

My year alone in the wilderness

A biology researcher retreats to a remote island to study the animal whose behaviour he knows best — himself

STORY AND PHOTOS BY BOB KULL

THE CHILEAN NAVY dropped me off at dusk on Feb. 5, 2001, on a tiny, nameless island 150 kilometres by water from the nearest settlement, and 35 kilometres off its usual patrol route. Darkness had fallen by the time we beached my supplies, and the boat and crew disappeared soon after, seeking haven from an approaching storm.

In the gathering dark, I built a tent platform by laying plywood over two-by-fours in a rough, grassy patch I assumed was above the highest tide — an incorrect assumption. It turned out to be seagrass. As the tide rose, I shoved more and more lumber under the plywood, while politely requesting, then demanding and, finally, cursing at the sea to back off and give me a break. It was pitch-black, with wind howling through the trees, rain roaring down and the sea surging in. I was alone in the middle of nowhere and beginning to wonder whether I'd bitten off more than I could comfortably chew. Crouching in the dark, I remembered my first visit to this remote coast four years earlier.

AS THE NAVIMAG FERRY zigzagged through the islands and channels of Chile's southern archipelago, I leaned against the wind and heard solitude calling me. It was July, the middle of winter, and I shivered in my thin jacket. But the swirling sky, wild mountains and beckoning sea held me at the rail.

I had recently earned degrees in biology and psychology from McGill University in Montréal, and had won a fellowship to study animal behaviour at the University of British Columbia. But my years of research and wilderness travel in British Columbia and northern Quebec had led to the realization that the animal whose behaviour most interests me is — me. For a long time, I'd wanted to spend a year completely alone to continue the exploration of myself in relation to the natural world.

The ferry travelled north through immense protected reserves, encountering neither boat nor plane nor human habi-

tation. It seemed more remote than anywhere I'd ever been in Canada. Slowly, a plan emerged in my mind, one that weaved together the apparently disconnected threads of my life. For my doctoral research, I would return to this coast and study the physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual effects of deep, wilderness solitude on an individual human being.

Although solitude has long been recognized in many cultures as an opportunity to journey inward, seeking solitude in our current cultural climate is often considered unhealthy. We are social beings and tend to think that meaning is found solely through relationships with other people. This is only partially true. Interacting with others is one aspect of being human, but we are more profoundly social than that. The structure of our minds, the consciousness that experiences the world, emerges in a communal setting and is itself social, even when we are alone. Biologically, each of us is a community. We share our bodies with bacteria, viruses, fungi and mites.

We are also spiritual beings. To be fully human, we need relationships not only with other people but with the non-human world, our own inner depths and with Something Greater. For me, that non-material Presence is mysterious, sacred and intellectually unfathomable. It can be experienced but not defined.

For my year in solitude, I would be both researcher and subject. The project would be a hybrid cross between lived experience research and meditation retreat. My primary methodology would be mindful observation, the long-established spiritual practice of repeatedly bringing the mind back to the present moment to notice what is actually happening in the here and now. I would record my observations in a daily journal and write the dissertation as a first-person narrative to include poetry and introspective reflections as

Daily meditation sessions helped Bob Kull (OPPOSITE) settle in to his life alone on a tiny island off the coast of Chile. At the summer solstice, he fasted for four days and spent hours sitting and thinking in the wind and rain.





The cabin Kull built for himself (ABOVE) kept him dry but the site wasn't ideal. At the highest tides, the ocean lapped at his tarp-covered woodpile. When weather permitted, he supplemented his diet with fresh red snapper (BELOW).

well as formal analysis. I would not attempt to “prove” anything or to describe the effects of solitude in an abstract, general or absolute way. Instead, I would share my personal experience as a possible mirror that others, without my urge and opportunity, might use to reflect on their own lives and relation to nature and perhaps find there more spaciousness and meaning.

For a month, I'd been working in the cold, wind and rain and was now stuck on the island with no boat.

