

## The Importance of Fieldwork

a Simple Primer

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Have you ever searched for something on the Internet and can't find it? Even the mighty [Google Scholar](#) doesn't have what you need. So you go search for it the old-fashioned way, maybe in a library (gasp!), or some old journals or newspapers on microfilm (does anyone even know what that is anymore?). But still, you can't find the information you need. And maybe even when you do find something *close* to what you want, you're not certain if you can trust it.

These kinds of experiences happen all the time when conducting research—whether in Academia, the government, or private sector. Take for example the city planner who gets tasked to “revitalize” a run-down neighborhood...Or a mining company that develops interactive maps of mining bore-holes...Or maybe YOU are trying to find out how your data sizes up in the real world. How could these problems be solved? And how could you know that what you found is correct?

### FIELDWORK!

Yep! That's right. *Fieldwork*: One simple word that makes all the difference for any research or problem. Fieldwork is certainly fun, and every discipline associated with fieldwork has its occupational hazards. And Geography is no exception! Sometimes fieldwork is harrowing. Personally, I have experienced extreme heat (120+ F), extreme cold (-40 F), extreme dirty, torrential downpours, and blinding blizzards. I've also been chewed out, cussed at, teased, shot at, and run out of town. Other times, fieldwork can offer experiences you may have never experienced otherwise: playing on top of and under the ocean, in rivers and lakes, on glaciers at 20,000 feet above sea level and in grabens 100 feet below sea level. And then there are the cultural experiences: sharing a meal in the middle of nowhere or a fancy restaurant, crawling through unexcavated ruins or modern skyscrapers, and listening to the haunting strains of a Bedouin song or being asked to join in a traditional dance. Exciting occupational hazards I've personally experienced in the field include: being shot at by Guerillas, bribing international customs officials, and eating some really, really odd food (moss, ants, and other assorted bugs) and some really, really superb desserts (several very satisfying *bignets*, truly outstanding *won-tons*, and a chocolate mousse fit for King Louis XVI) Indeed, fieldwork makes life very interesting!

There are a good number of Geographers who have little field experience, but are still very knowledgeable about one thing or another. While that may sit fine with them, I believe they really allow the world to pass them by and miss the excitement and knowledge that comes with first-hand experiences. I know a famous Art Historian who specializes in Greek sculpture. When I asked him where his favorite place was to visit in Greece, he said, in all seriousness, “Why would I want to go all the way to Europe when I can see everything I need on-line?” I was flabbergasted! Likewise, I also know Geographers who have nearly starved to death or lost nearly everything abroad for lack of practical awareness. I remain continually amazed at the number of people who poo-poo fieldwork. Yes. I said “poo-poo”.

For me, field experience is invaluable, and Geographers who lack it are not doing the discipline justice. Geography's tenets revolve around exploring, seeing, and doing. Geographers—physical, human, technical, or otherwise—study the earth. And how can you study the earth

without *being* there? The great Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan says that everyone already has numerous years of fieldwork experience, although most never realize it: “our life is a field trip,” he says, and I agree. If the word “life” is used as a verb in that statement, rather than a noun, I especially agree!

I often refer to fieldwork as “play”, because playing usually connotes fun. And fieldwork is certainly FUN! You may already be familiar with fieldwork. Maybe you’ve already conducted formal fieldwork. (Most) Geographers see “the field” anywhere and everywhere: the forest, a foreign country, the CBD of a city, the corn fields of Iowa, a classroom, the city plaza, rooftops, a river, the road, movies, even life itself! Being in the field—*playing* in the field—with a full-fledged Geographer is a fabulous treat. Tag along with a Geographer doing fieldwork and see for yourself!