

2019 North America Leadership Tour Report

Stepping out into a North American winter is physically painful in so many ways... from slipping on a sidewalk covered in ice thicker than the concrete itself to forgotten hats and consequent blue ears, every day I found myself questioning how people do a whole season of this. Theoretically the cold claims more lives than the hot and based on my brief encounter with the minus 30s, I believe it. Perhaps a spoonful of global warming may give the people up there a break... less salt ruined shoes, less flight delays, more vitamin D uptake. Maybe Trump has a point...

A lengthy trip deserves a lengthy write up, and I feel obliged to report back on how your sponsorship has benefited me. Someone told me to find the thing that makes you feel most alive early in life. Find it and harness it. And through the experiences and people I met on this North America Leadership tour, I can safely say that I am on my way to doing just that.

I came to this continent because of its influence. I wanted to peel back the outer layers and expose it in the flesh. To ask it to define one word – change, and to learn how to measure it. Russians or not, Trump got to where he is because people voted for him. Discontent is out there. All he did was listen. And I guess over the space of a month I did the same. People voiced opinions that I fundamentally disagreed with. And I stayed silent because they had done their research and were just as worthy of their views as I was. Speaking louder doesn't necessarily make your voice heard and in many cases I was a fly on the wall, assessing, deconstructing, understanding. Only in one scenario was I a lion and that was in the presence of a baseless claim. When people couldn't back up what they were saying, that's when I went in for the metaphorical kill. Because it is so easy to take words as gospel these days. We forget that the who, what, when, why and how is just as relevant now as it was when we were kids.

I was in Washington D.C. for Trump's State of the Union address. His tie was skewed but surprisingly his words were not. They were scripted, persuasive and because of that, his words created the most dangerous speech he has given this year. Not surprising though was his lack of concern for the environment. Anti-trump propaganda has slogans saying "stop building walls and start building longer tables" – a statement I will carry forward with me and hold close.

How would I describe the six major cities I travelled to across Mexico, USA and Canada? One word – Turbulent. But each in their own ways.

Mexico served as a catalyst in trying to understand the broad complexities of our world and though I will never be able to crack that nut, the insights and perspectives I have gained over my time there seriously challenged my definition of progress.

Climate change is my priority... but for Mexico it is not. For years it has stumped me as to how some countries fail to recognise that climate change is the single most important challenge that we face, and I have always put it down to greed. Where short term gain is prioritised over long term consequences.

But in the case of development, of which Mexico is very much still on the steep part of the curve, one must consider the amount of fossil fuels that have been burned to get places such as the UK, USA and even NZ to where we are today. Does that not make us hypocrites when criticising their unsustainable practices?

Diving deeper, this earthquake prone country has a lot on its plate. It may be the 15th largest economy in the world but it is flooded with refugees, has a poverty rate of 42% and a government that lacks transparency. Corruption within Mexico is so deeply ingrained in everyday life that it has set the country on a never ending downwards spiral that is almost impossible to stand up against. It is because of this corruption that 98% of crime and rights violations persist without conviction.

So in the face of all this, how does one bring forward ice melt, sea level rise, extreme weather and ocean acidification to a country weighed down with immediate social challenges. How do you defy gravity and stop climate change from sliding down the totem pole?

It pains me to say this, but I have no answer.

My time spent in the United States pulled into question its position as leader of the free world. Political polarisation is clear cut and in your face, following you wherever you go. It highlighted to me the importance the role of a diplomat and fostering international unity in a time like this. Globalisation takes advantage of the connectivity of citizens around the world and is an ocean that we all swim in thanks to the digital age. It cannot be carved out into rivers, but the USA is swimming back to shore. The recent challenges have seen a global trend towards deglobalisation and thanks to Trump and Brexit, these trends have been put on steroids.

Time spent at the United Nations and Harvard opened my eyes to the pace of change. It is slow. So slow in fact that in countries like the United States it is almost invisible. I hoped that I would walk away with a simplified process for quantifiable change in the projects that I lead in New Zealand – the kind of process where I could add the ingredients and let simmer, but if anything, I have walked away even more confused. Prior to this tour I thought the biggest environmental challenges our globe faced were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought thirty years of good science would address these problems. However, upon return, I realise the top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy. And to fix these problems we need a spiritual and cultural transformation, and no one seems to know how to do that.

Returning home, I am more determined than ever. In my head, this proposed transformation starts by getting people out in the environment and showing them what they have to lose. Nothing matches the power of a natural moment.... Snorkelling for the first time, an albatross flying over your head, summiting that peak. Times like these achieve what no documentary, speech or news article can. They bestow in us a sense of ownership and therefore responsibility in protecting it. I want the word kaitiakitanga to be as widespread and understood as the word kia ora.

Thank you for your support in getting me to where I am, the trip may be over but my passion and drive only grows. I took video footage throughout the trip and created a short film which can be viewed on youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWhrzV63zbE>) and have photos I am able to provide on request. If there is anything I can do to pay your generosity forward please let me know.

Ngā mihi,

Anne-Sophie Page