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Cathartic Returns to Morocco: Mark Apel, from Peace Corps to Farmer-to-Farmer

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Upon hearing the words “Hamdullahwainshallah,” Mark Apel is transported as if in a time capsule to the many times he and Yossef Ben-Meir, President of the High Atlas Foundation (HAF), uttered them in gratitude for the food set before them or in hope for something good to come of their efforts as Peace Corps Volunteers. “It makes you more mindful of the moment,” he remarked in a recent interview conducted by Yossef for HAF.

Mark was born in France, son of an airman, whose family returned to the U.S. where he grew up in a suburb of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Two months after graduation from Penn State in 1982, he joined the Peace Corps and came to Morocco. There, he was able to use his degree in environmental resource management and specialization in wildlife management as a fisheries volunteer. He had originally aspired

to be a veterinarian, but his keen interest in wildlife, parks, and protected areas led him to this more holistic discipline.

Initially having applied for a position in sub-Saharan wildlife management, he was surprised to be offered the position in Morocco, a country about which he knew little. Yet, he accepted the offer right away because he was eager to serve. This involved two-and-a-half months of rigorous fisheries training in Oklahoma. "It was like boot camp, pretty much under the direction of an autocrat," he recalled. However, he acknowledged that it instilled a good sense of self-reliance and ability to figure things out and institute a good program in Morocco. He added, "Compared to that training, though, the language and cross-cultural training once I arrived was a piece of cake."



After two years as a fisheries volunteer in Ouarzazate, when, just as Mark was prepared to leave, he was made aware of the need for a wildlife volunteer by Youssef Alaoui, an engineer with the High Commission of Water and Forests. He remembered that his "ears perked right up" upon this news, and he vowed, "If you guys get a parks and wildlife program going here, I'll stay," knowing that this was another two-year commitment. As a result, he became part of the very first cohort of volunteers to serve in wildlife, a field that was still nascent in Morocco in the 1980s. About the opportunity, he humbly stated, "I was in the right place at the right time."

When Yossef asked during the HAF interview whether Mark could offer any explanation for the tendency in Morocco for things to fall into place just at the right time or just when needed, to this, he replied that he frequently thinks about this notion because, as he put it, "It has actually manifested that way multiple times in my career," including the position he currently enjoys as Environmental Coordinator with Cochise County in Arizona. He explained, "If we put a certain amount of psychic energy into creating our destinies, especially if it's in the service of others or contributing to the world in a way, it just happens. I have felt very blessed over the years in that way."

This is also how he ended up in Arizona, some years after returning from his Peace Corps work in Morocco. His first position there was working for the Nature Conservancy on a nature preserve. He remarked, "It's a matter of visualizing in your own mind what you would like to be

doing.” Coming out west with a new wife into a very remote area was a major shift in thinking, and it required adapting to living conditions very unlike the urban life of Philadelphia, yet not too dissimilar from the circumstances of life in TassaOuirgane in the High Atlas Mountains.

During his second two-year commitment in the Peace Corps, Mark was given the freedom to shape the new program and to choose the subject of his projects. He selected the Takherkhort Reserve for the mouflon sheep, concentrating all his efforts on compatibility between the people who lived in TassaOuirgane and the conservation and protection of the mouflon in the reserve. Disappointingly, it did not manifest as he would have liked at the time. Though he was able to secure a grant for that purpose, the local government would not give permission for the project because of a history of water disputes with the outside authorities and fears of being taken advantage of. He is grateful, though, that it is happening now through the High Atlas Foundation and an eco-lodge that is there.

By 1986, Mark was ready to return to the U.S. He chose to attend graduate school at Ohio University, which had a high concentration of former Peace Corps volunteers. He found this experience very gratifying. He was able to secure a position with the National Parks service despite a six-month delay due to a federal hiring freeze. He describes that moment as “the launching pad” for his career. His responsibilities were in the Wild and Scenic River Program of the Mid-Atlantic States region studying the Great Egg Harbor River in southern New Jersey. “People think of New Jersey as this industrial state. But, in south Jersey, it is very rural and can be very wild, and you get back on these little rivers and tributaries, canoeing or kayaking, and it really is an amazing place.” That position also introduced him to a lot of other people in the conservation and environmental world. He had the opportunity to go to conferences, including an Open Space one in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Seeing the places and meeting the people there convinced him that he could live out in the Southwest. Arizona and New Mexico, he feels, are very similar environmentally even if they are not so politically and culturally.

