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Rita Riewerts, the sun catcher from Forks of the Salmon

Archaeologists are agreed that ancestors to all us humans, prior to spreading across Europe and beyond, originally lived in Africa. Perhaps this provides one reason why 'the Dark Continent', despite much-touted problems, exerts such a strong pull on people? Irrespective of their reason, visitors to Africa are typically confronted with a stark contrast: compared to most Africans, even poor North Americans are pretty well off by traditional metrics of economics. Reading about this disparity, seeing it on television, or hearing about it in a classroom is different than experiencing it.

As a young 21-year-old freshly minted veterinary scientist from Forks of the Salmon, Rita Riewerts first traveled to Africa in 2006 to study unusual arboreal



mammals, called lemurs. What she saw of the conditions in the lives of Africans around her, however, changed her path forever. "I was really surprised at the lack of healthcare, and the lack of clean drinking water ... I also noticed the problem of in-door inhalation of smoke." As has been the case for many other visitors, for Rita there was to be an important difference between *visiting* Africa for the first time, and *returning to* Africa. When she returned on many subsequent trips, it was to install solar ovens.

Sparkly Rita Riewerts, the sun catcher from Forks of the Salmon.

Of course, lots of people are always talking about helping Africa. So what makes Rita's non-profit Sun Catchers Project (SCP) different? While Rita acknowledges that SCP is "coming in from the outside", she explains that the organization got off the ground by "first just asking people what their problems are".

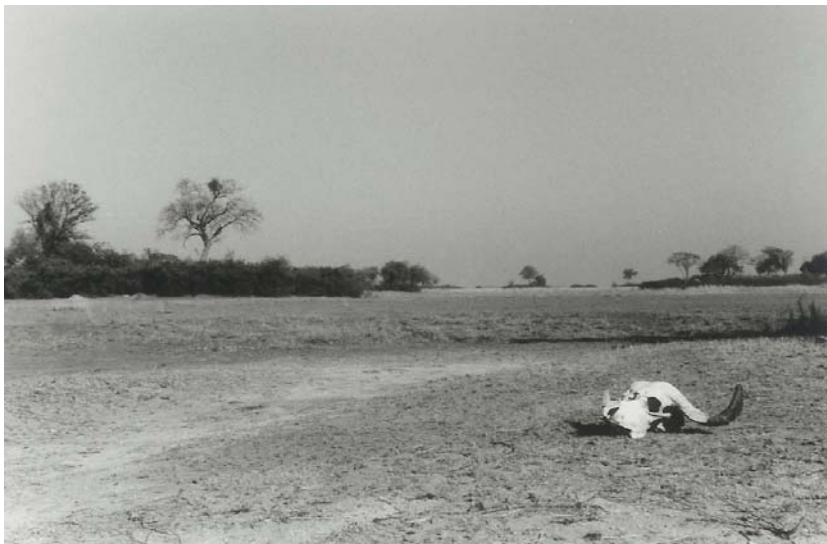
With all her travelling, Rita still likes her family home in Forks of the Salmon best. "I want to live there all the time!" Baking cookies on the banks of the Salmon



River, tucked between the Marble and Trinity Mountains, "I had been exposed to solar ovens". Rita hit on the idea that solar ovens could be used to boil contaminated drinking water, without the need to hack into dwindling forests for firewood. "Solar ovens – that's the way I want to go."

Rita's simple solar ovens can make a big difference.

"We have all the right solutions," believes Rita. But why don't Africans just make their own solar ovens? "They don't have access to glass! Glass is maybe the hardest component to get." Africa, in other words, lacks the capital to invest in its own abundant sunshine. While European interests are gearing up to invest hundreds of billions of dollars on capturing concentrated African sunshine and transmitting it north across the Mediterranean for electricity, rural African



families have to rely on intrepid altruists like Rita for access to the simplest solar technology.

While the ground hunkers for rain, seas of sand bring death to those living on the shores of expanding African deserts.

The Quagmire of African Poverty

So why, with African countries now ostensibly independent of European colonialism for half a century, is the continent still so poor today? All kinds of explanations have been given to this simple-sounding question: Africa is poor because it lacks resources. Africa is poor because of tropical diseases. Africa is poor because of its climate. Africa is poor because of western exploitation. Africa is poor because of corrupt leadership. Pointing to some of the very rich people she saw in big African cities, Rita believes part of the answer lies in the tremendous inequities within African countries themselves. "I think a lot of people there are exploited." Whilst saying this, Rita thinks specifically of South Africa, where wealth is still strongly divided along racial lines. "South Africa was the hardest place to visit. Sometimes, it was hard to breath. You could just feel it.



At times I could walk down a street and cry. I felt it most in South Africa, but I believe it happens in Tanzania and Kenya as well."

Namibia, on Africa's west coast, suffers from world's widest divide between rich and poor.

Rita is currently widening her capabilities by attending nursing school. Is this, then, what her future holds? "This is just a plan. Life changes." Indeed it does. And, for hundreds of families benefiting from Rita's ovens, it has likely changed for the better.

You can read more about Rita's work on the Sun Catchers Project website at <http://www.suncatchersproject.org>.