

Measuring Livelihoods and Environmental Dependence

Methods for Research and Fieldwork

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Chapter 9

Preparing for the Field: Managing AND Enjoying Fieldwork

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Experience is one thing you can't get for nothing.
Oscar Wilde (1854–1900)

Introduction

Embarking on fieldwork is for some the most exciting and challenging part of the research process. How fieldwork is organized, and how researchers and their teams present and conduct themselves, can have a significant impact on data quality and research team members' well-being, happiness and health. Before embarking on fieldwork, considerable preparations should be in place: collection of good background information (Chapter 5); the sampling strategy (Chapter 4); hiring a research team (Chapter 10); and designing and pre-testing questionnaires should be completed (Chapters 6, 7 and 10). Now the time has come to start collecting data. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss practical issues that will help researchers cope with and enjoy fieldwork. This includes suggestions for strategies that can help with navigating challenging political and cultural situations and practical advice on doing fieldwork. Figuring out where to live, what to eat and drink, and how to stay healthy and safe are critical aspects of a productive and positive field experience.

Context matters! The importance of political and cultural context

Rushing to get to the field is a mistake many researchers make. Before setting foot in the village, there is a considerable amount of research and administrative

legwork to be done. In addition to finalizing research instruments, hiring and training a research team, pre testing data collection instruments and selecting study sites, researchers need to learn about the political and cultural context of the study area. First impressions can make a very big difference to success in the field, and preparing carefully before starting fieldwork will have a positive influence on the integrity and quality of the data collected.

Political context

We emphasize three political issues that need attention: (a) understanding formal and informal hierarchies and approval processes; (b) acknowledging the special case of natural resources and issues linked to resource access and use; and (c) knowing the political and economic history of the area (Magolda, 2000; Gubrium and Holstein, 2001; Ergun and Erdemir, 2010).

Understanding formal and informal hierarchies and approval processes

In most countries there are both informal and formal hierarchies and procedures that researchers are advised to observe. Most countries have a research approval process that requires researchers to obtain research permits from a national-level entity prior to undertaking research of any kind. In addition, there might be procedures for obtaining permission to go into the field (for example, getting written permission from the district-level police or military authority in the area). These processes can be very bureaucratic and complex and take several months; leave sufficient time for obtaining approvals before heading to the field. It can be tremendously helpful to have a local collaborator who is familiar with the approval process and who will vouch for your credibility. In many countries, having a local sponsor for your research is required.

Once formal research approval at the national level has been obtained, directly inform people who should be made aware of the research project and fieldwork plans including: provincial or district officials; military outposts; non-governmental organizations (NGOs) undertaking activities related to your research; collaborators and colleagues at academic or national research institutions; natural resource management authorities, and so on. This is beneficial for two reasons. First, important resources or key informants may be uncovered (for example, someone who has digitized village boundaries or a key informant who has moderated disputes over forest resources). Second, making sure that people are aware of the research team's presence and movements in the field should contribute to its relative success and safety. There may be several levels of informal and formal hierarchies to work through before going to the villages where you will conduct your study. For example, in countries with decentralized governance systems, it may be important to make research

objectives known to multiple levels of government officials. Having a letter of introduction that briefly describes the research team leader, the research project and objectives, the research team and the specific areas in which research will take place is a good idea. Letters written by respected in-country collaborators or institutional partners are particularly helpful. Put the letter on official letterhead, leave a space in the salutation line so it can be personalized and make sure to print sufficient copies.

Acknowledging the special case of natural resources and issues linked to resource access and use

Natural resource management is fraught with political complexities including: land redistribution; contested land and forest tenure; unclear or overlapping property rights systems; and conflicts between local resource users and outsiders and/or forestry and other officials. For example, in Bangladesh, land tenure is contested, making questions regarding property rights potentially difficult to broach with communities and households (Box 9.1). It is critical to have knowledge of the study area context, in particular knowledge of conflicts. Erroneous assumptions about access, use, management, distribution, and so on, of natural resources and products can compromise the research team's credibility in the field. Grey literature produced by government agencies, donors and NGOs is often a valuable source of information. Interviewing a diversity of key informants prior to arriving in the field is an important source of knowledge – try to identify a sample of key informants that will provide a diverse set of views, and who are likely to identify issues that might not be highlighted in government, donor or NGO reports. Talking to researchers that have previously worked in the area can also be a useful source of information.

