

ENRICHMENT AND FRUSTRATION IN FIELDWORK

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*I*t was before 7:00 A.M., and already the temperature was in the low nineties. We were at least 50 miles from the nearest settlement, on a deeply rutted dirt road, bound for a remote cactus population to collect data for my master's thesis. We rounded a bend, only to find a roost with dozens of black vultures in bare trees, silhouetted against the early-morning sun. It seemed a portent of events to come. Later that day I found myself extracting spines from my backside after I tangled with a cactus that seemed to hurl its weapons at the closest bystander. We then discovered that our target cactus population was too sparse to measure with our sampling protocol. To make matters worse, a piece of critical equipment we had left in the closed car while we scouted the population had literally melted. Such were the adversities of my first field season as a biogeographer, collecting data for a study of columnar cactus distribution and demography in the northern Sonoran Desert (Figure 1). Despite numerous logistical challenges and physical discomfort, that fateful summer twenty-five years ago was the start of my lifelong love of field research.

Since that summer I have spent part of nearly every year in the American West or Florida, collecting field data for various studies. Although most projects have focused primarily on biogeographical questions, they have been varied in other respects. The scale of inquiry has ranged from local to regional. Some projects were small, cramped by a shoestring budget and funded with only personal financial resources; others received generous external support and involved multiple principal investigators. Methodologies have included a broad array of procedures and equipment: basic censusing or sampling for distributional and demographic studies of both plants and birds, tree-core extraction for dendroecological and dendroclimatic work, collection of plant-tissue samples to analyze population genetic structure, and soil-profile description and microclimatic monitoring to relate vegetation patterns to environmental parameters. Throughout these approaches, several key themes have proved fundamental to successful field investigation, and these are the focus of this essay.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

A basic tenet of field research is that unforeseen difficulties will arise during data collection. These seem inevitable, even with thorough reconnaissance; and methodologies often have to be adjusted to accommodate unanticipated field scenarios. I remember well a frantic call to my doctoral adviser from Death Valley, California, one of the intended field sites for my dissertation research, as I fretted about how I would census birds when there was insufficient vegetation at the lowest elevations even to support a resident bird community! In that case, minor site-selection ad-

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