to offer courses internationally. Courses are based on seven principles that, at first read, with the exception of number four, recall something akin to what your parents told you before you left on those family camping trips at the beach. By that I mean that they make perfect sense when you stop to think about them. They are as follows: 1) *Plan ahead and prepare*; 2) *Travel and camp on durable surfaces*; 3) *Dispose of waste properly*; 4) *Leave what you find*; 5) *Minimize campfire impacts*; 6) *Respect wildlife*; and 7) *Be considerate of other visitors*.

Does this seem like an eco-merger between Golden Rule and Mother Nature, the happy couple of the western world? In some ways, the principles embody iconic philosophies of modern popular culture that are instantly recog-

nizable and give us warm and fuzzy feelings, like Eagle Scouts, Smokey Bear, and Mom. They are intuitive and downright user friendly. We don't even have to leave home to be trained—we already know this stuff. Or so we thought.

There is still that contentious principle number four to contend with, however. Quite frankly, it flies in the face of all things human—who hasn't skipped stones and had one find its way into your pocket, or picked wildflowers on a sunny spring day, or searched for that perfect sea shell to remember a summer walk on the beach? As an archaeologist I could see the logic, but what about the rest of the folks? Ours is a consumer culture; we are taught from birth to hunt and gather, all the way from Target to Tiffany's. I could see that number four was bound for trouble ahead. As Chris Cifone '05 observed, the seven principles can be thought of as an applied replacement for Values Inquiry class all rolled up into one challenging adventure—or a Values Inq reality road show filled with moral dilemmas and critical thinking.

We could only have a total of 12 people on the trip: eight students, two faculty members (Professor of Anthropology Dan Ingersoll and I), and two instructors. In the end, it was a diverse group. Some had never traveled out of the country before, some spoke Spanish, many were environmentally aware, and at least one had no real outdoor experience. There were six women and four men, including faculty, and we ranged in personality type from girly girl complete with ribbons and bows, to nature boy/ Jeremiah Johnson, and more than one caffeine addict. Some of us were quiet, some of us made up for that silence with vigorous enthusiasm, some were anthropology majors, some were biology majors, with a couple of English majors and a political science alumnus thrown into the mix.

We traveled from Baltimore to Miami, then on to Santiago, and finally to Balmaceda, in the Aisen district



of Chile, where we were met by our instructors, Jim Ferguson and John Hauf of Patagonia Frontiers. They are avid mountain climbers, guides, fly fishermen, and masters of all things outdoors. The trick was now to combine the physical backcountry challenges of the Leave No Trace program with the intellectual experience of a stunning landscape and remarkable culture. The next morning, after loading three trucks with provisions and bags, we left the frontier town of Coyhaique in a convoy to head south to Lago Plomo, where our instructors owned the large ranch where we would do our LNT training.

The Carretera Austral is a highway that runs down the center of Chile, which, for the uninformed or geographically challenged, is a very long narrow country, some 260 miles wide and nearly 3,000 miles long. The Andes form the spine of the country and the highway often cuts through large rock outcroppings dropping off sheer cliffs to azure water below. Think Switzerland, west Ireland, and Vancouver all rolled

into one incredibly glorious landscape. Beginning south of the mid-point of the country, we traveled 300 miles south on a narrow gravel road with large potholes, no guardrails, and very little traffic. In a world where horseback is still a generally accepted form of travel, the highway has had a profound impact on the residents of Chile. Prior to its construction, it took weeks to traverse the distance between our point of destination and the large town of Coyhaique.

The first day on the ranch we were broken up into cook groups and taught how to cook on a small but efficient gas stove. Jackie Mastny '09 sums up the overall cooking experience best: "The stove is interesting, and cooking is harder than you think. If you were in our cooking group you would understand why pasta was a good choice for breakfast. We thought you couldn't ruin pasta, but I was wrong—you can!"

Because the total trip crossed climate zones, we had packed for the tropics as well as the rain forest, and the urban areas around Santiago, as well as the

The motley crew that traveled to Chile and Easter Island forged friendships that will last a lifetime. From left to right: Kate Meatyard, Chris Cifone '05, Dan Ingersoll, Iben Rickett '09, Jackie Mastny '09, Sunny Schnitzer '09, Shane Hall '09, Michelle Marsich '09, Giselle Rahn '07, and Danny Schindel '09.



We questioned one another, laughed at the challenges, and learned how to negotiate with grace and poise. We were humbled by the majesty of our surroundings and awestruck by the sight of the enormous glacial ice fields.

Photo by Dan Ingersoll

Water meets sky as Chile's Lago Plomo flows towards the entrance of Lago Bertrand.

backcountry. The first order of business was lightening our packs by storing all clothing and items not necessary for our trip to the glacier during LNT training. We grudgingly stowed all extra clothing and gear in a shed that became known as Packistan. As our packs had to hold our food, tents, stoves, sleeping bags, a trowel, and pots, we wore all the clothing we had with us, which resulted in a hilarious fashion statement, the likes of which one prefers not to acknowledge in polite company.

At long last, we were ready to begin what brought us to Chile in the first place. Although technically it was summer, the weather was cold and rainy and the first order of business was learning how to do a river crossing in rapid glacial water. Shocking! We quickly learned that for the next five days, wet boots, socks, and other clothing would be a daily reality. Each day we hiked about five or six miles through streams, across glacial gravel beds, and along horse trails cut deep into the mud. Sometimes it was an easy, beautiful walk, other times one or more of us were stuck in hip-deep mud, or just lost in the glory of the landscape. Toward the end of each day we would set up camp, cook, and then make our way through the principles

of LNT. Someone would be assigned a lesson, and after consultation with Jim and John, a lecture and/or a skit on one of the principles would begin.

