

**The American Geographical Society**

**Guidelines for Ethical Conduct of  
Foreign Field Research**

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Since 1851, the American Geographical Society (AGS) has sponsored or led countless expeditions to foreign lands for exploration and field research in physical and human geography. An unspoken set of ethical principles continuously has governed our conduct.

Today, global issues regarding sovereignty, human security, environmental stewardship, material wellbeing, social equity, and cultural respect (often collectively subsumed under terms such as *sustainability* or *human flourishing*) demand a new era of foreign field research, hearkening back to a past when the United States relied heavily on knowledge created by geographers and other scholars conducting field research abroad. To promote the resurgence of geographic expeditions and ennoble their purpose, we hereby formalize our foreign field research ethic.

The AGS is committed to improving foreign policy and international relations through improved understanding of foreign lands and peoples.

Of paramount concern is that AGS-sponsored research be accomplished by scholars conducting research for the public good with complete intellectual freedom and independence.

The AGS also holds paramount the personal safety and professional honor of students and scholars who travel and explore under its auspices and the in-country associates with whom they travel or communicate.

The purpose of this document is to set forth ethical guidelines that address and enable these three complementary propositions for all AGS ventures, but the guidelines stand on their own merit. It is our fervent hope that all *scholarly* foreign field research, no matter who sponsors or leads it, will adhere to the standards and traditions of scholarly integrity that our guidelines reflect.

A. AGS will exercise discretion in accepting sponsorship by public organizations and donations from private individuals.

B. AGS expeditions will be led by qualified scholars. AGS lead researchers will, with rare exception, be scholars associated with degree-granting colleges or universities or

respected research institutions and subject to the standards and practices of ethical research as understood by their academic or research institutions and disciplinary communities.

C. In the course of AGS-sponsored expeditions, no university, scholar, or student will be tasked to gather data or information by anyone other than the lead scholar, or his or her designate. Also to be avoided and countered is the actual or apparent tasking from outside the confines of the research team as comprehended by the lead scholar.

D. The lead scholar of each expedition will arrange in advance for the safety and well-being of all traveling participants in an AGS-sponsored expedition. The specific measures to be taken and policies to be followed in regard to the physical safety of participants will vary from expedition to expedition, but they will be agreed upon in writing between the lead researcher and the AGS before any foreign travel is begun.

E. Each lead scholar of an AGS-sponsored expedition will prepare and execute a plan to further the intellectual and professional development of each participating scholar and student.

F. No information will be acquired through deception or misrepresentation.

G. Expedition leaders and staff will not falsely identify themselves or their institutions while conducting AGS sponsored research or engaged in travel associated with such research.

H. Sources of funding for AGS-sponsored expeditions will be made publicly transparent. Private, civilian donors may remain anonymous at their request provided they confirm their acceptance of these guidelines.

I. Expedition leaders, staff, and students will not be embedded in military units while conducting AGS-sponsored research or engaged in travel associated with such research.

J. All information gathered abroad must be *unclassified*. That is, it must not have been formally designated by the United States or host government as sensitive to national security, as a hindrance to formal judicial processes, or as private data the release of which is unlawful. The information must not be a state or civil secret. If, after acquisition, information is found to be classified or otherwise identified by a national government as a state or civil secret, its disposition will be determined by the lead scholar and AGS in accordance with all applicable laws.

K. All results of AGS-sponsored expeditions including data, information, reports, articles, and web sites, if released to anyone outside the immediate research team, must be made freely available to everyone, including United States Government agencies, host countries, other scholarly researchers, and the public. If requested, a brief period of proprietorship (one year maximum) may be approved on a case by case basis.

- L. On return, each lead scholar will submit to the AGS a comprehensive report regarding the administrative conduct of the expedition, methods, key findings, and lessons learned.
- M. All analytical results will be unclassified.
- N. Each lead scholar and many other participants will publish key findings in scholarly journals, popular media, and web sites. Authors have final authority over and responsibility for the contents and conclusions of their documents.
- O. Lead scholars and other members of AGS-sponsored expeditions must comport themselves in a manner that respects cultures in the host country while simultaneously adhering to widely held values of American culture. Their actions must not adversely affect the people or natural environments of host countries. A significant breach of this provision may result in recall of individuals or entire expeditions.
- P. Lead scholars, expedition members, and AGS will protect the confidentiality of any human subjects who may be involved. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at the investigator's home institution is required for any activity constituting human subjects research.

To enforce these guidelines, the AGS will exercise full, unfettered, independent oversight of all projects and expeditions under its aegis. Partner institutions, especially parent institutions of expedition leaders, will be expected to exercise similar oversight regarding foreign research conducted under formal agreement with AGS. Our commitment to these guidelines will be communicated clearly and in a timely manner to all interested parties. Subject to available funding, the AGS will establish a Foreign Field Research Advisory Board consisting of established scholars in geography and other appropriate disciplines, including foreign scholars, who will be invited to review and advise on ethical matters regarding AGS-sponsored expeditions.

We invite all professional associations and institutions involved in scholarly foreign field research to review our guidelines, adapt them to their needs, and promulgate similar guidelines of their own.

Jerome E. Dobson  
President

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