IUPUI Geographer Reflects on His Years in Papua New Guinea

Rick Hein, professor of geography at IUPUI, spent three years in Papua New Guinea (PNG), which occupies the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, the second largest island in the world. PNG sits atop two colliding plate boundaries, so that earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are a daily occurrence, while tsunamis are reported from time to time. There is heavy rainfall throughout the year, ranging from 15 feet per year in certain windward areas to 40 inches per year in the capital, Port Moresby. The three basic PNG climate types are tropical rainforest, tropical savannah, and highland temperate.

In 1996, I took my family and went to live in Papua New Guinea. We stayed there three years and had a wonderfully creative time. I was sponsored by an Asian Development Bank grant to the Midwestern Universities Consortium for International Activities (MUCIA) through the University of Minnesota. My assignment was to develop and direct the PNG Environmental Research & Management Center (ERMC) at the Papua New Guinea University of Technology (UNITECH) in Lae, PNG’s second largest city.

It quickly become obvious that this mission could best be served by promoting “environmental awareness.” I found that it could be developed at many levels, first at the university level, then at local and national government as well as not-for-profit organizational levels, then at primary and secondary school levels, and finally to the level of the village.

My campus activity at UNITECH began with an “Environmental Lecture Series.” This required finding out in advance when environmentally active people were visiting the country and arranging for them to speak to a public audience. In my three years there, the ERMC sponsored 22 speakers who each drew an average audience of 40 people, mostly students, faculty, and townspeople. The series still continues. My teaching duties included teaching environmental studies to 100 university freshmen each semester and introductory human and physical geography courses to the surveying department sophomores. I also taught courses on the environmental impact assessment and began developing a postgraduate diploma in Environmental Management.

While I was there, the ERMC sponsored a brand-new publication, Environment Papua New Guinea: Collected Paper Series, the first volume of which was printed in July 1999. This inaugural issue included 13 peer-reviewed applied environmental articles—both in PNG and overseas—from 10 different academic disciplines. This research publication is aimed at university students, government agencies, and not-for-profit environmental groups in PNG and elsewhere. Plans were drawn up for the development of a building to house the ERMC, and they are now well under way. The European Union is financing this and groundbreaking should begin in January 2000 once the drier season starts. When I return there in the summer of 2000, I may be able to see the new building.

It was the work off campus, however, that was the most exciting because there were few limiting institutional parameters. Two very creative opportunities were offered to the ERMC: to coordinate and direct a biodiversity inventory in a coastal village wildlife management area and facilitate an environmental education program for the primary schools of Morobe Province.
The biodiversity inventory got me into the “bush” that was only accessible by boat about 30 miles down the coast. Over the three-year period I made about 15 visits to Lababia Village where I developed a transect from the open sea to the top of their mountain for sampling nine biomes. I then arranged for 13 different biologists to use their specialties to inventory the different parts of the environment. To date, five previously undescribed species have been identified from this study. The study also outlined a series of recommendations by which the villagers, with guidance from a not-for-profit organization, could sustain their livelihood and the environment as well.

I personally enjoyed this more than any other aspect of my Papua New Guinea experience. Three village hunters and I cut a slit of a research trail into their untouched pristine rainforests, encountered the spirits of their ancestors, and explored the environments of their higher elevations where they themselves had never ventured. With all the backpacking and hiking that was required, I became more fit than I had ever been since high school. This prepared me for climbing the 14,500-foot Mt. Wilhelm, the tallest mountain in PNG, and for enduring the six days of the World War II-vintage Kokoda Trail.

My previous experience with Geography Education Network Indiana (GENI), the National Geographic Society, and the Indiana Geography Institutes paid off with the environmental education effort in Morobe Province. The Wildlife Conservation Society’s Bronx Zoo of New York offered to bring their education team and a truckload of teaching materials if a workshop for PNG primary teachers could be organized. I worked closely with the Rainforest Habitat (located on campus) that was able to arrange for a grant to bring in 100 teachers to attend the workshops on campus. I coordinated these two groups with the local provincial school administration to select the teachers.