Collecting data regarding illegal activities and navigating relationships between forestry or environment officials and communities are significant challenges associated with collecting valid and reliable data on forest and environmental incomes. Ensuring confidentiality is a critical aspect of successfully collecting complete information. Many forest and environmental goods are harvested illegally, making respondents nervous about revealing if, what and how much were harvested. While in the field, emphasize the aggregation of data to respondents and officials at all levels (from village leaders to district chairmen), respondents should be confident that reported data will never be used to draw attention to particular activities undertaken in their household. A basic understanding of the politics and economics of high value resource extraction beyond the village boundaries is also useful: local officials, high-level politicians, military officials, and so on, might be involved in both legal and illegal extractive activities.

Box 9.1 *Politics surrounding land tenure: Forest officials and their relationship with communities*

Ajjur Rahman

Understanding local dynamics of land tenure and community relations with forest officials are examples of understanding the political context of your field site. Most land in the uplands of eastern Bangladesh is owned by the state – although people use state land for their subsistence needs, they do not have any permanent or long-term rights to the land. This lack of tenure security promotes the practice of shifting cultivation, which is the main driver of deforestation in the area. Weak tenure security also limits access to formal credit, as small farmers cannot supply required collateral, forcing poor farmers to get loans from local moneylenders at high interest rates. This means less investment in good land management practices. This tense situation requires that researchers need to establish good relations with local communities before asking about sensitive tenure issues.

Understanding relations between small farmers and official authorities is also important. In Bangladesh, the Chittagong Hill Tracts Forest Transit Rules (1973) and subsequent administrative orders regulate the harvesting and marketing of timber and other forest products available from private growers. The rules require people to get written permission from government offices before harvesting and transporting forest products, especially marketed timber. As such permits are not issued to small farmers, tree growers are compelled to sell timber to local traders at low prices, discouraging private tree growing. In addition, forestry officials are located in sub-district headquarters, far from the farmer, and have limited understanding of rural livelihoods and constraints. Understanding these relationships is important for the researcher working in this study area: the local forest officer, often among the first people consulted to learn about forest management in the region, is not likely to provide an accurate picture of obstacles to obtaining forest income. Further, if researchers are perceived to be too closely allied with forest officials, if introduced in villages by these officials, local trust may be compromised.

Local perceptions of research team interactions with officials and organizations influence the quality of collected data. Asking local natural resource management officials to introduce the research to village leaders and community members means that the research may automatically be associated with the introducing organization or personnel. Any resentment or hostility against the organization or person could then be directed towards the research.

Households may not want to share information for fear that it will pass to the organization (for example, regarding illegal harvesting activities). If someone to make introductions to village leaders is needed, try to find a government official, local leader or NGO representative who is neutral with respect to natural resource allocation and use.

Knowing the political and economic history of the area

Make sure the research team is familiar with the political and economic history of the study site; political, social and economic relations are often shaped by the history of an area. There is a wealth of information to be picked up in books and articles about almost all countries and regions – search libraries and the internet. Often local printing presses publish books that have a limited distribution outside of the country. Bring history books to the field and ask respondents about major events and find out how the oral histories of elderly people in the village compare with academic accounts of events.

Cultural context

Most researchers are not from the village or area where fieldwork is conducted and are thus perceived as outsiders. Familiarization with local customs and language, and establishing trust early on will help in overcoming potential barriers of entry and encourage greater willingness to share information among respondents.

Understand the culture

Cultural differences are typically related to ethnicity, nationality, age, race, gender, religion, caste and socio-economic status. Respondents may view cultural differences as a threat and be reluctant to give information if they: feel vulnerable to legal action; feel intimidated by the researcher; feel other community members could use the information to further institutional agendas or legitimize social inequalities; have insecurities regarding interviewing across class, gender, race or ethnic lines (Adler and Adler, 2001; Briggs, 2001; Ryen, 2001; Shah, 2004). Researchers need to figure out how to overcome, or at least cope with as many of these potential barriers as possible.

We propose the following list of best practices for demonstrating cultural awareness and overcoming cultural barriers:

- Understand local fears, anxieties and sources of pride.
- Be humble and do not gratuitously display wealth.
- Dress respectfully, a good rule is to be dressed slightly more formally than respondents.

- Address fears and concerns with empathy.
- Work hard to communicate with respondents even if you do not speak their language.
- Train all team members to be culturally aware and avoid stereotypes.
- Match enumerators and respondents by cultural compatibility (for example, language skills and gender issues).
- Use cross-cultural teams, including a gender-balanced enumerator team.