THE NEXT MORNING, I moved the tent to higher ground and began waiting for the wind to die so that I could take the inflatable boat and search for a perfect place to build and live. I especially wanted to investigate a small protected bay I'd seen on the map that was 20 kilometres to the south. I'd decided to begin my retreat just after midsummer, when the days would be long and the weather (I imagined) reasonably good. But it was a week before the sea calmed enough to let me go exploring. It's often a mistake to extrapolate from what you do know (in this case, B.C. weather) to what you don't. In southern Chile, I discovered, summer (October to May) can often be windy and wet.

I didn't find a perfect site close by (which, in my fantasies, included a hot spring), and the ocean remained too rough to move my gear to the bay, so I eventually decided that the island where the navy had dropped me by chance was actually a fine place to make my home. It was semi-protected from the wind by dense rain forest to the north and by two islets to the south. There was a level area just above the high-tide line large enough to build a shelter and a small rocky beach I could clear to haul up the boat and use as my

front yard at low tide. A hundred metres away, exposed to sun and wind, was a point of land where I could set up the wind generator and solar panels. Waterfalls threaded down the sheer face of Staines Peninsula two kilometres to the west, and there was an amazing view of the rock spires and icefields of the southern Andes off to the east. There was no stream, but since I'd brought a barrel to catch rain from the roof, it seemed unlikely I'd run short of water.

I began to build. In the rain. My tools were basic: chainsaw, swede saw, handsaw, axe, machete, chisels, tape measure, level, square, hammer, plane, hand drill and bits. The ground was soggy, so I buried posts a half-metre down to bedrock. On top, I built a three-by-five-metre wooden frame with plywood floor and roof, covered the outside with translucent tarp and the inside with clear plastic and set in three Plexiglas windows. This let in plenty of light and created a dead air space between tarp and plastic for insulation. My plan was to staple the tarp and plastic to the frame, and it seemed like a good plan until I discovered I'd brought 2,000 of the wrong size staples for the staple gun. Not a happy moment. I had to drive in each staple with the hammer, and since my fingers were split from the wet and cold and wrapped in duct tape, holding the wee staples was not easy. The process tested my patience as well as the creative limits of my profanity.

One night, before the shelter was finished, the wind shifted, and a ferocious storm roared in out of the southwest. My exposed tent shuddered in the gale, and I wondered whether I might be sucked up and hurled over the Andes into Argentina. At first light, when I checked to be sure the in-

flatable boat was still safely anchored, my heart sank. The wind had flipped it in the night, and my outboard motor was submerged in the sea. For a month, I'd been working in the cold, wind and rain, had rarely seen the sun and was now stuck on this tiny island with no boat, no way to collect driftwood to heat the shelter, catch fish or explore the surrounding land and sea. It was one of the lowest moments of



Kull kayaked to a nearby island and took this photo (ABOVE) from the top of a hill. His cabin was on the far side of the middle island, which is 150 kilometres by water from Puerto Natales, the nearest settlement. All around him were the fiords, peninsulas and channels of Chile's southern coast.

the year. I was exhausted from long preparations, travel and setting up camp, and this seemed too heavy a load to carry. I'm pretty stubborn and didn't consider calling the Chilean Navy to pick me up, but I felt beaten down and depressed at the thought of staying on this wet, windy coast, hunkered down in a damp, unheated shelter through the long, grim winter months ahead.

I HAD TO DO SOMETHING, so I put on chest waders and went to look at the overturned boat. Walking on the slippery rocks was a challenge. I lost my lower right leg 17 years ago in a motorcycle crash, and while I get around pretty well on my prosthesis, I tend to lose my balance easily. But the tide was out, and I managed to right the boat and rescue the motor. In the outboard repair manual, I found a wonderful gift: a section titled “Submerged engines.” I'm no mechanic, but following the instructions, I cleaned the electric system, cylinders, carburetor and fuel pump. I pulled the starter cord and felt a huge sense of relief when the motor fired up. With frequent tinkering, I managed to keep it running all year, but it was never right, and each time I left the island, I wondered whether I'd make it back. I always carried a survival kit containing





I separated all my food into 12 bundles and divided each bundle into four one-week portions to last the year.

warm clothes, food, tarp, kayak and satellite phone to call for rescue in an absolute emergency.

