A Tale of the Adventure, Frustration, and Value of Fieldwork

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Editor’s note: Do you have a tale you’d like to share—good or bad—about life as a soil scientist or an experience you’ve had in the field? If so, email it to Dawn Gibas at dgibas@sciencesocieties.org. You may remain anonymous if you like.

I am pretty certain that many people reading this column could write their own version of this tale, and I invite people to do so and share their experiences. Fieldwork is an experience unto itself, especially if you are working in remote areas, although I have had adventures in urban settings too. This is just a sample of some of my early experiences in the field, which as you may guess from the title, can be categorized as full of adventure and frustration, but also very valuable. I don’t want to give the impression that fieldwork is horrible—it’s not. The field is where I have learned the most in my career. I would still maintain that it is essential to gain field experience to shape perspectives on not only the interactions between soil and the environment, but as insight to yourself and how to deal with complex systems in the midst of nature and all its uncertainties. Over the past few years, I have written about various events throughout my career, and in this issue, I will go back to where I began: learning about fieldwork while I was a graduate student.

My first real experience with what I would consider fieldwork (not just a field trip) was during my Ph.D. work. I was exclusively lab oriented in completing my master’s research, but the Ph.D. research was primarily based on field study. I learned quickly that whatever you have planned in the field and whatever timeline you associate with it will not work. Something always happens that sets you back, whether it be the equipment, the unaccounted for issues with the field site, the weather, or a myriad of other things that tend to appear with no warning. This introduced me to levels of frustration I hadn’t really had before but also very quickly taught me that problem solving is the key to success.

The research for my Ph.D. was based at the Marcell Experimental Forest north of Grand Rapids, MN where I studied hydrologic linkages between uplands and peatlands. At that time, the graduate students stayed at a U.S. Forest Service cabin within the experimental forest (think Forest Service green paint inside and out). The cabin was several miles from the nearest neighbor and had no phone (yes, this was prior to cell phones). It was isolated and many times I was the only student in residence. The sheriff checked in from time to time, and a few forest service employees were there most days, but I got in the habit of carrying my rifle, and I also had my Doberman, who was my constant companion.

I should point out that I absolutely loved being at my research site. I would say it was quiet, but if you have spent time out in the forest, it is really not quiet at all. There are frogs, birds, and the wind blowing through the trees, any combination of which at times can actually be quite loud. The one thing I always looked forward to was that first smell of the forest when I got out of the truck after the drive up from the Twin Cities.

 Trials and Tribulations of Fieldwork

So what of the trials and tribulations with the fieldwork? The Marcell Experimental