Enumerator training (see Chapter 10) should include sessions on conduct in the field and coping strategies for dealing with uncomfortable situations, such as asking about payment for time spent responding to questionnaires, dealing with conflicts between households in the village and even how to deal with threats of violence. Even when enumerators speak the same language as respondents, there are barriers to overcome.

Establish trust

Data quality and the research team's overall field experience are strongly influenced by the level of trust established with the study villages. Building trust and rapport with respondents means integrating into community life: attending community festivals and sporting events, walking around the community and spending time getting to know families, helping with community projects and maybe even offering to give lessons (for example, English tutoring for students). Establishing trust with all groups is essential, including marginalized people. For example, in some cultures, women are excluded from formal meetings; this should be addressed when requesting village leaders to bring a representative group together for focus group discussions.

Learn the local language

Being able to speak directly with respondents is a tremendous asset. Invest a few weeks or months in intensive language training and learn the basics of greetings and showing gratitude. Knowing a few local proverbs can help break the ice with respondents. Learning enough vocabulary to follow an interview (in other words, agriculture and forestry terminology) is extremely helpful for cueing enumerators to probe further when interesting or unusual responses are given. It is essential to work with enumerators that have a strong command of the local language. Be aware that dialects differ widely. If you are working across a relatively large geographic area with diverse linguistic groups, you should consider having more than one research team. Alternatively, you can hire translators to work with enumerators. Conducting surveys using a translator is a sub-optimal situation. Translation lengthens the time of the interview, reduces the validity and reliability of data (important information is lost in translation),

and puts respondents and enumerators on edge as they both have to work harder to understand the meaning of responses. Body language also tells a lot, such as facial gestures, rapport and demeanour. With a translator, having someone who not only communicates in the local language, but who also understands local conditions, customs, practices, and so on, can make things easier. Finally, be cautious about importing one set of linguistic and cultural assumptions into another when interviewing between cultures. Even within the same culture, meanings that seem clear to the interviewer may not be clear to the respondent.

Be transparent

Make the research process transparent to respondents. They will be naturally curious to know why their village or household was selected for the study. Meeting with community leaders and holding a community meeting that anyone can attend is a good way to inform people of the objectives of the research and how and why they were selected. A random sample of households can also be drawn at such a meeting, demonstrating that household participation is by chance rather than through connections. Respondents may also have questions regarding the confidentiality of the information they provide, how the information will be used and how they will benefit from participating. Be open and clear from the start about the purpose of the research. To ensure transparency:

- Have the lead researcher visit all households to offer an explanation of the research; this will underscore the importance of the survey work and may encourage greater participation and higher quality data collection.
- Offer respondents an opportunity to express concerns or ask questions about the content of questionnaires, the interview process, or how data will be used.
- Conduct interviews in a place that the respondent is comfortable in.
- Acknowledge that the respondent does not have to answer questions that make them uncomfortable.
- Think about the timing and ordering of personal questions.

Several factors influence willingness to participate in a study, including: timing (for example, if it is planting or harvesting season people are busy and may not want to commit time to respond to questionnaires); the level of research fatigue in the study site; whether or not a gift or compensation for participation is offered; and the general level of interest in the research team and purposes. Be respectful of people's time and commitments, through careful planning it is possible to anticipate times or days (for example, holidays) that are not ideal for administering questionnaires.

There is an ongoing debate regarding the practice of giving gifts or money as an incentive to participate in survey research (Lynn, 2001; Wertheimer and Miller, 2008). The general rationale for giving gifts is that people are busy and should be adequately compensated for their time or contribution to a study. Most controversial are cash payments directly to households. The criticism is that directly paying someone to respond to your survey is a type of coercion; scientific integrity may be compromised by commodifying a practice that should be based on altruism. Poverty Environment Network (PEN) researchers were encouraged to give practical gifts (for example, salt, sugar, matches, soap or pencils) to participating households. The general advice was to give a gift valued at roughly the daily wage rate for unskilled labour.

Restitution (reporting back to respondents)

At the end of fieldwork, it is a sign of professionalism and respect to share preliminary findings with local communities and partner organizations that helped support the research. Too often field researchers extract information from local communities and leave suddenly with little to no closure or follow-up. In this section, we discuss techniques for giving proper closure to the research process through disseminating preliminary results and thanking local communities and partner organizations before going home. This process is sometimes referred to as 'restitution'.