It took two months to build a comfortable camp: to cut brush and clear the beach of rocks; to construct the shelter and outhouse, table, shelves and bed; to hook up the wood and propane stoves, rain-collection system, wind generator and solar panels, batteries and lights; to fill mudholes with gravel.

Another task was sorting and measuring food. Deciding how much to take was one side of the equation; sticking to



Sunny days at his kitchen table (ABOVE), which also served as his desk, workbench and fish-filleting station, came with a glorious view of the Andes Mountains (OPPOSITE TOP). Geese (BELOW) arrived in summer to breed and raise their goslings.

planned rations was the other. I kept my menu simple, avoided canned goods and mostly brought foods that wouldn't spoil during the year. Rice, beans, oatmeal, and fresh fish were my staples. I also had pasta, dehydrated soup, dried fruit, lentils to sprout for greens, enough flour to have a small piece of fry bread each day, some potatoes, onions, garlic, cheese, bacon, coffee, tea, powdered milk, sugar, honey, chocolate, popcorn, spices, oil, lard, hot sauce and three bottles of booze. I separated everything into 12 bundles, and I divided a bundle into four one-week portions. I even drew lines on the cheese and slabs of bacon, which I kept from spoiling by hanging in the open air in my porch. Fishing and fetching firewood were ongoing activities throughout the year, whenever wind and tide permitted.

Island time, like all time, had two facets: cyclic rhythms and linearity. After five months, I put away my watch and, later, the calendar. I lived with the shifting spill of light on mountains and sea, the ebb and flow of moon and tide, the changing lengths of day and night, the call of migrating



birds and the fall of winter snow. I don't know how many hours I slept, especially in winter, but often, still meditating, thinking or writing, I would look out the window and be surprised by dawn glowing on the eastern peaks. During long stretches when clouds hid the sun, I could locate myself in time only at dawn and dusk. After a while, I seldom thought about clock time, except on days I went to fish, fetch firewood or explore and had to link my movements with the tide.

IT'S UNTENABLE TO CREATE sharp, linear divisions in experience, but I did sense different stages during the year. At first, I focused on physical survival in the difficult and unfamiliar environment. Early on, while sneaking up on a sea otter for a closer look, I fell on the slick rocks and tore the rotator cuff muscles in both shoulders. That hurt and kept hurting for months, especially after strenuous activity. Exercises became a regular part of my days and nights and helped to stretch and heal the muscles. In the cold and wet, arthritis settled into my hands.

I also had to pull a tooth. I'd known when I began the retreat that my teeth could be a problem but had decided to take a chance. In April, one of my upper canines started to trouble me. I nursed it with saltwater rinses, but finally, in August, it seriously abscessed. It was impossible to leave the tooth in my mouth, but I didn't want to abandon solitude to visit a dentist. The only solution was to pull it myself.

I e-mailed my friend Patti Kuchinsky, my primary contact and a nurse, to ask for advice and tell her I was scared of the coming pain. She wrote back to say that people have



Kull eventually stopped keeping track of time, allowing himself to work, sleep and eat when he felt like it. Occasionally, he says, he'd be absorbed in a task and look up, surprised, to see the sun rising over the Andes. His creative outlets included carving (ABOVE) and photography. He says this image of a "stone totem" (LEFT) was created by wind, water and an active imagination.



