

Kenai Refuge youth leader sets fast pace through Mexico

by Ryan Beltz



I am a seasonal ranger and the youth conservation corps program coordinator at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. I usually spend my off-season winters traveling—either by foot, bicycle or motorcycle. This past winter I bicycled about 2000 miles through Baja California and Southwestern Mexico.

It sometimes seems easier to recount a trip in terms of hours rather than days. At home events happen in real time, meaning they are quantifiable and seem to fit into the normal scheme of night and day. On the road it's much different. Events happen so quickly. Everything is bright and new and demands attention, resulting in an overload of stimuli that seems to transcend the typical 24-hour clock. I sit at night my thoughts drifting back over the day and I think, my God, it was only this morning that I was in Oaxaca, or last night I was on a cargo ship bound for Mazatlan, or three hours ago I was being dragged off the road into the desert by hurricane force winds. To oscillate between these worlds, travel and home, is to experience the full gamut of human emotion. As I write this, I mull over events so intense that hours passed like seconds, set against the ticking of the clock in the corner or the click of the keys as I punch my thoughts onto paper. I am living two different lives, almost beyond connection.

For over a month I toiled over sand and stone through desert and sun as I wound my way through

Mexico, always pedaling toward some distant point on the horizon. I began the journey with four others, but through fortune and fate and collisions with trucks I found myself bicycling alone, perhaps for the better. Anybody who has traveled with and without partners knows of the joys and sorrows of traveling alone. The experiences are heightened, emotions ebb and flow like an unbridled sea without a shoreline or coast on which to rest.

In this vain, I rolled over the land of Baja California. My goal was the southern terminus of the peninsula La Paz, some thousand miles distant, then onto mainland Mexico. The days and nights passed, piled upon each other until time no longer seemed to matter. I was lost in the present. My life hinged upon the moments I was living. It was the food I was eating. It was the water I was searching for. It was tents and motels and trucks blowing past my handlebars with a hell-bound fury. Looking back, I see my journey as a linear progression of events and faces, the clock and calendar are lost on such things...

Morning saw me riding through waves of heat towards the outline of a sun-bleached shack. Oh, the glory of the hole-in-the-wall diner, not featured on any map and barely visible to the naked eye, but like a mirage in the desert the planks of discarded pallets rise above the dust and needles. It was to be half a day's ride to breakfast, but like a steak to a starving man my elation found refuge in the form of a few sticks and tin.

I walked into the tiny room, my eyes adjusting to the dark and glow of twinkling lights, a haloed effigy of the Virgin Mary presiding over the dining table. I sat in a crooked and broken chair admiring the construction of such a house—the walls had more holes and gaps than wood—the pocked tin roof supported by a single worn and eaten, termite infested beam—a lone bulb dangled from above with wires exposed.

A lady in simple dress and missing shoes asked what I would like to eat. I ordered my standard breakfast fare: machaca (dried beef), eggs, beans, tortillas, cheese and coffee. This is a protein-powered breakfast, one that had been serving me well for the previous days. She retreated into the kitchen, separated from the dinning area by a pallet and few jugs of wa-

ter. One burner and two kids in the kitchen, one on her hip, the other scampering about the folds of her dress. A young daughter served my coffee in between the rings of her cell phone. Dust blew through the holes and gaps as trucks rumbled past. The golden hew of morning faded from the open door as this desert world prepared itself for another day on the shadeless llano.

Half-way through my breakfast the father walked into the room—in one fluid motion taking a metal cup from a bent nail and dipping into one the jugs of water, a long draught, the smacking of lips, drops wiped from his beard with the back of a dusty hand, the cup making a small clinking sound as it swung from its perch, the man back to work before the cup was quiet. A full stomach, a cup of coffee... happiness.

I rode into the village after spending eight hours and a hundred plus miles in the saddle only to find that the motel I was planning on had closed some years earlier. As I sat pondering my situation with unfolded map, a local shop owner approached and suggested that I sleep on the floor of his flower shop. With fading light and faltering energy I graciously accepted. As I moved my gear from bike to floor, I was instantly surrounded by a host of children, intently focused on my every move. Feeling the bit of a sideshow, I played the part and produced the novelties I carried. I cooked for them on my little stove and showed them my sleeping gear as well as a map of Mexico. I sat and watched as ten grimly little fingers traced the 1500-mile long route I had so far ridden through the Baja, over the sea and

to their homes.

A half hour after my arrival the novelty passed and the children darted back into the fading light amid fits of shouting and laughter. I woke early the next morning well before 5 am and sat on the steps of the shop watching the night slowly fade to day, eating leftover pasta and fruit. Every so often a man or women would emerge from the darkness passing by my perch, lunchbox or machete in hand, marching towards a day of toil in the fields.

A truck passed a few minutes later, its cargo a living mass of hands bound for those same fields, valued only for the work they produce. The owner of the store refuses payment. He says he is pleased that he can offer to me a place to sleep. I look at his possessions and realize just how generous he is being. Out of nothing rises limitless generosity. I leave tips and tokens as gratitude, knowing full well that I eat more in a day than he does in three and for what? To fuel my ambition for sport and adventure? These people live on much less than I and lead harsher, coarser lives. Despite their meager possessions I hesitate to use the word “poverty.” For, I listened all night long as people talked and laughed outside my door. At what price then comes happiness?

Ryan Beltz is a Seasonal Ranger and the Youth Conservation Corps Program Coordinator at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.