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## Human Traces



The marine biologist and writer, Rachel Carson once wrote ....“In every outthrust headland, in every curving beach, in every grain of sand there is the story of the earth.”

And every so often, like the notes or lyrics from a song, they remind us acutely of a place or time. This was the case in South India and a few days spent on a beach. The hype had been palpable and unequivocal so I set off enthusiastically along the dusty trail from its nearby village crossing the golden strand heading for the small rocky promontory just before sunset. The view from the top was all you would expect - dusk reflected in lapping waves, palm trees waving their farewells and the ‘Om’ shaped curve of sand leading away down the indented coastline. And then I noticed a plastic water bottle stuffed neatly into a crack in the rocks ... then another and another.

On closer scrutiny there were probably 30 - 40 bottles crushed and pressed into every nook and cranny like inlaid jewels. Beach litter is nothing new in the grand scheme of our innate inability to, 'leave nothing but footprints' but these wanton and deliberate actions seemed especially vile.

Traces of our movements, beliefs and existence are not always so negative. Frequently they are markers which help us to understand and maybe accept a landscape or culture for what they are or have been. Look no further than some of the great land artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, Nancy Holt and Tony Plant all of whom working with both the fleeting and permanent elements of the landscape. Much of my work as a documentary and travel photographer revolves around human impact on the environment and the relationship - good and bad, we have with our surroundings. Documenting my own early climbing expeditions and subsequent projects for the Royal Geographical Society, Earthwatch and Coral Cay Conservation not only gave me a real sense of purpose in my photography, but gave me access, knowledge and experience not found in books or googling. Journeys to Kyrgyzstan and Ladakh in North West India, in particular following in the footsteps of Central Asian traders and pilgrims, built on the foundations of what interested me about landscape and the people who inhabited them.



Some of these trails, crossings and pathways are still in use as trade routes or transhumance thoroughfares. More have been morphed into hiking routes or in the case of Ladakh, the old caravanserais are permanent army encampments in expectation of insurgents from neighbouring Pakistan and China.

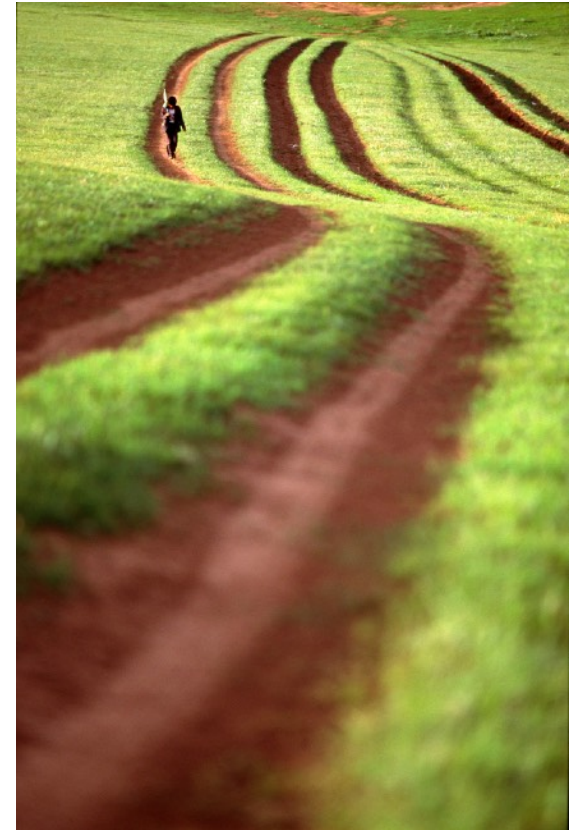
For many years, travel magazines and brochures would adorn their covers with images of sumptuous, natural empty landscapes as a legitimate means of inviting in prospective travellers. No humans here, no cairns, no way markers .... Much of the last decade has witnessed a sea change in representation where the traveller or their presence is now front and centre allowing the viewer to imagine themselves there. There was and still is a constant demand for these images from picture researchers and editors alike. Add to this the explosion of social media where a huge emphasis is placed on the 'photographer' being an essential part of the image (can't bring myself to use the word 'selfie'), and you have a situation where the human element is loud and clear and there is no room for the landscape to breathe or exist in its own splendour.





Many photographers and visitors alike decry the development of destinations without realising that they are or have been a part of that development. Undoubtedly the increase in visitors and lack of sensible management has had a detrimental environmental effect on some locations. It is a dilemma ... we discover new places, we visit, we document, we display, we publish, we move on.

It would be disingenuous to try and compare these current trends to those of cave painters inscribing their lives on walls or what remains after nomadic communities have moved on to the next part of their landscapes. Their attitudes and lifestyles were infinitely more compatible to the environment they inhabited but there is a comparison in how human and many other animal species have consumed and moved on.



We are everywhere now .... humans that is. And we leave our mark in no uncertain terms. Some say that we are the dominant species, although 10 quintillion insects might beg to differ. We have walked, developed and consumed the planet and might well be on the cusp of irreversible change. Yet thankfully, we still manage to find moments of solitude in the natural world which feed the soul and inspire us to be creative. It could be the simple process of making a record of that place to remember or share. It might have helped clear your mind allowing ideas to form which you take back into busy lives. In 1854, native American, Chief Seattle coined the phrase, "Take only memories, leave nothing but footprints" as part of a speech highlighting the concession of native lands to the settlers. I feel it is an adage which has equal if not more resonance today than 160 years ago as we continue to explore, photograph and ask questions about how we exist in this unique environment.