Although there are various phases in the research process in which researchers can engage local stakeholders, restitution may be the phase where it is easiest and most effective for researchers to engage local people (Kainer et al, 2009). Returning preliminary results to communities and partner organizations during or at the end of field research serves the dual purpose of sharing information gleaned during the research process, while allowing researchers to validate preliminary findings based on feedback from local stakeholders. Dissemination of research results can take a variety of forms, including short presentations, interactive workshops, brochures, maps, radio and photo albums, with researchers limited only by their creativity, available resources and knowledge of audience-appropriate methods for sharing scientific information (Shanley and Laird, 2002; Duchelle et al, 2009; Kainer et al, 2009).

The extent to which field researchers will be able to disseminate preliminary results will depend on the timing of their research. For instance, the advantage of research projects that require multiple visits to communities is that they allow researchers to develop relationships with the communities where they work; each field visit can be used as an opportunity to share select preliminary findings at a community meeting. Such information sharing throughout the research process clearly shows the researcher's appreciation for community involvement and treats community members as research partners and not simply respondents.

Information sharing is generally welcomed by local stakeholders, allows for mutual learning and provides an important vehicle for researchers to thank local communities and partner organizations as fieldwork comes to a close.

In addition to dissemination of research results, there are a variety of other ways to thank local communities and partner organizations for their supporting role in field research. These activities are again determined by the researcher's creativity and resources, and by what is appropriate in the local context. For example, at village meetings during the final field visit, researchers can present personalized certificates to participating households to publically recognize and thank them. Other ideas include hosting lunches or parties. Such gestures clearly show researchers' appreciation for the time and energy that local people give to field research, keeping the door open for local stakeholders to want to engage and collaborate with researchers in the future.

The practicalities of life in the field

Researchers should spend as much time in the field as possible: it can be enjoyable, it can generate a lot of contextually relevant information and, perhaps most important from the perspective of the topic of this book, the data quality will be much better (more accurate and complete). Getting high quality data requires detailed checking and quality control, and should not be left to enumerators or research assistants. This section focuses on practical aspects of fieldwork organization, including the implications for researchers' health and safety.

Where to live?

Beyond avoiding areas with armed conflict or drug wars, where to live was probably not a primary concern during study site selection. If fieldwork is conducted in one village, or several villages within fairly close proximity to one another, living in the village is potentially a good option: researchers are integrated into the community and likely to build a high degree of trust with respondents. This can facilitate the data collection process tremendously, providing opportunities to see things from an anthropological perspective, to groundtruth trends observed in the data and to collect information about activities that might not be easily observed otherwise. For example, in many forested areas, illegally harvested timber is picked up by traders and transporters in the middle of the night. By being around all the time, it is possible to learn about social, political and economic processes that might not be obvious – while minimizing research costs at the same time.

There are also drawbacks to living in a village: it is easier to get involved in village politics and more difficult to get privacy. Researchers boarding with a local household, staying in a local motel, living at an NGO or college guesthouse or building their own dwelling close to the village leaders may find that respondents develop perceptions about possible allegiances. As we have discussed, perceived political or ethnic allegiances can be detrimental to data collection. If respondents feel that one group is favoured over another, then trust is compromised. The challenge for the researcher living in the field is to navigate these relationships in a context that is culturally different and operates with a different set of social norms than the researcher is used to. While status as an outsider allows for a degree of tolerance related to social and political ‘errors’, researchers should strive to gain awareness of local customs relatively quickly. Limitations on privacy affect people differently. Researchers should expect to be the focus of a lot of attention, particularly as they arrive and get settled. Children in particular will be curious. Over time, however, village members are likely to decrease their level of interest.

Many of the practical details of village living are beyond the scope of this chapter. To help guide decisions on where to live, the following issues should be considered:

- Will you build your own house, camp or board with a local family?
- Where will you obtain food and who will do the cooking?
- What is the source of fresh water and what are the bathroom/shower facilities you will use?
- Where will you store your questionnaires and research notes?
- Where will you store your valuables (money, mobile phone, computer, and so on)?
- What is the reliability and cost of transportation in and out of the village?
- Do you have access to health care facilities?
- Are you prepared to deal with vermin, snakes, insects, and so on, that might be an issue in your field site?

Food in the field

It is common for people to welcome researchers to their village or home by offering food and drink. These may be exotic, such as dried white ants in groundnut sauce, served with matoke (cooking banana); ‘bamboo chicken’, also known as iguana; tiny fried frogs; or python preserved in locally made brew. Undoubtedly fieldwork pushes researchers to the limits of their epicurean comfort zone – either from eating the same meal of pounded cassava for days on end or from being offered very exotic fare. Remember that food is strongly tied

to culture: offering food and drink is a form of hospitality across many cultures and food may be the only thing that the most humble households have to offer. To refuse to eat offered food in a respondent's household may be perceived as extremely rude, depending on the cultural context and may have implications for how researchers are perceived in the household or the larger community. Researchers collecting data on environmental income should be particularly willing to try wild foods. Part of understanding local culture, tastes and preferences is getting to know a culture through food. So unless religion, culture or health forbids, eat it!

