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"I will endeavor to retain the spirit of youth"

~Sigma Chi Creed, George Ade ΔΔ 1887

An Amazing South America Adventure

So what's your excuse for missing your Pledge Class's 10 Year Reunion? If you're **Justin Lotak '02** it's because you are somewhere in the Amazon in South America.

Read this fascinating story of a brother who is searching for ways to make our planet a better place to live.

A South American Adventure by Justin Lotak '02

In August 2012, after 6.5 years of developing wind and solar power plants, I decided to leave my job at Invergy and volunteer for approximately a year in South America with a variety of environmental organizations. I researched approximately 150 volunteer organizations throughout Latin America and narrowed it down to 15 "favorites". I've stayed flexible throughout the journey and it's brought me to some amazing places and allowed me to meet some incredible people. My goals in doing this trip are to perfect my Spanish while traveling the continent and to better understand ways in which various organizations are working to help the environment, particularly in regards to biodiversity.



September - October 2012 Filmmaking in the Amazon

For the first two months of my trip, I worked with a friend on a documentary he is filming in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The documentary is called "Yasuni Man" and should be released this summer. Here is a trailer: [Yasuni Man](#). The film is about the biodiversity, the Waorani indigenous culture, and the politics regarding the conservation of Yasuni - a region in eastern Ecuador that is potentially the most biodiverse area on earth and that is under threat due to the discovery of oil underneath this section of the Amazon. We lived with a Waorani family, an indigenous group that still lives off the land in the rainforest.

My job during the film was to record the audio portions - something that was completely new to me but that I found a lot of fun. We would hike for miles through the rainforest every day filming animals and interviewing the biologists whom we brought to survey various animal and plant species that were in the area. Many of the details of the film are confidential at this time, but it's very possible we discovered new species (DNA confirmations pending). While filming in the field, we hosted a National Geographic crew to help film a part of a series they will release in 2014 called Planet Earth in the Age of Man which will cover various ecosystems and show the impacts of man on each. One of the five episodes will be about forests and a large portion of that episode will be about Yasuni.

November 2012 Weddings and Wildlife in Guatemala

In November I attended brother Juan Ayau '05's wedding in Guatemala, as well as his cousin's wedding later in the month. In between weddings I volunteered at ARCAS, an organization that is dedicated towards the protection of wildlife in the rainforests in northern Guatemala. ARCAS primarily work to rehabilitate animals that have been confiscated by the government as part of the illegal animal trade industry, with a goal of releasing the animals (mostly various monkey and bird species) back into the rainforest in a healthy condition. The project is described here at [ARCAS](#).

January 2013 Creating a Future National Park

Next I headed for Chile where I worked on the future Patagonia National Park, located in the Chacabuco Valley near the town of Cochrane. Private and distressed land has been purchased by [Conservacion Patagonica](#), an organization started by Kris Tompkins (the former CEO of the clothing company Patagonia), and it is now being returned to its natural state with the help of volunteers. My volunteer work consisted of being sent to remote areas of the park to camp with a group and complete various projects. For two weeks we built 4km of new hiking trails, and then for another five days we collected native grass seeds. I plan to return here once again as a volunteer in March to help with their renewable energy systems. The park is extremely abundant with wildlife and is being nicknamed the "Serengeti of the Southern Cone" for this reason. It should be a significant National Park for Chile in the future, one of many that Kris and her husband Doug Tompkins (founder of clothing companies North Face and Esprit) are forming in Chile and Argentina.



Where's Justin? Somewhere in South America.

February 2013 Adventure Race Photography

I then hitchhiked further south to get to the city of Punta Arenas, Chile to work as a photographer / videographer for the [Patagonian Expedition Race 2013](#). This race is the longest running adventure race in the world - an extreme test of both physical and mental endurance. Eleven teams of four people from countries around the world competed in this year's 10-day race, which consisted of 701 kilometers of hiking, mountain biking, and kayaking through iceberg-filled lakes, glaciers, mountains, and very dense forests. This was one of the more rewarding volunteering opportunities I've had so far.