My self-image as an explorer seemed suspect to me.
It's not easy to be both adventurous *and* neurotic.

pulled their own teeth for centuries, to stop being such a wuss, take some antibiotics and painkillers, clean the gum with hydrogen peroxide, tie the tooth to the door, slam the door and get on with my life. (In the meantime, she told me later, she was actually pretty upset.) This was excellent advice, except that I didn't have a door — at least not one heavy enough to slam. So I went to the beach at low tide and found the perfect tooth-pulling rock — just the right shape and weight — tied it to my tooth, leaned over and told myself to drop the rock. Nothing happened. “Drop the rock, Bob. Bob, it's time to drop the rock.” I never did drop the rock. Just couldn't bring myself to do it. I finally tied the string to a table leg and pulled up with my neck muscles. In the end, actually pulling the tooth was less painful than had been all my worrying about it.

NOW AND THEN, I had to siphon fuel from a 55-gallon drum into smaller tanks for the outboard. I dislike siphoning. I'm bad at it and often get gas in my mouth, so I tend to put it off. One day, I was reading a philosopher I'd struggled with for years, and one particular sentence made no sense, so I read it again. It still made no sense, and my head began to hurt. I paused to watch the light on the water, breathe deeply and relax. I read the sentence once more, and again, my brain tight-

On an exposed point near his cabin, Kull installed a wind generator and solar panels (ABOVE) to power his laptop and lights. But the gales were often so fierce that the generator howled like a banshee and he would have to short it out to stop the noise. Even though the sky was often overcast, the solar panels proved a more reliable energy source.

ened into a painful knot. Then a lovely and very sensible thought drifted across my mind: “I'd rather suck gas through a hose than read any more of this crap.” And I've not read that philosopher since.

Little by little, my attention settled on reading, thinking and psychological self-analysis. Throughout the winter, inner conflict troubled me and often pitted my desire to see a distant glacier against my fear of capsizing in a sudden storm or being left adrift by motor failure. My self-image as an explorer seemed suspect to me. It's not easy to be both adventurous *and* neurotic at the same time. In early spring, I finally set out on the 300-kilometre journey and, after being turned back once by a storm, reached the glacier. As I edged slowly through the thousands of small icebergs that had calved into the sea, I was joined by a pod of dolphins. There, I felt truly otherworldly — far even from the middle of nowhere. And there, too, I recognized what had called me so strongly: the mystic blue of glacier ice.



I spent more and more time watching and visiting with my neighbours, the birds, dolphins and sealions.

DURING THE LAST THREE MONTHS, I gave up reading and writing, for the most part, and focused on exploring depths of experience beneath the reach of language. I spent hundreds of hours sitting quietly (at least physically, although at times the inside of my mind was noisier than downtown Vancouver) and listening to the sounds of rain and sea and my own breathing. Sitting meditation was an important part of my daily routine, and the simple tasks of splitting wood, cooking and fishing became moving meditations. I spent more and more time watching and visiting with my neighbours — the birds, dolphins, sea lions and otters that make their homes there.

The wind was unpredictable, a danger, a threat and an adversary. One of the challenges and opportunities of solitude is the absence of easy escape. Dark shadows, usually avoided, act as gatekeepers to be met and embraced on the inward journey. Doubt and despair are there to be explored. As solitude deepened, I sometimes lost perspective, and the wind filled my mind with fear and anger. I knew that the only way out was further in, and I daily went to the exposed point of the island to be hammered and perhaps shaped in ways I couldn't know. I watched the sea crashing against rock and questioned why I didn't sense the same wild freedom in my own relationship with the wind. I began to see that while I accepted their spontaneous interaction, I tried to control how the

Edging through a field of ice chunks calved from a nearby glacier one day, Kull encountered a pod of dolphins (ABOVE). Later, he saw them frequently in the basin in front of his cabin. Being alone helped him realize that humans are part of nature too and that "scientific study is one of the ways the world becomes conscious of itself."

world touched me. I held myself apart as a tightly defended entity instead of delighting in the endless dance of our common existence.

The belief that we are separate from and can somehow own and control the Earth is a very strange illusion. We are participants, not possessors. This 55-year-old man that I call "me" is also a natural manifestation of the universe I cannot own. How odd to believe that the conscious "I," a fragment of the whole body-mind process, has the power to control sensation, thought and the mysterious pulse of emotional cycles. My struggle to reject those aspects of me I disliked was painful and futile. Like the outer storms of wind and rain, my inner weather was often turbulent.

