

Robi Smith

Blue Lantern Studio

2004 Earthwatch Artist Fellowship

In June 2004, I was awarded an artist fellowship by the Earthwatch Institute, made possible through funding from the Ford Motor Company. The purpose of the fellowship was to participate in a scientific research expedition in Washington State's Skagit River watershed and then create art work about the experience.

The 12-day expedition, called "Salmon Hotspots of the Skagit River," was led by Drs. Peter Kiffney and Correigh Greene of the Northwest Fisheries Science Center in Seattle. They are examining how tributary junctions, or the places where streams connect, influence biodiversity and distributions of fish species. We spent our days hiking in the creeks that feed into the Skagit river, counting and measuring the fauna and flora.

For information about the Earthwatch Institute, please visit their website at www.earthwatch.org

Field Notes

Being in the field was magical.

I spent most of my time on "rock duty," which meant crossing the creeks at set points and picking up, measuring and counting a rock at every step. Because our goal was to measure 100 rocks in each third of each crossing, we would take one step, bend down into the water, find the rock wedged under our big toe, pick it up (hard when the rock is boulder-sized or smaller than a peppercorn), and then measure it by slipping it through square holes punched into a rigid metal tray. Big rocks took a little estimating, especially when they were half buried under the sand ("It looks like 250 mm, but it could be 1000..."). Over the course of two weeks, our team counted and measured more than 4,000 rocks!

For me, counting and measuring rocks was a mix of meditation, yoga, tai chi, and a lesson in the beauty inherent in the tiniest things. In those thousands of rocks in the creek bed, I saw gold, silver and diamonds; the mountains of New Mexico; cave dwellings; faces of ancient friends; the fine lines of an architect's drawings, and the letters of the alphabet. I saw the here and now, and I glimpsed infinity.

Then came the moments in between the work when I'd realize I had stopped breathing: the deep green of the mountainside disappearing into a sky of mist; a slippery, warty toad hopping across my boots while I ate lunch; a kingfisher flying by and landing on a branch to hover over the water and take stock; the mesmerizing perfection of a paper wasp's nest, hanging like a beautiful lantern on the underside of a log.

And the songs. The "peep peep" of sandpipers dashing and bouncing this way and that along the rocky shore. The Swanson's Thrush singing its heart out in the bushes. The wrens trilling. The crows cawing.

The fish were magical too. Tiny and cute as buttons with their big eyes and delicate fins. Swimming with them under water, watching them watching me, was a lesson in interconnection. "Are you one of us? Am I one of you?" Of course, counting them when they move so fast, are so tiny and are wearing camouflage was nearly impossible. I look back at my photographs and think I didn't capture any fish at all. Then I look closer at the rocks and see the little trout and salmon, laughing.

The insects were pretty cool too. Not so much the stoneflies or the mites, but the caddis flies caught my fancy, living under the water, clinging to the slippery rocks, wearing their little houses made of bits of colourful gravel spun together with silk. Some bound needles into their casings. All were finely crafted ornamental jewellery.

Of course, there were animals we didn't see. The bear whose smell lurked out from behind the bushes and whose tracks would greet us unexpectedly. The midnight deer leaving hoof prints in the sand. Beaver-gnawed logs and carefully laid out fish bones also told us we weren't alone.

The Painting

Back in my studio, I decided I wanted to try to recreate the magic of standing in the creek and looking around in wonder at the world (or at least the small microcosm of the world we had been in).

When you look at the painting, imagine yourself standing in the centre, somewhere in the cracks in between the four smallest squares. Then start looking all around: in the water at your feet, across the rocks and up into the bushes and logs, and then finally into the four corners of the sky. Each corner holds one of the four large birds that graced us with its presence: bald eagle, red tailed hawk, turkey vulture and raven.

What's Next?

In early October, my painting, which I've titled "Up the Creek," will travel to the DeSoto Wildlife Refuge on the Nebraska / Iowa border. It will be on display with the sculptures of Richard Hart, another Earthwatch artist fellow who came on the same expedition as me. Our work will be on display for the fall season, ready to greet the hundreds of thousands of snow geese that fly over the Wildlife Refuge each November.