

THE DISCOVER INTERVIEW

WADE DAVIS

A real-life Indiana Jones discovers the recipe for zombie poison and chronicles cultures at the brink.

BY JESSICA RUVINSKY

On a break from college, Wade Davis, age 20 at the time, crossed the Darién Gap—the roadless, desolate, and dangerous 100-mile stretch of swamp that divides Central from South America. He was clueless, compassless, and on foot. And yet somehow he was chosen to be his group’s guide.

His swagger certainly helped.

At 26 (and still alive), Davis entered graduate school under Harvard University’s legendary Richard Evans Schultes in the field of ethnobotany, where he learned to search for new medicines from the plants that indigenous peoples use. But merely cataloging plants was not his style, so he applied for a doctoral dissertation grant to discover the recipe for zombie poison in Haiti. He got the grant—along with a note from the academic reviewers that said, “Davis must be told he will be killed if he tries to do this work.”

In Haiti the swagger helped again. He won the locals’ trust by drinking unidentified potions in a sorcerer’s hut, winning impromptu horse races, and weaving luminous stories of that improbable land called Canada. He became probably the only white man ever to be initiated into Haiti’s secret societies. And he got the recipe for zombie poison—part graveyard-snatched human bone, part buried toad, part toxic puffer fish, and more parts magic than an outsider had ever been willing to see.

His success brought instant fame. Davis stepped off the Haitian coast directly into a deal for what would become a best-selling book about voodoo culture, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. Then he sold the movie rights, earning more money and becoming better known than the professors judging his work.

Ethnobotany’s rock star returned to Harvard and got his Ph.D., but he turned away from academia just the same. “My forte was as a storyteller, grounded in the kind of training that I had in the academic world,” he explains today.

In fact, for Davis botany was “a metaphor, a conduit to culture” itself. With the language of plants offering entrée to the people he found fascinating, he took off with rain forest nomads and wrote another book; he traveled with Inuit in the Arctic and wrote yet another.

In the course of his travels, he coined the term *ethnosphere* to

describe the cultural web that encompasses the diverse dreams, myths, thoughts, products, and intuition of every culture on earth. Preserving that diversity is what Davis desires most. “Half the languages of the world are disappearing in this generation,” he says.

