

ORAL HISTORY 2019-11-01/16

The Hobbit Hole: An Oral History

by Inian on October 1, 2019



Inian welcomes guest writer Regina Kong, Stanford undergraduate student intern of 2019. Regina was tasked with recording an oral history of the “Hobbit Hole.” The “Hobbit Hole” is an affectionate name used to describe the 5-acre parcel upon which Inian Islands Institute makes its home.

The summer I spent at the Hobbit Hole feels as if it were a dream. The previous December, I emailed Zach asking if he needed an intern. I was halfway through my freshman year and beginning to think deeply about what a true education meant and what forms of wisdom could be attained outside of the traditional classroom—questions that I discovered resonated with Inian’s own mission. I hold a life-long love for storytelling, and Zach proposed that I work on an oral history of the Hobbit Hole, something Inian had wanted to do for a while. At Stanford, I had worked with audio narratives but never oral histories. This project, in weaving together themes of history, ecology, anthropology, and above all human connection, seemed absolutely made for me.

Oral histories are a methodology for recording and preserving information not found in written records. Because they are shaped by the contours of an individual’s personal experience and reflections, they allow for the unearthing of rich and often unexpected stories. From the way Zach described the Hobbit Hole to me during the early months of the project, I knew that this oral history would be particularly special. To prepare for such an important undertaking, I took oral history training workshops with Stanford’s Oral

History Program and received invaluable guidance from the wonderful folks at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Oral History Program. I was then fortunate to be awarded the Donald Kennedy Summer Projects Fellowship from Stanford's Haas Center for Public Service. And so I arrived in Alaska for the first time in my life just a few days after the conclusion of my freshman year, stunned by the wild beauty of the landscape and unaware of the full scope of what laid ahead.



By the end of my internship, I formally interviewed over fifteen people, resulting in hours of audio recordings and dozens of photographs. However, nothing could have prepared me for the emotional intensity of the experience. There were moments when I found myself incredibly moved by the insights surfacing from layers of life and memory, and it was difficult not to react. Instead, my role as the interviewer was simply to listen and ask questions when needed. I've since learned that listening is an art form in itself, and I think it's one of the most valuable skills we can have.

What I loved most about this project was how it allowed me to spend time with some of the most amazing people I have ever met in my life. Although the interviews focused on individual memories of the Hobbit Hole's rich history, they also touched upon shared aspects of the human experience. In the months prior, I had prepared a list of questions organized by theme, but I noticed that the conversation flowed best when I let the interviewee decide what they wanted to talk about. Some of my favorite moments were when someone remembered something they thought they had forgotten, or when they stumbled upon a powerful memory that had remained buried until then. Yes, the interviews were and are about the Hobbit Hole and its place as an important anthropological, ecological, and community site, but they are also about life itself, reflecting all the various depths of what it means to be human and what it means to be alive.



I never could have anticipated how many people this project would grow to encompass. I am extraordinarily grateful that the interviews gave me the opportunity to travel throughout the larger Icy Strait region. By engaging the past, present, and future of the Hobbit Hole, the narratives preserved by this project brought members of various communities in dialogue with each other. In a world that's

becoming increasingly polarized, stories have the ultimate power to bring us closer together. We comprehend the world through the stories we tell because they allow us to mediate on what we share rather than what divides us. We just need to have the patience and generosity to fully listen to each other.

As I write this, it is my last evening at the Hobbit Hole before I return home to the Bay Area. In Greg Howe's words, today is a "Jesus day" with stunning blue skies and the kind of temperature that makes you want to stretch out on the lawn in the warm sun. I am thinking back to all the beautiful conversations I had the honor of listening to this summer, as well as the many new experiences that have enriched my time here, such as fishing, foraging, and even swimming in a bed of kelp (which was a lot colder than I anticipated). Living at the Hobbit Hole has truly brought me closer to the land, reminding me to think deeply about how my actions impact the environment.

Before the Hobbit Hole, I never thought I would ever describe a place as enchanting, yet there exists no better word. The Hobbit Hole is definitely enchanting for its incredible natural landscape, yet more so, I believe that it's the people that have made—and continue to make—it such a powerful place. There is a line from the poem "Summer Day" by Mary Oliver that has been lingering in my mind recently: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" Now more than ever, it is a line that feels immensely real and urgent to me. Everything that I experienced throughout this internship guided me to access so many new forms of wisdom and knowledge. I want to extend a huge thank you to everyone who made me realize that both our existence and our relationship to the natural world are gorgeously wild and undeniably precious: I hope to always take those lessons with me throughout my education at Stanford and beyond. This summer has allowed me to understand that we may each carry out our individual lives, yet we are also part of a greater narrative—that of being human and being alive in this vast, beautiful world.

Share this: