



From São Paulo to Sayward: Travels of a Trainee

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Bernardo in the process of cold acclimation. George Lake Hatchery, Vancouver Island.

Photo: Judy Knutson.

Bernardo Sardão was 22 years old and tired. He had traveled more than 24 hours from São Paulo, Brazil, to Victoria, B.C., including an eight-hour layover in Toronto. I picked him out instantly at the airport, slight and slumped beside a backpack nearly as big as he was. Despite his exhaustion, his smile was door-opening and unmistakably Brazilian. It was too late for a hotel, so we took him home, and he talked non-stop until we shoved him into bed at midnight and went off to reassess the whole situation.

This is how it is with trainees on international projects. For the longest time, they are just names on an email; annoying little collections of dates and qualifications and interests and special needs to be shepherded through the visa system, insured and set up with a training experience that is supposed to make the world a better place. When you meet them, the file becomes human, and everything changes.

Bernardo slept until 3:00 the next afternoon, by which time we had cancelled his hotel reservation and decided to keep him. In two days, this kid from a city of 15 million people would board a bus up the inside coast of Vancouver Island to Campbell River. There, a pickup truck from Stolt Sea Farms would pluck him off the beaten track and deposit him in the town of Sayward for a month. Two hundred people, three pubs, a forest industry employer folding its tents, and a view of Kelsey Bay to die for. Sending him off without a little home cooking suddenly seemed the wrong thing to do.

A Good Candidate

Bernardo was finishing his degree in aquaculture studies, and his supervisors in Brazil judged him a good candidate to bring back first-hand knowledge of aquaculture practices in Canada. Given the right person, a training trip like this can shape an entire career. Good trainees become reliable technical conduits for decades: a major payoff for a small development investment. Bad ones - and every project has its share of those - are a waste of money, or worse. Some spend more time shopping than learning; the occasional one will hoard contacts to advance their own career; and in rare cases, culture shock is so unHINGING the person beats a fast retreat home.

Not Bernardo. He already had eight weeks at a salmon farm in Chile under his belt, and he had reached that posting by bus from São Paulo (if you think that's a piece of cake, look at a map). In Chile, the hatchery manager only had one question for Bernardo: can you blow away seals with a shotgun?

The manager in Sayward was better. Judy Knutson issued him with rain gear, a monstrous pickup truck, and a standing invitation to her home. A local B&B gave him a spectacular deal on room and board, and he went to work scrubbing fry troughs in the hatchery, slinging feed pellets into fibreglass tanks, and generally wringing every possible lesson out of every minute. By the time we drove up to visit three weeks later, he had narrowly missed hitting an elk at 2:00 AM after learning the hard way not to look at a logger's girlfriend in the Salmon Inn, and his eyes were permanently saucered.

In the following three weeks Bernardo did an egg-take at a salmon farm in Tofino, spent a miserable five-day cold snap at an oyster-packing site in Fanny Bay and toured the backstage pumps and filters at the Vancouver Aquarium. He also had discussions with both the David Suzuki and Raincoast Foundations about the environmental risks of fish farming – the thing he really came to B.C. to learn about. He held his own, too, wondering politely what would happen if salmon farming were pushed out of B.C. and simply migrated south to Chile, where he knew environmental controls are practically nonexistent. We Canadians thought that was a pretty good question.

Bernardo is back in Brazil now, and when I was in São Paulo recently it was his turn to meet me at the airport. He was in full job-search mode, shaking off reverse culture shock, fretting about taking a job in the fish-farming business versus investing in a second scientific degree, and impatient to add his voice to the debate on aquaculture in Brazil. I attacked the four-cheese pizza he had bought us and asked, "But it wasn't all perfect, was it? Surely there's something you don't miss about Canada?"

Bernardo gave me the grin. "Only the cold," he said.

[Click here](#) to send Bernardo Sardão an email.