Highlights included filming teams from a helicopter while they crossed a glacier and being embedded with an America team for a 40 km hiking section to photograph and film them while they raced. Getting to know the team members on a personal level and watching them push themselves to their utter limits while going through every sort of pain and emotion the human body is capable of feeling allowed me to better understand how easy most of us have it on a typical day of hiking. I'd recommend adding or "liking" the [Patagonian Expedition Race Facebook page](#), where you can see some of the photos from this year's race. The photographers with whom I was

shooting were all professionals and some of the tops in their field; it was definitely humbling to see their photos when they came back, many of which are on the Facebook page and worth checking out.

Mar 2013 -- ????? Renewable Energy, Exploration, Jaguars, etc etc....

After Feb 2013, my current plans are to return to Valle Chacabuco for about a month to help get their solar, wind, and hydro energy systems up and running, followed by being a volunteer "explorer" at Bernardo O'Higgins National Park in Chile – an 8.6 million acre wilderness in southwest Patagonia that the Chilean government plans to explore for the next 30-40 years so that they can eventually start opening the park to tourism. After that my plans are still open but I will eventually make my way up to Bolivia where I will volunteer with [Inti Wara Yassi](#). They are an organization that works with the reintroduction of wildlife into the rainforest. Many of the animals they have are large cats (jaguars, ocelots, pumas) and were kept illegally as pets.

Why Volunteer?

So I've been asked many times why I decided to do this, and whether I think it was a good idea. Why would I give up a good-paying job at this point in my career, why would I travel around living on a shoestring while camping and hitchhiking to get around, why would I spend money to volunteer (a lot of the environmental organizations do not have an income so they charge volunteers about \$15-20 a day to pay for their food) – well I think the easiest way of explaining it is to look at it as a "hands-on" post-grad education while seeing the world. We easily spend tens of thousands of dollars on a masters degree, but taking a year off to volunteer is less common even though we very well may learn much more relevant information while working with various organizations doing tasks for which we have no training. There is also the satisfaction of knowing you are contributing towards something without asking anything in return, and many of these organizations rely on the help from volunteers in order to continue operating. Injured animals in the rainforest do not pay humans for their medical care, and most of the time they are injured because of our actions. Therefore in this example I think we have a responsibility to care for them.

With this adventure the biggest change I have noticed within myself is a healthy drop in my level of stress. I am happy to report that I easily sleep throughout the nights now and my concentration levels are much better. Taking a break from the corporate world has allowed me to openly think about other lines of potential business, many of which I've wanted to give some attention to for some time now. I also have noticed an abundance of opportunities down here with regards to renewable energy and other "green" businesses. Though it can be nerve racking when thinking about whether or not I have enough money saved up for this year (my budget is about \$20 a day and I've been successful in staying below that so far) and what I will do next, I've been very happy with my decision to take this trip. I was thinking about it for years and could tell that my thoughts about doing this trip were not going away anytime soon, if ever.

Follow Justin's Most Amazing Amazon Adventure

For anyone wanting to follow my journey, I've started a blog: volunteeringinlatinamerica.com. It explains a lot of what I've been up to. There are also some photos of this part of the world on my blog.

Of course if anyone would like to meet me down here or has any questions, please feel free to contact me at justinlotak@gmail.com.

Justin Lotak Bio

After graduating from Purdue with a degree in Mechanical Engineering, I first went to Spain to learn Spanish for three months, living with a host family in Barcelona and taking immersion language courses every day. After that I returned to the states to start a rotational engineering position for 2.5 years with Ingersoll Rand, designing rock drills and various security products at different divisions in Texas, Colorado, and Birmingham England. I knew that I wanted to apply my engineering degree towards environmental ends, so after much thought I left Ingersoll Rand and joined Invenergy in January 2006. Invenergy is a Chicago-based developer, owner and operator of large scale wind, solar, and natural gas projects. I worked with them for 6.5 years, both in Chicago and with a 2.5 yr assignment in Edinburgh Scotland, and worked on the development and construction of two 100MW wind farms, two 320MW natural gas peaking projects, a portfolio of wind development projects in Scotland, and a 20MW solar project in Illinois. Also, while living in Edinburgh, I obtained a MBA from the University of Edinburgh.

