

WHAT I DID ON MY SUMMER VACATION

BY RONALD BAILEY

"I wonder how much of all this used to be wetlands?" Startled from my reverie, I turned to look at the middle-aged "Christian ecologist" who had just uttered these words.

We were standing together on Rio's famed Corcovado Peak, and spread out more than 2,000 feet below us was one of the world's most magnificent cityscapes. The lovely ranked towers of Rio de Janeiro are wedged between precipitous green-clad mountains and the Atlantic Ocean; San Francisco's topography looks boring by comparison. Corcovado offers the kind of view that makes one think well of one's species. Yet the fanatic gleam in my companion's eyes made it clear that she could think only of razing the city and turning it all back into fetid swampland.

It could only happen to me. I get to spend three weeks in the world's most sybaritic city—the citadel of sun, surf, and sex—only to be stuck in a convent with a bunch of fanatic Christian environmentalists who sing hymns every morning at 7:00. It is an experience I won't soon forget.

Besides me and my green companions, more than 100 presidents, prime ministers, and princes gathered at the world's greatest-ever photo op in Rio last June. We were joined by diplomats from 178 countries, 9,000 journalists, and 17,000 environmentalists representing more than 1,400 nongovernmental organizations. But what was that epochal event really like?

Let me set the scene. There were two parts to the whole affair. There was the official summit, which was billed modestly enough as "the most important meeting in human history," which took place at the giant Rio Centro convention



center 20 miles south of town. The official summit was not known for understatement. Maurice Strong, the Mr. Magoo-like Canadian oilman who served as its secretary-general, warned that humanity's current path "could lead to the end of civilization" and that "this planet could soon become uninhabitable for people." He concluded that the only hope for saving humanity lies in sweeping changes in "global culture and value systems."

The second part—far more interesting from a psycho-social-cultural point of view—was the parallel Global Forum held in green-and-white tents occupying Flamengo Park near downtown Rio. The Global Forum was advertised as the "world's fair of environmentalism." It resembled a Middle Eastern *souk* where thousands of crafty merchants hawked the snake oil of bogus environmental crises and the frayed rugs of green-tinged socialism. The site itself was spectacularly lovely; the park borders Flamengo Beach and faces Rio's magnificent harbor, and the pinnacle of Sugarloaf Mountain hovers in the background.

Everybody who is anybody attended the Earth Summit, including Bianca Jagger, Jacques Cousteau, Shirley MacLaine, John Denver, Ted Turner, Jane Fonda, former children's singer and now "eco-troubadour and radical earth advocate" Rafi, Bella Abzug, Jerry Brown, the

Dalai Lama, "Senator from Planet Earth" and now vice presidential candidate Al Gore, and many, many more. They even mingled with us lesser lights.

One evening while having drinks at the Hotel Gloria's poolside bar, I noticed Shirley MacLaine sitting alone. So I sauntered over to ask her what she thought of the Earth Summit. "I'm having a wonderful time," she said. "I believe that consciousness is

being raised on many levels." But she had one, not quite ecologically correct, complaint: "It's too hot in the tents. They ought to air-condition them."

Well, what did she think of George Bush's policies? "I think he's being very covert." Covert? "Yes, you know, he learned how to be covert when he was the head of the CIA. Anyway, Bush is coming to Rio just to do a media grope." Couldn't argue with that last trenchant observation.

The Global Forum was officially opened by former Agent 007 and now UNESCO Children's Representative Roger Moore on Flamengo Beach. The ceremonies included the arrival from Norway of a replica Viking ship, the *Gaia*. Taking a leaf from the French Revolution, the *Gaia's* dotty captain proclaimed that since Tuesday is named for the Nordic god of war, Tiw, we should change it to a more politically correct usage—he then wished us all a "happy first Gaia Day." Meanwhile, a racially and culturally balanced group of children disembarked from the *Gaia* to address the assembled masses. The Russian child spoke in English, while the American (a blond named Molly Todd) spoke in Spanish to the largely Portuguese- and English-speaking audience. I found this very irritating.

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wandered by wearing a Metallica T-shirt that read simply, "Kill 'em All." Or then again, perhaps it was a plea for drastic population control. The ceremonies ended with Jimmy Cliff singing "By the Rivers of Babylon."

