

Dummy Projects

My wife and I have gone on several “Earthwatch” projects. You donate some money to an outdoor, university sponsored, science venture, get there at your own expense and the project scientific team takes care of you for two weeks. They also make you an intern in the project itself so you are able to dig, count, survey...whatever is required to better understand the objective of the study. We loved the projects we joined. My daughter, Leslie, on the other hand, thinks it hilarious that we dummies actually spend serious cash to work our butts off for somebody else.

Our first Earthwatch project was in Zululand (*Isandlwana*), South Africa. We were part of a team that investigated the famous battle where the Zulus taught the British army a lesson they wouldn't forget easily. Around 2,000 excessively dumb British soldiers, overconfident to the extreme, thought it would be a good idea to camp out overnight in the complete open after invading, without any provocation, Zulu territory. The next morning after ablutions and doffing those cute little shiny, easy to spot, red jackets, they happened to look up as they did their stretching exercises. There, on a ridge, half surrounding the encampment were 20,000, very angry, world class athletes with 20,000 spears. “Gulp, gasp” the British soldiers said collectively. A few hours later the British were thoroughly beaten, overpowered by superior numbers. Burt Lancaster and Peter O'Toole played in “Zulu Dawn”, a depiction of this battle. They portrayed the British in a much kinder light than they should have.



So my wife and I became apprentice field scientists studying, digging, surveying to find the exact battle line's outermost perimeter. Most of the scientists on the project and virtually all the volunteers were motivated by Michael Caine's movie, “Zulu”, a later battle on the same day. That one took place on “Roark's Drift” where my wife and I stayed during the project. “Around 12 dummies paying to work on the British dummy project,” my daughter says.

Our second project was in the bowels of the Brazilian jungle, off the Rio Negro river, spent studying and collecting data on a very interesting de-forestation venture. In the densest forest, there are fruit and nut trees that can't grow anywhere else. Unfortunately they have a hard time reproducing because of the density of surrounding trees that gobble up all the nutrients. So the Creator took a look and said, “Let's see how we can help with these poor trees’

reproductive sex life” So He/She created monkeys who love the fruit and nuts. Of course, after they finish eating they poop. God said, “Let there be beetles that like to eat monkey poop,” and it was good.

So dung beetles roll monkey poop into little balls, then they fly away and bury them in a more open area for future consumption. Some of the little balls have seeds in them. So the cute little insects plant, aerate and fertilize fruit and nut trees and they prosper forevermore until someone cuts them down for firewood. And of course monkeys are being hunted for delicious monkey burgers. Talk about symbiosis!! If any of the three species die, the others will perish also.

I, of course, got stuck with collecting dung beetles burrowing in little plastic cups full of monkey poop, sunk in strategic locations in the jungle, while my wife went on a canoe, leisurely surveying the lovely jungle territory. My daughter says I was the dummy on this one, my wife, on the other hand, got a genuine vacation tour of the Brazilian jungle.

Our last project was in Costa Rica. We were part of a team to study the Long Tailed Manikin birds. Get this: they are the only known breed of bird that has another male³ partner in the mating process. The alpha male and the beta male tune up together in harmony, something like “twit-twit” in the upper branches of a tree. Then they start to sing together which sounds something like “to-LEY-doh, to-LEY-doh”. Thereby they are known to the locals in the upper mist forests of Costa Rica as “Toledo Birds.” They are lovely little things the size of a fist, coal black feathers with a pale blue spot on their back and a bright red one on their heads. The tails hang down, coal black, like little ice tongs.



Now if the girlie birds like the singing, they are likely to come closer. If they get very close, the Toledo birds fly down on a bare branch in a clearing and start to dance. I’m not kidding...these guys hop up and down, do cartwheels backwards and forwards together to interest the girlies even further.

Then, if the sweetheart gets even closer the male long-tailed manikins start to fly in figure eights around the perch. If the female reeeeeeeally likes the performance, she comes onto the perch. Then the alpha male nails her. The poor beta male never gets to have sex, just gets to perform for girlie after girlie after girlie. I presume he goes with his buddies to the Toledo Bird bar and gets

a snoot full and has a huge hangover the next morning before performance time.

Interesting? Absolutely fascinating. But my daughter says, “You pay big bucks so you can be a blackbird voyeur? Boy are you guys dummies. And weird.”

We don't go on Earthwatch projects anymore. Their required “dummy donation” is so high now they've priced us out of the dummy market. Too bad! We would really like to be voyeurs on a dolphin or sea turtle expedition.