Slowly, the wind changed from adversary to teacher and, finally, friend. I watched as condors soared the windy sky and wished that I could play there too. I built a kite from clear plastic, attached it to my fishing rod and spun out 200 metres of line. With a huge tail for stability, it swooped and



As the year passed, Kull says his cabin became more and more of a refuge, "my little secure spot." So he began forcing himself to spend more time outside, sleeping outdoors and exploring the area. Exactly a year after his arrival, he climbed a hill for this final self-portrait (ABOVE).

lunged in the gusting wind and fought like a fish in the sea. At times transparent, it vanished into the swirling clouds, and I was sky-fishing for the wind, a kite my lure.

As my vision cleared, I began to recognize how much time and energy I often waste denying the world as it is. Our culture is so focused on progress, we frequently don't experience our own lives just as they are here and now. But the world will always be exactly as it is in each moment. Our dreams and ideals are also of this moment. Everything changes, no matter how slowly, and we can act to alleviate suffering. Yet if our desires and plans for the future are not balanced with acceptance and joy in this moment, just as it is, our lives go un-lived and are wasted.

As the inner boundary between what I accepted and rejected in myself softened, so did the outer boundary cutting me off from the rest of the world. There were times of surrender and release into the flow of life and death, times when the conceptual separation of the world into living and non-living lost its power. As I relaxed my defences and allowed myself to be more vulnerable to the shifting patterns of inner and outer energy, I sometimes received gifts of joy and wonder. In those moments everything came vibrantly alive and was filled with spirit and bathed in love. There was, finally, peace, and I could see that the world, including me and everyone else, is and always has been sacred.

A YEAR AND 10 DAYS after it had dropped me off, the Chilean Navy brought my friend Patti to spend a month on the island. I wasn't anxious to break my solitude but was glad to share my world with her. I'd

seen people just once, eight months before, when three National Park Authority employees came to see whether the lunatic gringo was likely to survive the winter. I'd used the satellite phone only to send monthly check-in e-mails and to request technical or medical advice; my support team had agreed not to write anything about personal or world events. Patti expected our first week to be very quiet, but I had so much to say I couldn't shut up. She also had news. A friend and spiritual mentor had died the previous May, and the World Trade Center had been bombed in September.

The day after Patti arrived, the outboard finally died. We spent two weeks getting to know each other again, wandering in the kayak and shooting video with the camera she'd brought. Then it was time to tear down the shelter. I felt like

a Buddhist monk who creates a mandala on the ground with coloured sand and immediately wipes it out to acknowledge the impermanence of all things.

The park warden had suggested I leave the shelter as a refuge for others, and I was tempted. It was painful to destroy the home I'd worked so hard to build. At times during the year, I'd felt deep joy and peace while sitting at night in my shelter. It touched my heart differently than did the non-human world outside, but I came to see that the table, stove and coffee cup were as sacred and alive as the trees, mountains, sea and sky not because human ingenuity had created them but simply because of their presence in the world.

But I didn't want to make it easy for someone else to come there. It had been difficult for me, and I believed it should stay that way. Mostly, though, I didn't want to extend our human hegemony. Too often, we turn wild places into named recreation areas with trails and campsites. I arrived as a visitor and stayed as a guest. On leaving, I wanted to give the sea, the sky and the mountains back to themselves and to the beings that live there. I wanted the island to remain unnamed.

I was too tired to feel much sorrow the day we left. I had work waiting for me: a Ph.D. dissertation to write and images and stories to share. My inner work would continue too. The realization that all is sacred can be difficult to live with. It takes practice to open the heart and mind to life as it actually is wherever I am. To remember that if there is Spirit in solitude, so, too, in a crowd; if my shelter was sacred, so, too, the city. ♦

Bob Kull is now back in Vancouver writing his doctoral dissertation at the University of British Columbia. For more on his journey into solitude, visit his website (bobkull.org).

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