"We in the North consume too much," intoned Norway's dour prime minister, Gro Brundtland, at the forum's opening. Brundtland chaired the U.N. commission that issued the green internationalist manifesto *Our Common Future* in 1989. This sequel to the notorious *The Limits to Growth* led directly to the establishment of the Earth Summit.

Brundtland's remark echoed one constant refrain heard at both the summit and the forum—the charge that citizens of the developed countries (hereinafter called "the North") are "overconsuming." You probably didn't realize it, but we in the North are suffering from "overdevelopment"—a case of material goods overload. Fortunately, the activists at the Earth Summit have a solution for this problem: Let the government divest you of your excess goods, such as your carbon-dioxide-emitting automobile; your alienating, too big house or apartment; and foods imported from outside your bioregion.

Indeed, Northern overconsumption is responsible for nearly all the ills of the world, including overpopulation in the developing countries (hereinafter called "the South"). The assertion by many Third World representatives that "because you are rich, I am poor" was never doubted in the discussions that took place in the conference rooms of the Global Forum.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the Earth Summit was how little the natural world and the environment were actually mentioned. Usually, the alleged crises were simply stipulated and the conversation and speeches turned quickly to discussions of how to redistribute the world's wealth. Environmental activists assailed transnational corporations and strongly opposed free trade.

Friends of the Earth founder David Brower declared that the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade "is an end run around the principal environmental gains

of the past century." He also called transnational corporations "one of the greatest threats to the Earth." Perhaps environmentalists mean to protect ancient industries along with ancient forests?

Although I am generally not much of a nationalist, the patience of the most laid-back, even-tempered American (excuse me, *North American*) wore thin under the unrelenting onslaught of virulent anti-Americanism at the Earth

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Summit. Even the ultraliberal Rep. Gerry Sikorski (D-Minn.) lashed out after a Zambian made a particularly vicious attack on the United States for not giving more money to the South. Sikorski told the Zambian that he would "feel a whole lot better about asking my constituents for money for the Third World if you would clean up your corrupt governments first."

The Christian ecologists with whom I was staying included two Motilon Indians from Colombia. I became pretty good buddies with Fidel Waysirsina and Roberto Dacsarara Axdobidora (Don Fidel and Don Roberto) while carousing together in Rio's night spots. Don Fidel is a university-educated administrator and Don Roberto a lawyer.

They were not completely with the Christian ecological program—especially not Don Fidel. Don Fidel, one of the principal leaders of the Motilon, has been kidnapped twice recently by communist guerrillas in Colombia and both times barely escaped being killed by

them. He has a very strong sense of his community's property rights. A year and a half earlier, a band of guerrillas had tried to cross Motilon land without permission. They were killed by bows and arrows as a warning to their compatriots, who now politely ask for permission before venturing onto Motilon land. Not exactly gentle, unspoiled primitives.

During the meetings with other Indian groups, I was struck by the contrast between Don Fidel and Don Roberto, both nattily attired in linen suits, and the Canadian Indians dressed in grungy jeans and tattered T-shirts (one of which, I kid you not, read "POW WOW"). One session involved the ritual smoking of tobacco (in this case a pack of Players cigarettes as well as the more traditional braid of tobacco). Imagine my surprise when several white, rail-thin vegetarians joined the circle to smoke the peace pipe. These were the sort of people who would become apoplectic at the mere thought of inhaling a whiff of second-hand smoke while dining in a Santa Monica restaurant.

The round of festivities and moments of green self-congratulation were nearly endless. I attended a reception at the Sheraton, where America's environmentalist-in-chief, Al Gore, presided over the formal presentation of the "Global Situation Room" to the Brazilian government. The brainchild of artist Tom Van Sant, the Global Situation Room's centerpiece is a magnificent computer-generated collage of satellite images of the Earth that, combined, offer the first cloud-free photograph of the home planet.

During the presentation, I sidled over to Sen. Steve Symms (R-Idaho) to say hello. When he figured out that I was not one of the usual environmental journalists, he laughed: "The eco-freaks ought to be mad at people like me, not President Bush. He's gone the extra mile. In fact, he has perhaps gone a mile too far."

I also spoke with fortysomething California developer David Rivard, who now works for the California World Foundation. Rivard is scary. He believes humanity should renounce technology as an "act of faith." Rivard argues that we should

emulate hunter-gatherer societies because they are "the only cultures that have sustained themselves for 20,000 years."

