A Helpful Presence in Every Village

Essay and Photos by Santiago Zindel Mundet Cruz

The Banda children ran behind us, each holding a twig in the air to which was attached a simple leaf torn in parts to create a beautifully uncomplicated pinwheel. Banda is a small village in Rwanda surrounded on three sides by the lush forests of Nyungwe National Park. My group and I, traveling from the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, visited Banda hoping to better understand the residents' relationship with the park and their perception of environmental conservation.

There are three ways to reach Banda. You can: 1) take a long, bumpy, winding dirt road on which motorbikes and cars often get stuck in mud puddles after a rainfall; 2) walk for an hour and a half down to the village from the paved road inside Nyungwe, on a wide path, in the hot sun, that crosses mostly through a monoculture of pines; or 3) like I did with my five colleagues, take the adventurous way down by hiking, for three hours, through Nyungwe’s forest, encountering Blue Monkeys and Gray-Cheeked Mangabeys while hearing baboons and chimps scream in the distance.

Regardless of your approach, you will find in Banda a lively village with caring Rwandan families and a well-run NGO called Kageno helping to improve the town.

Students at the Kageno School learning about hygiene
Throughout my travels, I have visited many poor villages that could clearly benefit from outside help. Banda is fortunate to have Kageno working from within to improve the quality of life for its residents by providing basic services and helping build capacity for people to improve their lives. This covers everything from health and hygiene to improved gardening techniques and animal husbandry.

Our Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies group was hosted by Kageno and able to witness all the great work it is doing. Kageno, for example, built a pre-school to which low-income families can send their children to learn for free. When it heard that children in other schools weren’t attending class, Kageno began providing free meals at the school so that the children would be encouraged to attend and have access to healthy food.

Kageno also built a health clinic to help sick residents. And after realizing that, because the hospital was too far away, there was a high mortality rate among women giving birth, it built a maternity clinic as well. Kageno also owns land for cultivation where it keeps chickens and cows and teaches people how to be more efficient farmers and create fertilizer from animal dung.

I found Kageno to be a great success, in part because it is run by local people who understand the needs of the community. They listen to fellow residents’ concerns and have first-hand knowledge of the community’s challenges. So their work addresses the most pressing problems in Banda head-on, rather than waiting on an outsider’s assessment. The NGO also focuses its work on the people who most need it. The poorest family is the one that gets a latrine built next its home, or can send its children to Kageno’s pre-school, for instance.

As a traveler and someone who has had a relatively worry-free life, I often feel guilty when visiting communities such as Banda, where people are struggling to get by, feed their children, and take care of their health. Why should I be living such a comfortable life when all these people have so many hardships? Naturally, I wonder what I can do to help. This, I believe, is a common feeling among Western travelers in developing countries. Still, the question remains—What CAN we do to help?

Some people give candy to local children, but that’s not a healthy option and can teach dependency. Others donate money to individuals who claim they want to send their kids to school, or buy seeds for their farms, or uniforms for their sports teams. But this money often ends up staying in one person’s pocket. I’ve heard of people sending books, but those books are usually written in English, so few people can read them. Others decide to give money to children or beggars on the streets, but this often encourages children to skip school and homeless people to spend it on short-term needs, not helping them overcome their hardships in the long-term.
Travelers often want to help the low-income communities they visit, but sometimes it's hard to find an effective way of doing so. There is no one-size-fits-all model. However, the clear answer here—and a solution encouraged by the Center for Responsible Travel—is to donate money to an organization working to improve the lives of the community you visit in an organized way, whenever possible. This might be a nonprofit organization like Kageno, or it may be a community eco-lodge that has engrained positive community engagement within its business model.

If there isn't an organized giving option, consider utilizing the tips offered by CREST in “The Dos and Don'ts of Travel Giving.” Kageno and similar organizations around the world are utilizing a model that is on the right track. It provides not only a strategic fund to which travelers can donate, but a constant presence in communities, allowing them to maximize the benefits of travelers’ philanthropy.

Santiago Zindel is pursuing a Master of Environmental Management degree from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and Master of Business Administration degree from the Yale School of Management. A native of Mexico City, Santi has also lived in the United States, France, and South Africa. Santi’s interest in conservation of wildlife and wildlands across the world and passion for travel have led him to pursue a career in the field of sustainable tourism.