

The Guatemala Stove Project

Sunday, Feb. 23, 2020 by Rob Bowyer

Before going much further with the story I suppose I should talk (write?) about the main purpose I have traveled a thousand miles into the deepest heart of Central America.

Up to this point my three little tales have been more or less about me which, as you have probably gathered, is my favourite topic. I'm confident you are your own favourite topic too. After all, are we not the most interesting person we know. Like a tire with a slow leak our minds roil with self deflating internal conversations. There are times we say one thing while we do another and in the process we become a jangle of contradiction. We drag ourselves down by a thousand tortured failures as we stumble blindly along a broken pathetic existence. Wow, that is so drama. Okay, so maybe YOU don't, You're perfect, which I've always thought, but I am certainly an existential mess. Ironically it's this animated mess that makes for the interesting stuff that the best and most fascinating stories are made. What great artist is not a tortured soul. Bad things come before good things. And then bad things happen again. And so on. I don't really know what that has to do with anything about the GSP but there you have it.

The Guatemala Stove Project (GSP) has been around for 20 odd years. It is a charitable, non-profit organization that funds the building of wood burning stoves in the highlands of Guatemala, Central America.

Why wood stoves? Well, the people who live here, the native Mayan people, are the poorest and most marginalized in a poor and marginalized country. They live a subsistence existence, meaning, basically, they live off the land. Their homes are hand built of adobe (mud). Most have no running water. A few have minimal electricity. They grow and harvest their own food and they cook what they have over open fires. There is little variety in their diet, mostly corn, and if they are fortunate, some vegetables. Cooking takes place outside the home but most cooking takes place indoors. Fire wood is either gathered from far away and carried back to camp, or if the family has an income in that particular month they may be able to purchase a few arm fulls of wood.

Imagine a tiny fire in the center of a small dark room. You will cook all your meals on this fire. There is an entrance that may or may not have a door. There could be a tiny window for light. Or not. There is a hole in the roof to let the smoke out. A pot of water rests on the fire. You, the mother, tend the fire and watch patiently, carefully as the water comes to a boil. Two or three of your children are with you. The haze is as thick as soup and you can hardly see your child who totters across the way. The walls are stained black. So are your lungs. Your eyes sting and burn. You rub your eyes and that only makes it worse. Breath in, breath out.

I don't know if you have ever been in a smoke filled room but it is wicked. Recall those smoke filled bars in which us boomers once passed away the time way back when. And that is tolerable comparatively speaking.

There are several things going on here. The health issues are obvious. However, there are a few other things to consider. An open fire uses a ton of wood compared to an enclosed and efficient wood stove. Imagine you have to collect all that wood and carry it up the side of a mountain. Every day. More wood, more deforestation. More deforestation, more soil erosion. More soil erosion, less productive soil and the greater the chance of mud slides.

And in the big picture, more wood burned, a hell of a lot more carbon emissions. More trees cut down, less carbon sequestration. Forests and Jungle are good things for the planet. Desert, not so much.

When the forests are gone they are gone. The land becomes barren and dry. The birds, the animals, the

insects are gone too. We humans are hard on this earth. We don't mean to be. We just are.

I digress, the stove is a source of pride for the family and it becomes a place for communal and family activity. Cooking is safer as there is far less chance for burns and accidental fires. Or, if the family has to purchase fire wood periodically they could save on this expenditure and use the money elsewhere for other much needed goods.

There is no chance for employment for the people in the hills. There are no jobs. There probably will be no jobs other than agriculture. There are very few places for education. Education is key, especially for women, as they are the backbone of civilization. Women and education are the glue that binds. Guatemalan men, and entire families, are abandoning their homeland for the supposedly greener pastures of North America in hopes of a better life. We have heard the stories. I can't blame them for seeking something better. You and I would do the same. The history of humanity is the story of migration. A cook stove won't change that but it will change the lives for the better for those who stay.

A stove costs \$300 Canadian dollars. Think about it. Or think about donating 20 bucks. It won't kill you like a face full of smoke.