He insisted to me that antibiotics have weakened humanity's gene pool. He disdainfully rejected the suggestion that primitive societies are being superseded by more advanced societies because they are being outcompeted. He also noted: "I haven't heard a single person involved in the United Nations process use the word *progress*." (I thought to myself, "Good point, Dave.") Like I said, scary.

One of the more amusing plans for saving the Earth offered up at the Global Forum was arch-environmentalist Hazel Henderson's proposal that all economists be forced into re-education camps. Henderson asserts that "economics is a form of brain damage." Under her plan, economists would be forced to attend classes in biology, anthropology, sociology, etc., and then pass a test to prove that they had reformed. "They will not be able to be policy-making economists until they pass their sustainability exams," she explained. Watch out Friedman, Boskin, Galbraith, and Samuelson.

It could have been worse. One environmentalist friend of Henderson's advised her: "Look, Hazel, you really need to line them up and shoot them all." Strong, the secretary-general of the summit, endorsed Henderson's proposal.

Since most people in the United States were saturated with Earth Summit news coverage, I won't bore you with the details of the agreements reached at Rio. The good news is that the generally weak-willed and anxious-to-please Bush Administration managed not to sign even more damaging treaties. Although EPA administrator William Reilly tried his best to get the United States to agree to the Convention on Biological Diversity, President Bush just barely managed to muster the backbone to resist signing it. This treaty would have crippled our burgeoning biotechnology industry by seriously compromising patent protection and intellectual-property rights. The Biodiversity Treaty could have required com-

panies to license their technology to developing countries without compensation and to pay extortionate sums to Southern nations for access to their genetic resources.

The bad news is that by signing the "guttled" version of the Global Climate Change Treaty, the United States is officially buying into the notion that "global

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warming" is a serious environmental problem. Even as more and more scientific evidence accumulates showing that the threat of global warming is overblown, President Bush has called for an international meeting in early 1993 to consider ways to implement the treaty. These discussions will no doubt revolve around economically devastating limits on carbon-dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels. Carbon-dioxide reductions that would satisfy environmental radicals would cost trillions of dollars to achieve. I tremble when I think that Al Gore may then be in control of U.S. environmental policy.

The United States also signed Agenda 21, the ambitious 800-page blueprint for global environmental regulation and economic planning for the 21st century. Agenda 21 is the Mother of All Five-Year Plans. A U.N. Sustainable Development Commission will be established by the General Assembly under the authority of the secretary-general to oversee Agenda 21. To implement Agenda 21 programs, the North is also expected to give the South \$125 billion annually. During the negotiations at Rio, the developing countries (the so-called Group of 77 or G-77) pressed the Northern Countries to "reaf-

firm" their commitment to redistribute 0.7 percent of their GNPs to the South.

Meeting this goal would mean tripling U.S. foreign aid. However, the Bush administration got around this provision by carefully noting that since the United States had never "affirmed" its commitment to a 0.7-percent giveaway in the first place, by signing Agenda 21 it would be "reaffirming" a commitment it never made. Such are diplomatic niceties.

It's hard to make fun of the many earnest people who actually believe they are struggling to save the Earth from imminent destruction. They attend meetings; they suggest more love, more caring, and more sharing as the solution to the planet's problems. Participatory democracy, redistribution, and consensus building form the nebulous bases of their political program. They participate in demonstrations. (I overheard one participant tell another, "I'll feel somehow unfulfilled unless I participate in at least one demonstration while I'm here.") These people don't worry me very much.

In stark contrast, however, are the more steely-eyed, must-break-eggs-to-make-omelets types. Not for them, the mushy, New Age spirituality. They exhibit the dedication of true-believing fanatics in the classic Leninist mold. They sat through interminable meetings hammering out manifestos and plans to make sure that their governments obey the treaties they signed. They know exactly who their enemies are and precisely what must be done to snatch the planet back from the precipice.

Chris Flavin, an environmentalist from the particularly gloomy Worldwatch Institute, proudly declared: "You cannot go to any corner of the globe and not find some degree of environmental awareness and some amount of environmental politics." Flavin also added that with socialism in disrepute, environmentalism is now the "most powerful political ideal today." Alas, he is right.

Contributing Editor Ronald Bailey is the producer of the weekly PBS series Technopolitics and his book ECO-SCAM: The False Prophets of Ecological Apocalypse will be published by St. Martin's Press in February.