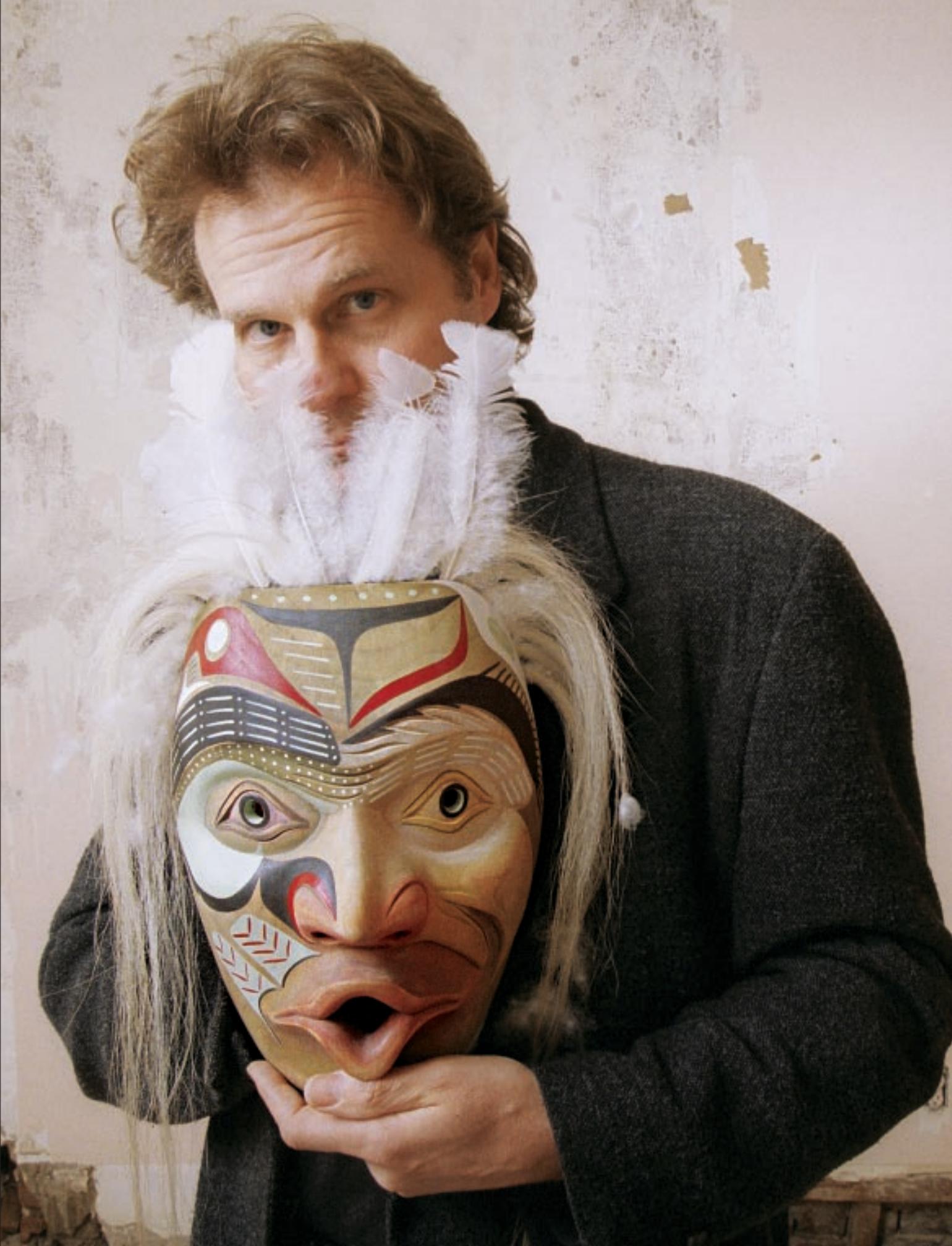
Davis does not consider preservation to be his job, however. “I’m not in the business of trying to save the Peruvian Indian farmer any more than he’s in the business of trying to save me,” he says. Instead, his goal is taking the rest of us to realms of cultural splendor so great that we will understand, finally, their value to the world. Toward that end he works full-time as explorer-in-residence for the National Geographic Society, holding perhaps the only job-with-benefits on par with astronaut for pure adventure and thrill. As a professional explorer, Davis travels the ethnosphere so he can discover and describe it in a stream of moving and popular exhibits, books, and films. His award-winning two-hour special for the History Channel, *Peyote to LSD: A Psychedelic Odyssey*, airs April 20, and the IMAX film *Grand Canyon Adventure*, made in collaboration with environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy Jr., premiered in March.

DISCOVER met with Davis in his Washington, D.C., home among the artifacts of his eclectic life: a tool for skinning the eyelids of wolves, a compound microscope, an upright piano, and an ornate wooden mask, carved in his likeness by an old Kwakiutl friend, who told him, “That’s your lips in old age, because you never shut up.”

When did you start exploring?

I was at Harvard in 1974, and Harvard was very intense in those days. I got there and I got very radicalized within about three days over the Vietnam War, so I spent most of my first year writing pamphlets and smashing windows, basically, and demonstrating. Then after a couple of years I was exhausted, and I was just gonna take some time off.

I was with my roommate, David, who was from a Montana ranch family. And we’re in a café in Harvard Square, and there was a National Geographic—ironically—map of the world right in front of us. And David looked at the map. We were downing a cup of tea or a beer or whatever it was. And he suddenly looked at me, and he looked at the map, and he pointed to the Arctic, and



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Previous page: Davis holding a Kwakiutl mask carved in his likeness. Above, Davis with Kofán shamans in Ecuador; below, with environmentalist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (second from right), Kennedy's daughter Kick (left), and his own daughter Tara in the Grand Canyon.

he looked at me. And I had to go somewhere, so I just—plunk—Amazon. And within two weeks he was in the Arctic, and he never came back. He's still there. He lives in Alaska—I see him all the time. And in three weeks I was in the Amazon, where I stayed for a year and a half.

Having decided to go to the Amazon, there was only one man to see, and that was Richard Schultes, the Harvard professor who was the greatest Amazon explorer of the 20th century, without a doubt. So I knocked on his office door at Harvard. I just said: "Sir, I'm from British Columbia. I've saved up money in a logging camp. I want to go to the Amazon like you did and collect plants."

