

Making a Difference: Geographers in NGOs

Geographers by nature are interested in the big questions of science and the humanities and the place of humans in the world. The American populace as a whole has been characterized as "insular." The training, experience, and expertise we gain as geographers however, expands our outlook and positions us to have a real impact on the world. Geographers have the opportunity to make a difference in the human condition and environmental quality. Among the most altruistic of geographers are those who collaborate with, or are employed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs)... not-for-profit agencies that are not affiliated with any government or private sector entity.

Many types of NGOs exist, but three of the most dominant arenas of work involving geographers are environmentally sustainable development, human rights, and women in development...all of which are major issues in our discipline. As catalogued by the Perkins Library at Duke University, many NGOs are based in the United States or Europe but are involved with projects primarily in the developing world. Others are based in the developing world and are regional in their outlook, spreading their activities throughout many countries. Some defend or promote a specific cause. Still others focus on a particular country, ethnic group, province, or city. NGOs number in the tens of thousands worldwide, so it is not surprising that geographers have studied the actions of NGOs. Dianne Rocheleau (Clark University) has written extensively on the influence of geographers through NGOs in advancing gender issues in sustainable agriculture, forestry, and environmental policy. A full review of geography, geographers, and NGOs requires more space than is available here. Instead, I want to explain why geography is especially adept at training people for successful employment in NGOs.

The World Bank lists the following characteristics of successful NGOs: strong

grassroots links, expertise in field-based development, ability to innovate and adapt, process-oriented approach to development, use of participatory methodologies and tools, long-term commitment and emphasis on sustainability, and cost-effectiveness. My first-hand experience with NGOs, observation of the work of other geographers in NGOs (including some of my former graduate students), and the testimony I have received from colleagues convinces me that geography trains students with the ideal conceptual and technical skills that NGOs seek. Geography departments prepare students for a wide range of employment options when students learn how to conduct participatory research, apply GIScience, and utilize mixed methods to collect and analyze both qualitative and quantitative data and use both field-based and secondary sources (e.g., archival, remote sensing). A good example is Joel Wainwright (University of British Columbia) who has been working for over ten years with indigenous-rights NGOs on projects related to the struggle for Maya land rights in Belize. His work with these NGOs has been influenced by his training as a geographer: participatory mapping of indigenous lands, archival research in legal-political campaigns, bringing postcolonial theory into political ecology, and development studies. Although broad-based training in geography constitutes ideal training for work in NGOs, I must point out that only one in ten AAG members who are employed by NGOs have a PhD degree. The master's degree is the degree of choice for NGO work in most cases.

In the reverse sense, it is true that work experience with NGOs will lead someone to geography. A case in point is Bill Moseley, now at Macalester College in Minnesota. Bill devoted ten years in his

"first career" to working for the British NGO Save the Children in Mali, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Lesotho, after finishing his bachelors and masters degrees in disciplines other than geography. A critical part of his NGO work involved mapping areas vulnerable to food security problems. Bill reported that this experience, combined with the fact that Africanist geographers were producing some of the best environmental and development scholarship on Africa, had a lot to do with his subsequent decision to seek a PhD in geography.

The capabilities of GIScience have been captured by many NGOs. In a June 2004 column for *Directions Magazine*, an online publication devoted to coverage of the GIS industry, Past President Vicky Lawson

presented several noteworthy examples of geographers collaborating with NGOs to construct socially and environmentally just policies and programs. AAG members Glenn Hyman, Todd Benson, and Deborah Balk are working with the International Center for Tropical Agriculture to compile poverty maps for various countries. Tony Bebbington (PhD, Clark University) is among a growing community of geographers who are focusing on the role of NGOs in environmental social issues, resource development, politics, and economic growth.