Days in the field can be incredibly long. If working in a community where food or drink is not available, finding a way to eat enough to keep going through the day can be a major challenge. In some cultures it is rude to eat in front of people that are not themselves eating. A useful strategy is to support the local economy by purchasing food, such as fruits, roasted maize or cassava, sodas, ground nuts, roasted meat or a wide variety of other foods that are often available in households or village trading centres. Purchase from a diverse set of suppliers and do not be too tough on the bargaining – this will support the local economy and serve to maintain good relations with hosts.

Partaking in local social activities is a great way to break the ice with respondents. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, many cultures have one or two forms of locally made alcohol and drinking is often a social activity. While drinking is a great way to get integrated into a community, be aware of the risks of drinking alcohol produced under village conditions. Remember to be respectful of village settings where alcohol is not consumed.

Staying healthy

Staying healthy in the field is a challenge whether living in a village or commuting daily from a nearby town. Research teams work long days, frequently under harsh physical conditions. There is great potential to get physically run down, increasing susceptibility to illness and disease. The most likely health problems in the field are: dehydration; sunstroke; water-borne illnesses including dysentery; and mosquito-related illnesses. Lower probability health risks include snake bites, stings, leeches and accidents. It is good to have information on localized epidemics and to take the necessary precautions. Make appropriate preparations before fieldwork, get the recommended vaccinations and prophylactics, and have appropriate health insurance for all team members. Private insurance is available in many countries. Basic first aid training for all team members is a great idea and at least one member of the team should have first aid supplies in the event of an emergency. Driving is probably the activity

that entails the highest risk in the field. When renting a vehicle (and driver), set clear rules, such as maximum speed limits.

Pay particular attention to the health of research team members. Just because an enumerator has had malaria several times before, it does not mean it is easier for her to deal with. Encourage team members to take precautions including accepting food and drink that have been prepared with some attention to food safety, sleeping under a mosquito net, avoiding sunstroke, and so on. When enumerators fall ill, adjust the research programme accordingly. Overworking enumerators who are having health problems leads to low morale and ultimately compromises the data collection efforts.

Tips for maintaining good health in the field include:

- Be aware of local epidemics and take the necessary precautions.
- Make sure that a reliable source of clean drinking water is available or boil water and store it in manageable quantities; carry water into the field.
- Maintain personal hygiene, including washing hands on a regular basis.
- Store food in a safe and hygienic location.
- Always carry a first aid kit.
- Always carry identification, insurance and medical aid details.
- Make contacts with local doctors or hospitals to check out the assistance available in case of emergency.
- If someone gets sick, another person should take charge. Do not leave it to the sick person to decide, often they are unable to make rational decisions.
- Make contingency plans in the event that team members get sick.

Researchers are frequently called upon to assist with health crises in the villages they are working in. The two most common forms of assistance are providing transportation to the nearest health centre or hospital and providing financial assistance to households experiencing health crises. The most important advice we have is to treat village members equally. If transportation and funds to support the medical needs of one or two families are provided, be prepared to do so for others in need. While requests for transportation and financial assistance can be quite taxing and interfere with fieldwork schedules, researchers should be aware of the impact that helping out might have on people's well-being, and the goodwill the community will extend to you.

Personal safety

Personal safety is a major issue for all researchers, whether a foreigner or a national of the country in which work is taking place, whether a man or a woman. As a relatively well-off outsider, there is a good chance that respondents

in the villages will perceive researchers as wealthy. Researchers should therefore at all times take appropriate precautions, for example, living with a trusted family. While there may be other issues tied to this (perceived allegiances and limited personal space as noted above), personal safety and the safety of belongings will be higher than when living alone. This will also benefit families in the communities through rent and will help the researcher to assimilate into the community. Take into account that ‘Murphy’s Law was written in the tropics’; many plans can and will go wrong, so make some contingency arrangements whenever possible, for example, the research team should agree on basic safety routines: what do we do if the car breaks down, a research team member is attacked or gets sick, and so on.