At the time, I knew nothing of botany. I'd never taken a serious biology course—*any* biology course—in my life. And he didn't ask for credentials. He just said, "Well, son, when do you want to go?" And two weeks later I was in the Amazon.

What advice did Schultes give you?

My poor mother. I was trying to placate my mother back in Victoria, so I went back to see him to get his advice and he said, "Don't bother with leather boots because all the snakes bite at the neck." And then he said, "Don't forget to bring a pith helmet." And then his third piece of advice was "don't come back without trying ayahuasca," which is the most potent of the hallucinogenic preparations of the whole shaman's repertoire.



Did you wear a pith helmet?

No.

Get bitten by a snake?

No. I did step on an anaconda once. I never had any problems at all.

Did you try ayahuasca?

Oh yes, many times.

What is it like?

You are flung into other levels of reality so visceral, so tangible, so all-enveloping, that they become your sense of the real world. And you suddenly realize that the relatively mundane realm of ordinary consciousness is a crude facsimile of what awaits in the psychotropic trance. This and other experiences in the presence of people taken by the spirit left me with visceral evidence that cultural beliefs can really make for different human beings, that there are other ways of knowing, other levels of intuition, that cannot necessarily be understood through the filter of Cartesian logic.

What do you mean by "other ways of knowing"?

When Schultes was in the Amazon in the 1940s, the Seona in Ecuador identified for him 17 varieties of ayahuasca liana, and all of them, to his Harvard-trained taxonomic eye, were the same species. When he finally asked them to give him lessons in the nature of their systematics, they looked at him like he was a fool and said, "Don't you know anything about plants? Each one of these 17, when taken on the night of a full moon, will sing to you in a different key." That's not gonna get you a Ph.D. at

Harvard, but it's more interesting than counting flower parts.

So drugs do for the Seona people what science does for us?

Not drugs. That's a pejorative notion in our society—cocaine, crack, crystal meth, whatever. These aren't drugs. These are sacred medicines. These are the facilitators. These are the avenues to the doorways of the gods.

You went from investigating one kind of sacred medicine to another. Is that what propelled you from the Amazon to Haiti?

I have always lived by the adage that if it works, it's obsolete. The minute I get good at something, I generally drop it and try something else. I was looking around for a thesis topic that would really catch me, and Schultes came up with this zombie thing. A team of psychopharmacologists led by a man named Nathan Kline—he was derided by one newspaper as the father of Thorazine, but his science was impeccable—went on record saying they had found the first zombie. They didn't believe in magic, but they believed it was

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Pilgrims in Haiti during an annual voodoo festival known as La Plaine du Nord, July 2000.

possible that a person could appear to be dead in such a way as to fool a physician. The existence of a poison that would do that was taken for granted by the Haitian government and specifically mentioned in the penal code of the country, but nobody had investigated to see what was in it. I went down there almost on a whim, thinking that the assignment would be a lark, a couple weeks in Haiti. In the end, of course, it consumed four years of my life.

How did you locate the zombie poison?

I was living in a stone hut on the beach and going out every night alone to these secret societies. When I went around the country, there was one consistent ingredient in these preparations, and that was these marine fish. I didn't know any of these fish from Adam, but I brought back all of the ingredients and the ichthyologist at Harvard identified them: puffer fish. He turned me on to this biomedical literature, and my God, I found case after case in which people had been nailed in their coffins by mistake. There was absolutely no doubt scientifically that these fish I had found in Haiti had, at least at certain times of the year, a drug in them, tetrodotoxin [TTX], that could make people appear dead. Haiti whacked me in the face like a sledgehammer. I remember that fantastic sense of how surreal Haiti was, a place of such poverty, where people adorn their lives with their imaginations. I didn't know it, but I had malaria and hepatitis at the same time. I felt like that line from the Bob Dylan song, "Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mister Jones?" Eventually a friend had to

just pluck me out of Haiti and put me on her farm to write my book.

Why did you write a book before finishing your graduate thesis?

I walked in off the street in London and got a book advance. I used the book advance to pay for the research. Then I sold the rights to Hollywood—I wouldn't say naively, because I'd do it again today. I mean, name me a graduate student you know who would turn down a quarter-million dollars for the rights to their Ph.D. thesis—let's see them line up. It was a terrible movie. I risked a lot academically, intellectually, and personally to tell this story with honor and integrity, but it brought down all of this wrath.