Geography and emergency services intersect in the work of NGOs, called to attention this past year by the Indian Ocean tsunami, hurricanes along the Gulf Coast and southeast U.S., and the earthquake in Pakistan. Steve Schill (PhD, University of South Carolina) is now Senior Geospatial Scientist for the Nature Conservancy (TNC) in the Mesoamerican and Caribbean Region. His TNC team works to develop new tools and techniques to assist countries struggling to



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conferences for faculty from predominantly Black colleges and universities, and many other tangible and intangible benefits of his deep devotion and dedicated leadership in promoting diversity in geography.

Saul Cohen receives the award for being one of the strongest and most vocal supporters of the COMGA program. In that role and others, he was engaged in numerous activities designed to increase the enrollment of Black students in geography. He was a major advocate for diversifying the discipline, raised funds for diversity activities, and strongly encouraged departments to recruit African-American geography students.

He was also a mentor to young students and professionals, helping to establish and grow a new generation of African-American geographers.

The AAG Annual Meeting in Chicago will include at least two panel sessions on diversity in geography, organized by the AAG Diversity Task Force. "Diversity in Geography Departments: Student Perspectives," will be held March 8 from 1:00 to 2:40 pm and "AAG Diversity Task Force: Collaboration and Outreach," will be held immediately following from 3:00 to 4:40 pm. For further details on these and other sessions, see the 2006 preliminary program at www.aag.org.

To make nominations for the 2006 Enhancing Diversity Award, include the complete name and address of the nominee and a concise (500 words maximum) yet specific description of the accomplishments that warrant the nominee's selection.

Digital submissions are encouraged. Send nominations by September 15, 2006 to the Patricia Solís at psolis@aag.org. The Executive Committee will make a final recommendation for the awardee(s) to the AAG Council during each Fall Meeting for approval and endorsement.

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meet the Convention on Biodiversity Conservation goals. Steve reports that the training he received through geography in statistics, remote sensing, and GIS are essential for the complex modeling of terrestrial, freshwater, and marine habitats and human threats to those habitats and government-designated protected areas. Moreover, coursework in cultural geography helped prepare him for dealing with the multiple languages, political systems, and social customs in the twenty-eight countries of the region in which TNC operates.

In countries where collaboration with government agencies is problematic at best, NGOs can provide the local contacts for logistical support, scientific collaboration, and geospatial information. Doug Goodin (Kansas State University) is collaborating with two NGOs in Paraguay to use remote sensing and GIS to study spatial-temporal changes in habitat populated by rodents who serve as disease vectors for the Hantavirus. Joe Scarpaci (Virginia Tech University) has studied how the spatial arrangements of NGOs affected their ability to deliver primary health care to the urban poor in three South American

cities. More recently, he has formed a partnership with the Punta Cana Biodiversity Center to carry-out a land use survey with a GIS data base on housing needs and health care conditions in slum settlements on the outskirts of resorts in the eastern Dominican Republic. Joe reports that NGOs provided a "safe place" where research collaboration was welcomed and encouraged.

In Africa, where the news has been overwhelmingly negative concerning health and population, geographer Alan Ferguson is making progress working on the "AIDS Highway," the road from Mombasa to Uganda. He is working with a team of Canadian doctors to collect an amazing array of data along the highway that will help identify hot spots where AIDS is most likely to be transmitted. Elsewhere, Alan helped curtail population growth when he was a family planning consultant through small-scale village education. He uses his knowledge of diffusion, spatial statistics, and GIS to organize teams of young trainers to focus education on oral rehydration therapy and other health issues.

I have a stack on my desk of additional accounts of geographers working for and with NGOs. I wish I could share all of them with you because it is a heartwarming reminder that our discipline really does offer a set of concepts and skills that can be used to address critical social and environmental problems from local to global in scale. Thanks for all you do for geography.

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Corrections

The President's Column in the December 2005 issue of the *AAG Newsletter* incorrectly referred to "the late Bruno Messerli." We are happy to report that Dr. Messerli is in fact very much alive and currently residing in Switzerland.

The 2006 Annual Meeting preliminary program is available online at www.aag.org