Slowly we made our way through all seven principles. We learned to pack and prepare ahead. We learned the hard way why you travel and camp on durable surfaces and why one doesn't stop to rest on the path. There was a surprise visit by a man on horse, leading another horse loaded with furniture, followed by several dogs while we rested on a path with an amazing overlook. We also learned how to dispose of waste properly—pack it in, pack it out. (Yes, that means everything.) We learned that the trowel was not for archaeological purposes or even for digging plants; it was the preferred tool for digging cat-holes to dispose of human waste in designated areas. We even learned to look for rocks that resembled baked potatoes and smooth sticks, but that is privileged information that one only learns when one is LNT trained.

We respected wildlife, in fact we reveled in the plants, animals, birds, and insects—though not the horseflies—we found along the way. We learned how to brush our teeth properly: one atomizes, one does not spit, as aptly demonstrated

on a large boulder in the shadow of the ice field by Jackie Mastny '09. We learned how to walk a path so as not to damage a pristine area and how to spread out on a wide glacier floor to minimize impact. Perhaps our most difficult lesson in a world of extraordinary treasures, we even learned to leave what we found. Every lecture had a different setting; every lesson took on new meaning as we learned how to leave no trace of ourselves behind on that virgin landscape.

Students turned into professors, professors turned into surrogate parents and poster children for the AARP, and guides learned how to layer the downy blanket of academic theory over the bedrock of nature. Hilltops, riverbeds, and pine forests were our lecture halls and fallen trees or rocks were our desks. We questioned one another, laughed at the challenges, and learned how to negotiate with grace and poise. We were humbled by the majesty of our surroundings and awestruck by the sight of the enormous glacial ice fields.

We were also conflicted—we couldn't wait for a hot shower and bed, but didn't want to leave. Michelle Marsich '08 noted in her journal "During our hike, today, John showed us these blue 'califate' berries growing on a short shrub. Apparently, legend has it that if you eat one, you are destined (or cursed) to one day return to Patagonia. I ate three." Danny Schindel '09 echoed those comments, "LNT is a program that strives toward an unattainable goal, but it is in grasping for it that one succeeds." It was boot camp and it was magic.

When we returned to the ranch, the lone horseman we met on the trail, now known to us as a neighboring rancher, Mancho, slaughtered a lamb and



Photo by Danny Schindel '09

Giselle Rahn '07 takes shelter beneath a rhubarb leaf along the Carretera Austral.

barbecued it for our celebratory feast. After days of trail mix, pasta, and cocoa, a real dinner was a welcome treat. The next morning we made our way back up the highway to Coyhaique where we would depart for the next leg of our journey. The bright lights, music, and traffic of Santiago, not to mention hot showers, beds, real toilets, and clean tropical clothes reclaimed from Pakistan, oriented us for the next leg of our trip, the six-hour flight to Easter Island where our newly acquired skills would be put to the test.

The tiny island of *Rapa Nui*, approximately 3,000 miles from any large land mass in any direction, was designated a world heritage site by UNESCO in 1995. Most people know Easter Island for its large heads (*moai*) that ring the island on platforms (*ahus*). A few people know the island through Jared Diamond's book *Collapse*, in which the culture is portrayed as a model of self-destruction and human degradation. In fact, the culture is much more a model of human innovation, courage, and survival in light of extreme environmental stress—an ancient LNT lesson our global community should embrace. On a landscape strewn with basalt, obsidian, and scoria, we used our LNT training to remove ourselves from current obsessions with geometrically plowed agricultural fields to understand how a society used their most abundant resource, rocks, to make gardens to cultivate food and architecture to provide shelter against prevailing ocean winds.

Locals Ramon Pakomio, Josie Nahoe Mulloy, and their extended family housed us, fed us, and taught students how to fish from the ocean rocks in the time honored Rapa Nui way. Francisco Torres, director of the Anthropological Museum of Father Sebastian Englert, gave us a behind-the-scenes tour of the laboratory and collections, inviting more students from the College to come as interns, as Pete Regan '05 had done the summer before while doing his SMP biological anthropology research. We learned firsthand how environmental archaeology can move out of the dusty past and into the future by “paying it forward” from the standpoint of ecological innovation for the next generation, something next year's Leave No Trace students and summer interns will do over winter break 2008-09 on Easter Island.

We also learned how to apply LNT principles at home, as Shane Hall '09 reminds us. “You normally don't think about where you walk or what kind of shoes you wear as an ethical decision, but LNT awakens you to the ethical implications of leaving a footprint, and teaches you how to utilize that new awareness in order to change the way you impact your surroundings,” he says. This kind of perspective allows you to reorder the way you engage with your surroundings, not just in the wilderness, but at home, at work, and at school.”

In the end, as suspected, principle number four turned out to be an unnatural paradox. While we resisted the temptation to bring home beautiful pieces of obsidian found on our walks, to hunt and gather memorabilia, ultimately we were not able to leave what we found. We left Baltimore a diverse group of people ready for an unusual adventure and came home as a family tightly bound together by profound shared experiences, environmental resolve, and the humility that comes from realizing human scale in a vast and spectacular world.

Every lecture had a different setting; every lesson took on new meaning as we learned how to leave no trace of ourselves behind on that virgin landscape.



Photo by Dan Ingersoll

Farmer and Chef Mancho Gómez roasts a sheep to welcome the weary travelers back to the ranch after days spent in Leave No Trace “boot camp.”

For more information, visit the following Web sites:

NATIONAL OUTDOOR LEADERSHIP SCHOOL
www.nols.edu

LEAVE NO TRACE OUTDOOR ETHICS
www.lnt.org

PATAGONIA FRONTIERS
www.patagoniafrontiers.com

EASTER ISLAND FOUNDATION
www.islandheritage.org