

Don't anger the ancestors

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Figure 1: Solomons village.

GOOD hygiene when travelling will keep the ancestors happy.

“Toilet paper is banned. It is not allowed!”

I was in East Kwaio, Malaita Province, Solomon Islands, clarifying the rules around staying in Laete'esafi's mountain hamlet.

Laete'esafi, a priest to his people, lives at an altitude of 700 metres in the East Kwaio Mountains (Figure 1) and his ancestors are central to his everyday life.

We were still in Atoifi, a coastal community where we work with the local hospital and surrounding villages on research capacity-building. We were due to depart and were advised that toilet paper was banned because the ancestors said so. Leaves were the new toilet paper.

The trip up into the mountains was physically demanding — walking of course — although in some places the slopes were so steep, it seemed we were often climbing muddy ladders of tree roots, other vegetation and rocks. After nine hours we arrived, exhausted.

The toilet facilities were the most sophisticated I had seen by bush standards.

The male toilet was located on a ridge about 300 metres from the hamlet.

A large rainforest tree with buttress roots formed the base (Figure 2). Between adjacent buttresses, tree fern trunks had been cut and shaped to make an outer wall about a metre high (Figure 3). You defaecated by climbing up onto the solid base of the tree fern trunks with your back to the tree trunk.



Figure 2: Rainforest tree.



Figure 3: Tree trunk toilet.

The view was magnificent and since three adjacent buttressed sections had been used, there was room for companions. The 'toilet paper' grew beside the toilet. To my amazement it was very comfortable to use — soft and moist. Far better than government issue in Australia.

The strict rules around safe disposal of faeces in the ancestor-worshipping society of the East Kwaio mountains align nicely with the biomedical world view.

Ancestors get angry if faeces enter fresh water; an angry ancestor will make people sick. For us, faeces in fresh water means bacterial, viral and parasitic contamination; people get sick.

The traditional view works well in the bush. However, when the traditional people are hospitalised, they don't want to use flush toilets. The ancestors forbid defaecation in fresh water. Hospital health staff who lack understanding of the mountain people's worldview are not sympathetic. So a worldview out of place loses its logic.

Safe defaecation and keeping safe while defaecating are two very important aspects for any traveller.

What can you catch from toilet seats these days? Flush toilets aerosolise faecal bacteria and viruses; these settle on adjacent surfaces. Always flush with the lid closed.

Modern toilets can be hazardous, particularly if they are not regularly cleaned. Travellers should always have a small bottle of alcohol hand wash available.

There is no evidence travellers get infected by micro-organisms from modern toilets, but staying safe while travelling is all about dealing with potential hazards.

Apart from alcohol hand gel I always travel with a few metres of toilet paper. Public toilets, and even private toilets, in developing countries frequently have no toilet paper — and no handy leaves.

In Islamic countries toilets often contain taps or water-filled teapots — it's wash rather than wipe. The issue here is avoiding the water on the floor: another good reason to wear boots or closed shoes.

Are there guidelines for safe disposal of faeces in the bush? Burying faeces is the rule as it prevents access of flies and removes pathogens from an aerobic environment. There appears to be no evidence on how deep. I suspect it is largely irrelevant beyond 5cm depth.

Be wary of informal public defaecation sites. These have the potential to be loaded with pathogens. Squatting in the bush and realising that you are surrounded by remnants of toilet paper or even obvious human deposits is a terrifying experience for the informed.

What does one do in this situation? Use the alcohol hand gel of course. If barefoot, immediately wipe any part of the skin that contacted the soil with alcohol. Alcohol (70%) kills hookworm infective larvae; so hopefully any larvae about to penetrate will be killed.

The really paranoid may think about taking an anthelmintic like albendazole or ivermectin to kill parasitic worms, but these will be ineffective in the early stages. Best to wait and see if adults develop in six weeks.

And when in the bush, never defaecate into fresh water — it angers the ancestors!

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