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OUTLOOK

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Tuesday, April 22, 2008

A struggle for our most basic resource

One in a series of stories for Earth Week, April 12-22, 2008

Apr 21, 2008
By Julia Marino

The ground was as dry and expansive as a deserted planet, layered sand stretching for miles on all sides like outstretched arms. A thin film of dust covered the surface as hundreds of cattle, goats and camels dotted the landscape. As we continued toward the drying well, the livestock moved toward us, behind us and alongside us en route to a trough for water or the horizon to graze.

It was the dry season, and our team of journalists from the Common Language Project was in the remote village of Dubluck in the Oromia region of southern Ethiopia. We were taking in the scene -- the harshness of the hot sun and the sad realities of climate change -- and how drought has affected the lives of nomadic cattle farmers, or "pastoralists," in this distant part of the world.

We soon crossed the flat, dusty ground of the plain, where a dip in the earth led to a large, hand-dug well -- its deep walls resonating with the low chanting of men. Their ritual dates back centuries, helping them to endure hours of long, laborious work under the scorching sun. A cow sipped the remaining water, its ribs protruding under its tattered skin. Women scooped water from another level of the well, rhythmically pouring the brown liquid down toward the waiting cow.

In that moment I realized that we stood amid a thirst -- a thirst for more water to fill the quickly drying wells, for more frequent rainfall, for peace and prosperity. It is a thirst so desperately in need of quenching in arid eastern Africa.

Leaving the well, we readied our cameras for our interview with the tribe's chief, a tall, strong man who spoke matter-of-factly of his community's struggle to maintain healthy livestock and livelihoods in such a resource-scarce region. As nomadic farmers, they have followed water and pastureland to feed their livestock and communities. But with each year, they have seen less and less water -- and with that, more and more conflict over dwindling resources. In fact, last year, parts of Ethiopia had experienced just two days of rain, a deadly pattern that become more commonplace in the past 40 years.

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Common Language Project founders Alex Stonehill, Sarah Stuteville and Jessica Partnow, AfrikaNews.org founder Ernest Waititu and Julia Marino stop for a group shot along the road to Kenya.

Photo courtesy of Julia Marino

About Julia

Julia Marino, a master's student in photography with a concentration in interactive multimedia in the School of Visual Communication, agreed to write an essay for *Outlook* as part of its Earth Week coverage.

She earned a bachelor's degree with honors in magazine journalism from the E.W. Scripps School in 2007 and was awarded a John R. Wilhelm International Reporting Scholarship to work as an intern and videographer in eastern Africa with AfrikaNews.org and the Common Language Project. Both nonprofit organizations produce independent online magazines dedicated to bringing underreported stories to light, with the idea that stories on a human scale can reveal the most about the political and social

And, according to a United Nations report, although the United States releases the majority of total greenhouse gas emissions an ocean away, the way of life of these pastoralists will be the first to diminish due to climate change.

As our mission to shed light on water scarcity issues in eastern Africa continued, I gradually discovered the true meaning of the world's most basic resource, one I had all-too-often taken for granted in my life. We rarely think about our water use, just as we rarely consider the air we need to breathe. But the sad reality is that to some, water is a source of life that is not easily accessed. Without quality water, the reality is thirst, disease and, ultimately, death. As a journalist, I hope my stories can bring more awareness to this basic human right.

Now, back at Ohio University, I peer through a library window at the lush grass and sparkling fountain outside. As I sip cold Donkey coffee made from Ethiopian coffee beans, my bottle of "Crystal Geyser natural alpine spring water" sits close by. This reality stands in stark contrast to my memory of the Ethiopian lowlands. But it reminds me of the many ways we're connected. It is difficult to realize a life lived in a village such as Dubluck -- one so different from my own bottled-water-crazed society.

Now that I have experienced the beauty and hardship of these pastoralists, water will never again taste the same.

Related Links

The Common Language Project: <http://www.clpmaq.org>

AfrikaNews.org: <http://afrikanews.org>

Julia's blog: <http://juliamarino.wordpress.com>

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issues of our times.

This past winter, through a grant from the [Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting](#), the East Africa team traveled to Ethiopia and Kenya to investigate the struggle to secure access to the world's most basic resource -- water.

[Visit Julia's blog to watch](#) the short documentary Marino and Alex Stonehill produced for World Water Day in March. Titled "Water Wars: Pastoralists Bear the Brunt of Climate Change," it was on PBS's Foreign Exchange.

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