

I had kids—a rappelling trip inside the salt domes of the Dead Sea.

In many ways, though, the first trip Glenn and I ever took taught me everything I needed to know about the biodiversity challenge we are facing. In 1998 we went to Brazil, and the trip began with the most unusual interview—locationwise—that I have ever conducted. It was with Nilson de Barros, then superintendent for the environment for the Brazilian state Mato Grosso do Sul, who insisted that we conduct our talk in the middle of the Rio Negro.

Mato Grosso do Sul is at the heart of the Pantanal region, along the border between Brazil, Bolivia, and Paraguay. The Pantanal is the largest freshwater wetland in the world (the size of Wisconsin), and is home to jaguar and a host of endangered species. Glenn and I flew in on a tiny prop plane, which landed in the front yard of the Fazenda Rio Negro, a ranch and nature lodge on the Rio Negro. We then boarded motorized launches and set off for the meeting point at a shallow bend in the river.

The Pantanal nature reserve is Jurassic Park without the dinosaurs. Moving downriver, we passed scores of caimans lounging on the bank, giant river otters bobbing up and down, with egrets, hyacinth macaws, toucans, ibises, marsh deer, spoonbills, jabiru storks, foxes, ocelots, and rheas (relatives of ostriches) all poking their heads through the forest curtain at different points along our route. It was, quite simply, the most stunning cornucopia of biodiversity—plants and animals—that I have ever encountered at one time. De Barros and his team were waiting for us, standing waist-deep in the middle of the Rio Negro.

“First a beer, then a bath, then we talk,” he said, cracking open a can of Skol as the river flowed by.

And I thought *I* had the best job in the world.

The broad threat to biodiversity and ecosystems worldwide today comes from two directions, de Barros explained. The first is from regions where the poorest of the poor are trying to scrape out a living from the natural ecosystems around them. When too many people try to do that,