To avoid awkward and potentially dangerous situations:

- Make living arrangements in a reasonably well-inhabited place with secure doorways and a sturdy lockable place to store all valuables.
- Surround yourself with trustworthy people; research assistants should ideally live in the same place, or at least within reasonable distance, for quick and easy communication if an unfortunate situation arises.
- Distinguish between genuine well-wishers and schemers or eavesdroppers who can pass off information on the location of valuable assets, or times when research team members might be alone and vulnerable.
- Be certain to understand the lay of the land in both the literal and figurative senses:
 - Know your way around – understand return routes and pathways when negotiating new locations.
 - Be aware of ethnic and political conflicts that the research may be at the heart of – for example, sympathizing with forest officials may put the research team under suspicion of households that engage in illegal logging.
- Make careful choices regarding study areas, avoiding/abandoning if possible those that are conflict-ridden or where conflict could emerge.
- Give full details of medical aid, next of kin, contact numbers, ID number, and so on, to the local partner institution or someone that you are working with (but who does not accompany you to the field). They should also get the detailed field trip plans (where and when).
- Keep the local headman, village chief, police station or other relevant authorities informed about the research team’s stay and movements.
- Fieldwork should not be undertaken alone. There must be two people present, preferably three, of whom at least one should be male.
- Bring a mobile phone, if the area is connected.
- Take seriously any threats from individuals received at your study sites.

- Beware of participating in ‘dubious’ social gatherings (for example, those with lots of alcohol involved) after dark when alone and unprotected.
- Be careful when hitchhiking or offering lifts to strangers, especially when alone, in remote areas and/or after dark. The rule of thumb is to never give lifts to anyone not associated with the research.

Female researchers should exercise extra caution in the field (Box 9.2). Though you might wonder at times how you could ever find yourself alone (you are

Box 9.2 *In memory of Vanessa Annabel Schäffer Sequeira (1970–2006)*

Vanessa Sequeira, a Portuguese doctoral student, was conducting PEN research in Acre, Brazil, in Western Amazonia when she was brutally murdered in the field. Vanessa was alone in a remote part of her study area looking for a family to interview when she was attacked by a man who had recently been released from prison for committing a similar violent crime. While the crime against Vanessa was determined to be not in any way directly related to the research that she was undertaking, the shocking and devastating act was a terrible reminder of the fragility of life and the vulnerability of researchers in the field.

Vanessa had extensive experience in Amazonia and a bright future ahead of her. Before beginning her doctoral work at the University of Bangor, UK, and CATIE (Centro de Altos Estudios de Conservacion y Investigacion de Agricultura Tropical de Costa Rica), she worked for four years directing field research for the Proyecto Conservando Castañales in Madre de Dios, Peru, where she implemented a project for sustainable management of the Brazil nut, a regionally important non-timber forest product. In Acre, her doctoral research focused on the differences in forest dependence between colonist settlers and forest extractivists. In her preliminary analyses, she reported remarkable differences between the forest extractivist and colonist communities and was delightedly proving her original hypothesis wrong – it seemed that small producers who actually used the forest were better-off than those who had cut their forest down to raise cattle.

Vanessa had a gift for engaging local communities and she strongly believed in conducting research that could make a difference for tropical conservation and for the people with whom she worked. Vanessa was tremendously loved and respected by the Peruvian Brazil nut collectors in Madre de Dios, and in Acre she considered many of the extractivist families in the Agro-Extractive Settlement Project Riozinho-Granada close friends. Her friends and colleagues were inspired by her persistence, humility and great sense of humour. Vanessa was a light in the world of tropical conservation and development, and she is missed terribly (www.vanessa.sequeiras.net).

always at someone's house or being followed around by children), you might find yourself in an uncomfortable or potentially dangerous situation. The bottom line: live and work in the field in an open and trusting way, but exercise a reasonable level of caution at all times. In particular, think carefully about situations where you will find yourself alone and vulnerable.

Conclusions

Our main message is that fieldwork can be a wonderful enriching experience if researchers invest time in understanding the context of the fieldwork site and situation, and think carefully about how the research team can function effectively in the field. Our assumption, validated by the field experience of several PEN researchers, is that well-organized fieldwork is correlated with data quality. Beyond the quantitative data collected, there is a significant qualitative story that needs to be understood. Being comfortable in the field and having good rapport with respondents gives the best shot at understanding the complexities and nuances that underlie the quantitative data.

Key messages

- Do not rush into the field, first get to know the political and cultural context of the study sites.
- Think hard about where to live and how to organize the research so that all research team members are healthy and safe.
- Fieldwork is a life-changing experience – embrace it and have a great time!

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