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Internship Report

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I have felt myself hit a wall, which cannot be breached, a mountain, which cannot be scaled. This obstruction forms before me as soon as the words slip out of my mother's, father's, friend's mouths, as they ask me, "How was Haiti?". "It was good", is my first response, which falls about a million words short of how important and absurd the entire experience was. Even more difficult was trying to learn something more than the trite and cliché lessons, which are ubiquitous to any visitor in a developing and impoverished country. Oh, how bright and happy the smiles, how destitute the poverty, how strong the women, how simple the joys, how small my troubles at home. Despite the triteness, these truths still weigh upon my soul and vision when they appear so intimately. Digging through them to try and learn something more universal was the greatest challenge of the internships. Fighting through the language barrier was challenging, but not impossible. Hiking up mountains under the equatorial sun, wrapped in a suffocating blanket of humidity, pushed me to my physical limits, even as a cross country athlete, but we always made it to the top. Giving up things I have lived comfortably with my whole life, such as access to Wi-Fi, air conditioning, water pressure, and a certain amount of independence, simply gave me more time to strain to hear what the mountains of Haiti seemed to be shouting at me. We have tried our very best to cut off our connection with nature, or build an impervious fortress

around ourselves and our lifestyles. However, this is much like placing a tourniquet around your arm, so that the blood will stop pumping to your fingertips, until they lay limp, lifeless, and cold. The voice of our world and the land is muffled and stifled behind a wall of possessions, distractions, and indulgences, but for the first time in my life, I heard this voice in Haiti. What it took was being in a place where I couldn't understand the people on the TV, where my Facebook page wouldn't load, where there were no malls, no fast food, and where the best entertainment was often sitting in silence outside. When sitting in this silence, Mother Earth sat with me. We broke bread, and the conversation continued, on hikes, and in my bed, and back in the States. Through this metaphorical conversation, I have learned several misconceptions about nature that have helped me understand our current global environmental crisis. The first misconception is that humans are in a battle with the earth, where one must come out as the victor. However, the two of us are inseparable. We are as much a part of the earth as the trees, the mountains, and the rivers. Even in our chaotic state, we coexist as one. However, this does not mean that environmental degradation by humans is justified as a by-product of the advancement of the human race. When we darken the skies with smoke and pollutants, our lungs become black. When we dump toxins in the rivers and oceans, the fish we eat become vessels for poison, and we become sick. The earth is not retaliating against us in some form of rebellion, for a single entity cannot rebel against itself. Humans have caused these wounds, and we bear the weight and the pain of each scar, whether we realized it or not. The second misconception? Developing countries are free of environmental abuse. Capitalism, materialism, excess production, consumerism, these things are only the American version of the tourniquet. In Haiti, the farmers are in a cycle of abuse with the land. They chop down trees and limbs to make charcoal, and the

land withers up and becomes rocky and barren. As a result, the harvests are small, not nearly enough to support and feed the farmers' families. This cycle is the tourniquet, and it becomes tighter and tighter with each passing twist, the blood of life, flowing from farmer to land, becomes thinner and thinner. But the farmer does not buy a new TV each year, or drive a gas guzzler, or put his recycling in the trash. These Western traditions of self-abuse are taken place by different practice, although they are equally harmful to the self. We have built a grand pyre to some heathen god who promises to end our pain, but the sacrificial burning is our own bodies.

So, was how was Haiti? It was good. It was good like a slap that wakens one out of a pleasant dream into a waking nightmare. However, as pessimistic as this report may sound, I feel hopeful. The work that I did in Haiti is aimed at changing cultural traditions that harm all inhabitants of the earth, including the Haitians. If I can encourage them to adopt friendlier farming techniques and better ways to survive in our burning world, I can abandon my own tourniquet, and live a life that does not separate my body from the land from which it came.