

FIELDWORK AS COMMITMENT

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To me, fieldwork is the heart of geography. I consider it the most magical, essential, and challenging part of being a geographer. Fieldwork is the ultimate mode of geographical exploration. It renews and deepens our direct experience of the planet and its diversity of lands, life, and cultures, immeasurably enriching the understanding of the world that is geography's core pursuit and responsibility. Fieldwork takes us beyond current frontiers of knowledge and preconception, enabling firsthand discoveries that no amount of theorizing or study of preexisting accounts or maps could ever reveal. Without fieldwork, geography is secondhand reporting and arm-chair analysis, losing much of its involvement with the world, its original insight, its authority, its contributions for addressing local and global issues, and its reason for being.

This essay examines the rewards and responsibilities of long-term fieldwork with indigenous peoples that involves many rounds of returning to communities over many years. Such fieldwork is based on a continuing commitment to people and places. It is built on relationships and reciprocity, requiring a dedication to research that is as relevant to indigenous peoples' concerns as to academic ones. It demands time, sensitivity, and an involvement as much emotional as intellectual. In return, it makes possible research that differs fundamentally from short-term studies in depth and breadth of inquiry. The best fieldwork reflects a level of local knowledge, indigenous insight, and regional understanding attainable only through long relationships with a particular people and particular places. With this come new obligations and responsibilities that may reshape the direction of your career and the goals of your research.

FIELDWORK AS A WAY OF LIFE

My fieldwork revolves around indigenous communities and homelands. A quarter of my life over two decades has been spent in the Nepal Himalaya. Much of that work has focused on the Sherpa-inhabited areas of northeastern Nepal, including five years in the Khumbu Sherpa villages within Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) National Park and in the many Sherpa settlements of the lower-altitude Pharak and Katuthanga regions just to the south (Stevens 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1997, n.d.). I have worked in forty-five Sherpa villages in these three settlement areas (Figure 1). For twenty years I have returned annually for fieldwork on cultural ecology, political ecology, environmental history, conservation geography, and tourism studies. This work involves wide-ranging interviews, observations, household surveys, and mapping of many facets of local life, including: indigenous geographical, environmental, and agropastoral knowledge; agricultural and pastoral practices and forest use;

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