In 1994, Mark became an environmental consultant in a small Arizona town on the San Pedro River, and that is when he met Yossef for the first time. With each visit, Mark’s relationship to Morocco has continued

to grow in a “deep and abiding love and respect for the people of Morocco,” though this has taken time. He has enjoyed witnessing and hearing of subsequent generations of Peace Corps Volunteers who have devoted their services to engaging communities in environmental education and park conservation. “To come back and contribute to that as a trainer was satisfying.”

This relationship eventually drew Mark back to Morocco as a Farmer-to-Farmer Volunteer with HAF. Though there had been some factors, such as the treatment of women, that put him in a frame of mind to be ready to leave Morocco at the end of his Peace Corps work. Serving in this new capacity with F2F, he has been heartened by notable cultural shifts, HAF’s women’s empowerment training, and the women on staff. “That is really going to be the salvation of our planet.”

The work with the Farmer-to-Farmer program gave him the chance to return and finish the work he felt he had left unfinished in TassaOuirgane. The president of their village association expressed gratitude for Mark’s work on grafting in the fruit tree nursery and work with the community to protect the agricultural fields near the river and the gabion walls against erosion. Mark noted, “It was a privilege for me to be able to come back and try to affect some good service and help them anyway I could. I feel that I accomplished more in the two months I spent there with HAF in the F2F Program than in a year and a half when I volunteered in that village with the Peace Corps. It was very satisfying to be able to go back and have a do-over.”

“But I don’t think anything has cemented my abiding appreciation of Morocco and its people than my coming back in 2017 and 2018 as a Farmer-to-Farmer Volunteer with the High Atlas Foundation, and now volunteering again virtually in 2020 . There were some amazing cultural and social transformations that have been taking place in Morocco that really just astounded me,” Mark reflected.

During one of his F2F assignments, Mark wrote an article that focused on women and trees. In it, he describes how women’s empowerment is the solution, not just for gender equality, but for the entire world’s sustainability. The article, and the process behind it, offered him both an epiphany and, with it, some long sought after closure as he recognized positive efforts pushing forward toward progress for the

greater good of the global, and Moroccan, society. "HAF and so many others around the world recognize that empowering women is the key to salvation of the planet. The article was cathartic for me and satisfying knowing that others felt the same way."

For years, Mark had felt incomplete in his feelings regarding Morocco, stemming in some way from the difficulties experienced by Moroccan women. Then his F2F experience embodied advancing tree planting and women's cooperatives. Today, as Yossef reflected in the interview, there is now a tree nursery managed by young women in TassaOuirgane village, where Mark served as a Peace Corps Volunteer years ago. This village, and the nursery, is now the location of a new project funded by UNDP as a direct result of an analysis that Mark completed over multiple visits as an F2F Volunteer decades after his first service there. This full-circle could not have been planned better or more poetically. That such a sense of accomplishment was established after so many years of dedication to the people of this very specific place goes to show that good things happen, but with time.

His message to returned Peace Corps Volunteers who are contemplating a return to service through the Farmer-to-Farmer program, is simply: "Don't hesitate. Just do it." Though Mark himself at first hesitated at returning for a shorter-term service in 2017, not knowing whether he would have sufficient support and skills to navigate his assignment and daily life, his fears quickly subsided as soon as HAF-F2F team members Hassan and Said picked him up at the airport. "I felt like I was home again."

Mark highly encourages RPCVs to apply to serve as F2F volunteers in Morocco with HAF: "This idea of former Peace Corps Volunteers coming back to Morocco with HAF as F2F Volunteers is a wonderful thing. You do not have to be a farmer. It is much more than that. I came back and was able to conduct an assessment of sustainable indicators and interview members of women's cooperatives. These are opportunities that I never had in the Peace Corps – to sit with women and ask them questions, and that they felt open and free to say what they wanted to say. It was an incredible experience." The F2F opportunity might also fulfill the arc of other RPCVs' experiences and relationships regarding Morocco, just as it has with Mark's.

Ellen Hernandez is an assistant professor of English at Camden County College in New Jersey, USA. Katie Bercegeay is the Director of Development at the High Atlas Foundation, and a former Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco. Mark Apel is in the photo below, second from the left (HAF, 2018).

By Ellen Hernandez and Katie Bercegeay

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