In my estimation these workshops, with their American-style hands-on approach, probably had more impact on environmental awareness in PNG than any of the other projects in which I was involved. They brought environmental thinking to the village level, in the rainforest where conservation efforts needed to be introduced and monitored. The 100 teachers went back to their schools, where each teaches between 30 and 40 children every year, with enthusiasm and inspiration. They brought environmental thinking to the village level, in the rainforest where conservation efforts needed to be introduced and monitored. The 100 teachers went back to their schools, where each teaches between 30 and 40 children every year, with enthusiasm and inspiration. The "new" teaching methodology, in turn, captured the imagination of the parents who experienced the excitement of their children regarding something that they themselves understood and in which they too could participate. This greatly empowered the teachers who became the leaders they should have been in their villages.

Our own two children became immersed in the culture of PNG, attending the Lae International School whose student population was half Papua New Guineans and included others from 30 different nationalities. Our oldest daughter, Molly, graduated from high school there and became the only foreign student in the whole country to participate in softball league play. The local Rotary Club honored her with the all-city high school student award for "Community Spirit and Volunteer Time." Our second daughter, Kristen, though not as gregarious, finished eighth grade, making many friends and having fond memories of PNG.

My wife Maryellen became superinvolved in all aspects of the community and volunteered for many women’s groups, including counseling at the women’s prison and preparing them for their release. Most of these had killed their battering husband or the other wife. Maryellen was guest speaker for numerous women’s organizations throughout the city of Lae and received special honors and recognition from them for all her “volunteer work and awareness created by crossing the lines between Expatriate and National women, creating bonds for future projects and endeavors.”

The return to the States in some ways has been difficult. Seeing old friends and appreciating the safety
Yuri Bregel (Central Eurasian Studies, IUB) translated and annotated “Firdaws al-iqbal: History of Khorezm,” written by the Uzbek historians Shir Muhammad Mirab Munis and Muhammad Riza Mirab Agahi in the early nineteenth century. It is the first Western translation and the first translation of a major Chaghatay source of that period.

Maria C. Chavarria (Modern Foreign Languages, IPFW), received the 1999 Latin American and Caribbean Fellow in Linguistics from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation.

Daniel Cole (Law, IUPUI) has been named the M. Dale Palmer Professor of Law at the IU School of Law at Indianapolis and gave the inaugural lecture, “The Importance of Being Comparative,” on October 28. His 1998 book, *Instituting Environmental Protection: From Red to Green in Poland* (Macmillan and St. Martin’s) was awarded the 1999 AAASS/Orbis Polish Book Prize.

William R. DeMott (Biology, IPFW) received a summer 1999 research fellowship from the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences at the Center for Limnology at the Netherlands Institute of Ecology. His research focuses on Dutch lakes.

Eugene Eoyang (Comparative Literature, East Asian Languages and Cultures, IUB) was elected as one of the vice presidents of the Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes in recognition of his distinguished scholarship. He serves as a member of the executive council of the International Comparative Literature Association for the 2000-2003 term.


Owen V. Johnson (Journalism and History, IUB) is one of the co-authors of a book titled *Eastern European Journalism before, during and after Communism* (Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press, 1999).


Jaques Merceron (French and Italian, IUB) has been appointed a Fellow of the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France, for the spring semester. He will be working on two book projects, “Parodie, hagéographie, et sainteté,” and “Dictionnaire des saints imaginaires et facétieux.”

Lynn Schoch (International Services, IUB) published an article, “Suddenly Poor: Asian Students in the United States,” in *Academe* (July/August 1999), the journal of the American Association of University Professors.

Natsuko Tsujimura (East Asian Languages and Cultures, Linguistics, IUB) is editor of *The Handbook of Japanese Linguistics,* which has just been published by Basil Blackwell, 1999. It includes her chapter on lexical semantics.

Yingjin Zhang (Comparative Literature, East Asian Languages and Cultures, IUB) contributed two chapters to *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943* (Stanford University Press, 1999), a collection of critical essays that he also edited.

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and the many comforts of life has not yet brought us back to the old ways. We still feel that extra awareness that places us at some distance, knowing that our experiences cannot be passed on nor appreciated by others. “How was ‘Papoo’ or wherever you were?” A simple answer is all that is wanted. After anything other than “Fine,” the eyes glaze over and the urge to share this wonderful experience is stifled. I feel like Rip van Winkle returning. “What is my niche? How do I fit this all together?” I am not what I was when I left. Well, I am taking it easy, writing as much as possible and fitting in slowly.