

LEARNING TO SEE THE IMPACTS OF INDIVIDUALS*

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The principal purpose of fieldwork, obviously, is data collection. Every geographer who goes to the proverbial “field” does so with the intent of gathering data that cannot be obtained otherwise (Figure 1). In this regard, fieldwork is not much different from going to the library, something we all do, mainly to get books that are not in our offices or homes. But there is another dimension to fieldwork, one that it shares with libraries: discovery. From time to time we encounter unexpected “treasures” on the shelves near the books we come to check out. In a similar vein, fieldwork can result in some truly unanticipated finds.

Discovery, however, is not simply the finding of something unexpected, such as additional data. It can also result in a change in the way one thinks about and interprets phenomena. To illustrate using the library analogy again, that unanticipated book discovered on an adjacent shelf may have nothing to do with the topic of the volume we came to check out. It might have been the title that caught our eye, the size of the tome, the style of type on the spine, or even the color. Whatever it was makes no difference. The important thing is that we found something unforeseen and that we subsequently learned from it.

Can discoveries be anticipated? Sure, to an extent. Just as we all expect to come back from the library with books we never intended to check out, geographers expect to come home from the field with information that eludes precise forecast. However, just as we all expect to find new things, some discoveries are so great, so eye-opening, that there is no way they can ever be anticipated. As a result, they revolutionize the way things are perceived. Preconceived notions, regardless of how old, well established, and widely held they may be, are then challenged, if not overturned. In this essay I relate the story of my greatest field discovery.

Actually, my one big discovery is a series of small discoveries, all made within a few weeks of each other and linked by a common thread, farmers who were bringing previously unused land into production. It happened during the summer of 1981 in the Valley of Sonora, Mexico, where I was carrying out research funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). The project had its roots in my dissertation research, which dealt with prehistoric settlements and agriculture and had involved fieldwork in 1977 and 1978 (Doolittle 1988b). Once my dissertation fieldwork was complete and my data were analyzed, I concluded that prehistoric agriculture in the valley was first practiced on the floodplains of the arroyos or ephemeral tributaries, and later spread onto the floodplain of the perennial river. Shortly thereafter I framed

* This essay is written in honor and memory of Paul Ward English, whose experiences in Afghanistan surely qualify him as one of the all-time great field geographers.

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