People made some serious accusations against you at the time. What happened?

I went to the world's expert on TTX, a man called Kao at Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York. At first he was absolutely thrilled. This was gonna put him on the map. I brought the BBC and I brought *20/20* to him. All he wanted to talk about was *his* research, but all they wanted was a sound bite saying TTX could make you appear dead. At the end of one of these sessions, he looked up at me and said, "Why zombies?" What he meant was, why had he worked in this bloody lab all his life with no one paying attention while I, a young graduate student, was in *Time* magazine? Right after that, two samples go away for analysis. One comes back zero TTX. The other comes back trace amounts.

The minute those samples came back, Kao called me up and said: "You're all wrong. Get another thesis topic. This is nonsense."

And I said, "Dr. Kao, I told you that 50 percent of the time these fish are nontoxic. It varies tremendously, and it's highly significant that either sample showed any at all, because it means that tetrodotoxin was found. You also have to understand that the Haitian belief system allows a sorcerer an out, a way to rationalize failures and emphasize successes: *If I go down to the beach and give you a poison and absolutely nothing happens, I can say that my attempt to capture your soul was interrupted by a priest who protected you.* I explained all that to this guy, but he began writing hundreds of letters all around the country, unsolicited, saying, "I'm here to alert you to a serious case of fraud in science."

With all the uproar, I'm amazed you ever got your Ph.D.

When I wrote my thesis, Irvin DeVore, the greatest biological anthro-

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pologist in the history of the university, said it was the best Ph.D. he had ever read in his career at Harvard. But another professor involved in approval was overheard at a party after I was in *Time* magazine saying that no matter what happened, I would not get my degree.

And sure enough, when the time came around for the faculty to rubber-stamp the approval of the committee, that professor did not put the vote as an agenda item on this faculty board meeting. And in the meeting he suddenly stood up and started railing against my thesis, apparently. Fortunately one of my committee members was there, this wonderfully kind botanist. So after this great tirade, Rolla Tryon just taps—in a classic sort of Harvard moment—taps his pipe on his glass of water and says, “Excuse me, but have you read the thesis?” And he had to admit that he had never seen it.

After all that, you abandoned the study of zombies. Why?

I was driving around Boston with this very close friend of mine, a professor of sociology. He looked at me—he had known me for years, and he just looked at me and said, “You know, Wade, do you want to be a zombiologist?” And it was like zazen from a Buddhist monk, because what he was really saying was: Here you are. You're in this whirlwind. *Doonesbury* was doing a three-week parody of the book. *Miami Vice* was doing episodes. I was on the *Today* show. It was completely surreal, right? And Charlie was saying to me, “Do you want to spend the rest of your fucking life defending this theory, running around Haiti trying to find more zombies?” And of course I instantly laughed and said no. And at that instant, I turned my back on the entire story. I never went back to Haiti, not out of any kind of bitterness or regret. I didn't want to be a zombie expert. Instead, I disappeared into the forests of Borneo.

Haiti, the Amazon, Borneo...How do you manage to fit in no matter where you are?

You're with a bunch of yak herders at night in Tibet, and you've got a choice: You can hang out with the other scientists and listen to their stories of Chicago or their problems with their wives, or you can just wrap yourself up in a blanket and go down and hang in the body pile with the yak herders and drink rakshi and eat tsampa and fart. I have a good intuition for finding that kind of opening into culture that allows you to be welcomed.

One of the cultures you celebrate in *Light at the Edge of the World* is the Inuit. What do you most admire about them?

The Inuit didn't fear the cold; they took advantage of it. During the 1950s the Canadian government forced the Inuit into settlements. A family from Arctic Bay told me this fantastic story of their grandfather who refused to go. The family, fearful for his life, took away all of his tools and all of his implements, thinking that would force him into the settlement. But instead, he just slipped out of an igloo on a cold Arctic night, pulled down his caribou and sealskin trousers, and defecated into his hand. As the feces began to freeze, he shaped it into

the form of an implement. And when the blade started to take shape, he put a spray of saliva along the leading edge to sharpen it. That's when what they call the “shit knife” took form. He used it to butcher a dog. Skinned the dog with it. Improvised a sled with the dog's rib cage, and then, using the skin, he harnessed up an adjacent living dog. He put the shit knife in his belt and disappeared into the night.

