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Research Note:

Failing to Give Enough: When Researcher Ideas About Giving Back Fall Short

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Before beginning my studies in Cameroon, I lived and conducted research for 2 years in a small village on the border of a national park in Uganda. In Uganda, “giving back” had not been an explicit, one-sided endeavor for me, but more of a mutual exchange of time, information, and friendship with the people I met there. I worked for a project that provided disposable income to many local people and thereby business opportunities to a wider group of local villagers, encouraged ownership and pride in local natural resources, and allowed locals to teach and learn from visitors from all over the country and the world. I, like many researchers, ended up paying to put the child of one of my field assistants through school and helped other assistants find sponsors for their children as well. I helped my field assistants and other villagers send e-mails and navigate technology, introduced them to fascinating things like ice, shared a beer with them in the evenings, and brought them small gifts from the United States. In turn, the local assistants became my friends and mentors, invited me over for dinner, shared their knowledge, experiences, and families with me, and gave me the sense that the program for which I worked had an overall positive impact on the village and its members.

So, as I approached my first pilot study in Cameroon in 2008, I expected to build similar relationships that would, in a sense, be my form of giving back. I was quickly disabused of this notion. Through cultural blunders on my part and an unwelcoming attitude in the

villages I visited, my relationship with those that helped me carry out my research never turned in a positive direction. Thus, my story of giving back is complex and sometimes depressing, and something that I still struggle with. What could I have done differently? Would changes in my behavior have led to a more positive experience on both sides? I have yet to come to any conclusions, but I still think about it regularly.

I went to Cameroon in the summer of 2008 to study gorilla ecology. My research set out to answer questions about what constituted suitable gorilla habitat, how people interacted with these same habitats, and how natural resource conservation could address both gorilla and human needs in the landscape. I planned to visit each of the villages in the landscape that potentially had a gorilla population living nearby, employ local assistants from those villages to explore the habitat, and share my findings with locals and government officials in an effort to improve efficacy of conservation in the region. I suppose this idealistic goal was doomed from the start, but I set out wide-eyed and excited to meet and work with people in the incredible forests of Cameroon.

My first mistake was trying to cover a large amount of area in a relatively short amount of time. I was restricted by my summer break and limited funds, and I did not understand many of the cultural norms I should have followed. I should have brought large amounts of alcoholic beverages to each village I visited. I should have stayed for multiple days at each stop while meetings were called to assess my right to enter the forest, those that I should take with me, and what I should be forced to pay to enter the landscape. Large fights erupted in every village I visited—anger that I had taken the chief's son as one of my assistants, anger that I had not taken the chief's son as one of my assistants, anger that I had entered a particular part of the forest with members of one village instead of another, anger that I passed some villages over in search of those closer to gorilla populations, anger that I had not brought palm wine with me as a sign of respect. I was met at each turn with animosity, and I only made it worse with my inability to communicate in local languages, my clear lack of understanding of which villages claimed rights to which parts of this huge, public forest, and my tight budget. The wages I paid to the assistants I employed only irritated other village members, rather than their intended effect of giving at least something back to each village.

The fights over my rights and the control of my activities were dominated by village men, frequently the only village members with whom I could communicate. That women tended to communicate only in local languages hampered my ability to build bridges through personal relationships, which would have been easier to establish with other women. Further, the fights that erupted were often between young men, much younger than I, who had found education outside of the village but been forced to return when no employment opportunities materialized elsewhere. They were struggling, just as I was, to find a place in their villages, and asserting power over me and their land was one way to do this. As a foreign, educated woman, I was both genderless and threatening in many people's eyes—and thus, no group was willing to fight for me, but many were willing to fight both against me and against each other over me.

So, after the few months of my pilot study, I gave up on the notion that I could cover large swaths of the landscape, and decided that I should choose one village to call my home when I returned for the next 6 months of my field work. I envisioned this relationship working well: I would go through the proper meetings and channels to hire my field assistants from the village, I would buy plenty of palm wine for village meetings, I would give money back to the village that would become my base camp through a negotiated monthly fee to enter the forest, and I would buy as much food as I could from the village for my camp supplies. I returned to Cameroon in 2009, ready for smooth sailing. Again, I was doomed from the start. The village I chose was actually made up of two discrete villages separated by a few hours walk, and I chose to work with the upper village, which bordered a gorilla population. Many of the villagers were unhappy with what I could afford to pay to enter the forest; they were unhappy that I wanted consistency in my field assistants, rather than employing various different villagers over time; they were unhappy when I tried to employ different porters every month to try and spread the wealth; they were unhappy with my choices of people from whom I purchased food. It seemed that I could not make any right decision. Additionally, the upper village would only work with me if I paid them and not the lower village, but the chief resided in the lower village, and also wanted money and gifts.

Over time, as I built relationships with the village members and my assistants, I thought that the animosity I constantly felt would wane. I helped purchase roofing materials for the village school/meeting hall, and carried necessities from the nearest town for villagers. I tried to spread my purchasing and portering around, so that all village members could feel some economic benefit of my presence. I entertained the village children with my stupid-human-tricks, and brought them a soccer ball to replace their plastic-bag creation. I played music at village parties, bought palm wine for gatherings, and tried to be light-hearted and open. But, in the end, I felt almost as though I had entered into an emotionally abusive relationship: each month upon my return to the village, I was harassed for something and felt more and more beaten down; each month that only made me try harder to make them love me. Instead, I felt less and less like a human being to them, and more and more like money was all I had to offer.

In the end, a culmination of events—the forceful removal of another researcher from the forest, a violent clash between the upper and lower villages, a black-magic threat towards me and my crew, and the murder of a colleague, made me give up on my quest. I left with both significantly fewer data and certainly fewer relationships than I had envisioned upon the outset of my work. Thus, despite what I thought were my best efforts, I do not feel that I really gave back at all. And, perhaps what is worse, in the end, I had lost even my desire to give back. So I continue to question myself: What could I have realistically done differently? Would anything have helped?

If I could go back and do it all again, in an ideal universe, I would have planned on many more years of piloting relationships, before even starting my data collection. I would have incorporated more time to pick a site where these relationships might have been possible. I would have planned on asking for a lot more funding to make the project work. I would have tried to link into an interdisciplinary project with a clearer, more weathered

understanding of local social nuances. I would have spent months, maybe years, digging more deeply into the local politics and the cultural and historical contexts of the region. Unfortunately, for the time scale of my PhD research in ecology, none of those things would have been possible.

Any scientist working abroad necessarily gets embroiled in local politics but does not necessarily have the resources, skills, or time to address them. While PhD programs, as well as research grant processes, are particularly restricted in their time frames and research foci, their success relies heavily on both the kind of informed site choice and cultivation of relationships that could take years to develop. This inherent dichotomy should encourage researchers to seek out established partners and interdisciplinary collaborators, but should perhaps also serve as a warning sign that some undertakings might be doomed from the start.

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