

When Alcoa employee Frank Cicela went to Costa Rica, he was quite sure that he would find caterpillars. After all, he was joining Earthwatch's Forest Caterpillar project. However, he didn't know that he would also find a different way of seeing the world.

The morning of our first day into the forest, Beto, an expedition staff member, pointed to a large leaf overhead and asked if we could see the caterpillar. I squinted, stared, and strained my eyes as I scanned every square inch of the leaf's surface. I was finding it impossible to see the caterpillar that was there. Cryptic caterpillar species match their environment so well that a novice observer like me finds them nearly impossible to distinguish from their host plant.

After several days, with numerous caterpillar finds to my credit, I still had difficulty spotting the creatures. Despite this, I was challenged to work with Angela, a graduate student studying geometrids, or "inchworms." We turned over leaf after leaf in search of tiny one-centimeter-long cryptic caterpillars. Our conversation went like this:

Frank: I found one! I found one! I found one!

Angela: Uh, not exactly...you found a piece of moss.

Frank: Oh.

Angela: But over here, on the other end of the leaf is a caterpillar.

Frank: Sighhhhhh...

After several more days of learning, practicing, and becoming acculturated to the forest, I was able to find cryptic caterpillars on my own. Acculturation has to do with how individuals mentally process or absorb unfamiliar experiences and knowledge. Essentially it boils down to how

established patterns of perception, reasoning, and intuition change (or don't change) when faced with out-of-

the-ordinary circumstances and information. Michel, a fellow Earthwatch volunteer from France, distilled my experience in the comment that I was learning to see what I didn't know. For me, this was a lightning bolt of inspirational clarity.

In many ways, our minds become numbed to our environment. We spend our days in habitual patterns of

behavior based upon the realities we have come to expect rather than the realities we encounter. There are vast intrinsic, unquestioned, and unchallenged elements to our lives. These elements remain this way until something occurs to disrupt our vision of reality.

In this way, my trip to the rainforest disrupted my vision of the world around me and continues to do so today. My expedition experience turned into what I consider a religious experience. The etymology of the word religion is "to bind back." Bind back to what? For much of our species' history, we made our living symbiotically, in harmony with this greater community that includes plants, trees, birds, and bees. As a species, we took what we needed to live, and generally lived within our biological means.

In the eye-blink of the last ten thousand years, the agricultural revolution changed our relationship with the earth. Agriculture has allowed our particular culture the ability to act as mythological gods—determining who lives and dies among our neighbors in the community of life. Without an event to disrupt our vision of the world, such as coming face-to-face with invisible caterpillars, we are blind to the possibility of questioning this condition or considering that things could be different.

Tribal peoples of the rainforests have continuously admonished the civilized to learn how to use the forests without consuming them. Yet the warnings appear to fall on deaf ears. Forests are currently cleared from the earth at the

terrifying rate of one and one-half acres every second, taking with them an estimated 75 species of flora or fauna every day. My trip to the rainforest was my opportunity to worship at the ever-shrinking altar of creation. For me, to experience a small parcel of creation on its own terms—a relatively unadulterated tropical forest ecosystem—was miraculous. My visit to the forest was sobering. The trip reinforced for me the fact that as a culture we must alter our course because we don't have that much more time! May the forests be with your grandchildren.

Frank Cicela is a self-described zealous agnostic animist foraging for truth—a believer in exile, searching for his tribe. He has worked for Alcoa Closure Systems International for the past nine years in a variety of capacities. He joined Dr. Lee Dyers' project as an Alcoa employee fellow. For more information regarding Frank's experience and to read his unabridged Earthwatch diary, please visit www.myearthwatchexperience.com. To find out more about other Alcoa-sponsored Earthwatch fellows visit: www.alcoa.com/global/en/environment/ew/2004/earth_watch_2004.asp

My trip to the rainforest disrupted my vision of the world around me...

Alcoa fellow Frank Cicela sports a jaunty "caterpillar-stache," samples a tasty termite, and models the latest in rainforest accoutrements, all in the service of opening his mind to new horizons in Costa Rica.