Is that a true story?

True or not, it's a wonderful metaphor for the resilience of the Inuit people. Once during the migration of the belugas I was watching this Inuit guy fix his snowmobile. He cleaned the carburetor with this beautiful feather of an Arctic goose. Then he needed a new clutch plate and had to drive a hole through a piece of steel. He just put it between his two boots, got his 30-30 [rifle] out, and boom. And I thought, “Wow, these people can do anything.”

Wait—the Inuit were on snowmobiles, not dogsleds? If everybody's going modern, what does it mean to preserve culture?

I don't believe in preserving culture. The real question is, what kind of world do we want to live in—a monochromatic world of monotony, or a polychromatic world of diversity? The idea is not to eliminate modernity, as if we've got the right to sequester people like some kind of specimen in a bubble. If I get my arm ripped off in a car accident, I don't want to be taken to a shaman; no one else does either.

But if the Inuit are living like us, how are they distinct?

The distinctions between cultures are not decorative—it's not feathers and bells or dancers or songs. Those are the symbols of culture. The essence of culture is a blanket of moral and ethical values that we place around the individual. It's culture that allows us to make sense out of sensation, to find order in a universe that may have none.

What about your own culture? Have you reflected on its meaning in your exploration of the world?

We don't think of ourselves as a culture in the West. We think that we somehow exist outside of time and culture. We're the real world moving inexorably forward: Get with it or lose the train. When the truth is, we're the anomaly. By a remarkable accident of geography, three of British Columbia's most important salmon rivers are all born within literally a stone's throw of each other in a rugged knot of mountains. The only other place I know like that is Tibet, where the Brahmaputra and Ganges are born in lakes on the lower flanks of Mount Kailash. That area is so revered that normally you are not even allowed to climb it. The idea of putting industrial infrastructure at the headwaters of those rivers would be anathema to Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain. Yet here we are about to embark upon coal-bed methane exploration and open anthracite coal mines right at the headwaters of our three greatest rivers in British Columbia. Not only are we prepared to do it, but we don't, even in the calculus of our economic planning, have a metric for the value of the land left alone. In other words, no company that wants to do something there has to compensate Canadians for destroying something so unique. But



Davis participating in a sacred Mazatec Indian “magic mushroom” ceremony in Oaxaca, Mexico.

we think that this economic system of ours exists out of culture, out of time, and is the inexorable wave of history when, by definition, it is simply the product of a certain set of human beings: our lineage. I was raised in the forests of British Columbia to believe those forests existed to be cut. That has made me a human being very different from my friends amongst the Kwagiulth, who believed that those same forests were the abode of the crooked beak of heaven and the cannibal spirits that dwell at the north end of the world.

Given those conflicting perspectives, how can we ever make a connection, let alone straddle different worlds?

My friend Randy Borman was a young child born of American missionaries, Bub and Bobbie Borman. They were evangelizing the Kofán in lowland Ecuador in the late 1950s and '60s. The Kofán, meanwhile, were evangelizing Randy. He grew up a blond kid from the Midwest in the jungles of Ecuador in a totally isolated tribe. Kofán became his first language. He hunted with the elders and the other boys. He became thoroughly Kofán in every fiber of his being.

Then he tried to become an American, tried to attend university. He struggled for a semester and then went back to the jungle and married a Kofán woman. Before you know it, he's chief. Oil pipelines and colonization had swept into their homeland. It made perfect sense to them that their chief be a fellow whom they could trust, who could understand their ways but also understand the ways of the invader and could speak English and could speak Spanish and could negotiate in those silver towers in Quito.



Kofán chief Randy Borman (second from right) with a film crew in Ecuador.

Recently I was in Ecuador and I took ayahuasca with Randy and his father-in-law, a well-known shaman. As Randy said when he first showed microscopes to the Kofán, nothing in the dazzling array of organisms displayed on the glass plate astonished them, because they already knew that multiple levels of reality existed. They had seen it in their visions.

A Tibetan monk turned to me once and said, “We don't really believe in Tibet that you went to the moon, but you did. You may not believe we achieve enlightenment in one lifetime, but we do.” ■