

Students

Working Internationally: Advice for Students from ASA Fellow Jim Muir

by Caroline Schneider

ASA Fellow Jim Muir was born in Angola, in southwest Africa. His parents were American missionaries, and he spent his youth in Angola, Portugal, Kenya, and Grand Rapids, MI (his mother's hometown). He grew up speaking three languages and experiencing life on three different continents. In 1977, as an 18-year-old, Muir had to choose one of three countries for his citizenship.

"If I opted for Angola, the newly independent country of my birth, I would be forced to join a side in the civil war," Muir recalls. "If I became Portuguese, the flag under which I was born in their African colony, I would be conscripted for obligatory military service in a country whose economic prospects were faltering. If I chose to become a U.S. citizen, my parents' nationality, I had full-ride university scholarships in a country that had just done away with the draft. Even for an added teenager, the decision was easy."

Though he chose to become a U.S. citizen, Muir's interest in other countries never faded. He has worked in Mozambique, South Africa, and Brazil as well as several U.S. states. He has also observed research and presented his own work in Europe, Australia, and Asia. He is most familiar with the agricultural heritage of Mozambique, where he lived and worked for 10 years. Muir is now a professor at Texas A&M AgriLife Research and Tarleton State University. He offers the following advice to students looking for international experiences in their agronomy, crop, and soil science careers.

CSA News: What would you tell students to do, even when still in school, to prepare for working abroad?

Muir: I think one of the things that you can do to begin with, especially as you're studying, is to learn other languages. If I'm making a list of things you can do to be able to break into international work, learning languages is certainly one. Even just classroom learning can be very helpful. I grew up speaking English and Portuguese, but I studied French and Kiswahili. So the more languages you know a little bit of, the more saleable you'll be.

Another thing that I would recommend you do if you have any chance is volunteer—even for short periods. You can volunteer with church groups, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) farmer-to-farmer, or rotary club sponsorships, whatever you happen to find. Even things



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like hurricane relief or short-term experiences—any experience like that is good.

You can also hang out with international students at your school. Play soccer, invite them home for Thanksgiving, or teach them the Texas two-step. Learning to be comfortable with other cultures, accents, and foods—these will prepare you for future international work.

CSA News: Once students graduate, what should they be looking to do?

Muir: After graduate school, I recommend you find some way to spend at least two years on location doing some sort of international work. What I did after graduate school was a Fulbright. The Fulbright sounds difficult to get, but actually, if you're willing to work in certain places, like Uzbekistan or Burundi, the graduate student research programs are fairly easy to get.

You can also get an internship with the United Nations or do development work with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Or you could work for two years with a

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non-governmental organization (NGO). There are scores of religiously affiliated NGOs out there—for example, World Vision or Hunger Relief. There are also non-religious NGOs. You're not going to become rich doing this work, but there are opportunities.

The other option, of course, is the Peace Corps, which espouses true immersion into host cultures. You definitely won't get rich doing that since it's volunteer work, but the Peace Corps is always looking for agronomists and crop scientists. It's not easy to get into, but they deal with a lot of agriculture, community development, and engineering. Society members, you student members, would be very sought after by the Peace Corps if you can afford two years. Then, based on that work, you could build a career overseas by working in contracts with NGOs, for example, if that's what you're looking to do. Once you've volunteered, you have a foot in the door.

CSA News: What types of projects have you been involved in and how different are they?

Muir: I think the best way to categorize the projects is by funding source because that's always a limitation. Depending on who you get to fund your international work, they'll have expectations that may be very different. I've worked with the USAID on projects, and they are very structured, very goal oriented. They generally want to be able to come in and establish national capacity. They want to train other people to do what you do. You work yourself out of a job.

Working for a university or a ministry of agriculture is similar. They want you to come in and build their capacity, and then they expect you to leave.

I've also worked with NGOs, and they're much more entity oriented. They're looking to benefit local communities in a more permanent, sustainable way. With NGOs, you aren't necessarily working yourself out of the job. They're more long term.

I've found myself working for third parties, for universities or ministries, but then getting paid by my own government. I've also received funds from donations, funds from the European Union, or funds from individual countries like Italy or Denmark. Just because we're Americans doesn't mean we can't work for the Danish government. Or just because we're thinking of going over with our own government doesn't mean we can't actually end up working for the local government.

CSA News: What is your advice for students or early career professionals who want to establish their career in the U.S. but also want to work overseas?



Left: Image courtesy of the U.S. Peace Corps. Above: Flickr/
hiddenfromview.



Muir: If you're interested in international work as university professors later on in your careers, you should still do some international work during or after school. Then you can come back to the states and get a job here. I imagine you'd want to focus on getting tenure and promotion, and once you're comfortably situated in a university, all the experience you had earlier will come back into play. Then it will be easy to become involved in university research internationally.

Interestingly, for some of the projects that my colleagues and I have been involved in internationally as professors, we no longer get funding from the U.S. The costs are actually covered by the host country, which is pretty amazing. If you want to work in China for a short period or have research exchanges with people in South Africa, often they'll pay for expenses and housing while you're there. They may or may not pay for your salary, but they'll cover extra travel, living, and research costs. I'm working with a university in Brazil right now. They apply for a grant that covers all of my expenses, and I supervise graduate students. It's quite a sea change from the last century where the U.S. donated everything.

CSA News: What if students or professors want to get involved in international work but can't spend a significant amount of time abroad?

Muir: I've worked overseas full time, and I've worked overseas part time—come and go—and those are two very different approaches to working internationally. And then there are those who work internationally without ever leaving their office. They might host international students and projects, publish overseas, or serve as editors on journals that are based overseas, even in different languages. You can even help international student groups at your univer-

sity, such as a bicycle loan project we have at Tarleton.

So there are different levels of international work—full-time, part-time, or armchair international work. And it just depends on what your preferences are and what your tolerances are. Sometimes your health doesn't allow you to live in certain places. You may have to stay fairly close to a doctor or an emergency room. My wife, kids, and I lived in a place for a year in Mozambique where it took us over 24 hours to get to an emergency room. If you have a chronic health issue, that's not a good situation. But that doesn't mean you can't do international work.

Also, you can be involved in international congresses or groups that put on congresses, just like the Societies. You can establish relationships with people in different countries and get invited as a speaker to their national conference or meeting. And if you can communicate with them to begin with, you're far more likely to get invited. If you spend two years in the Peace Corps and you come out speaking French, you're much more likely to get invited to France to give a talk. In today's Anglophone world, language shouldn't be a barrier, but in international work, it can open doors.

CSA News: Once someone has found an opportunity to do international work, do you have advice for making it an enjoyable and beneficial experience?

Muir: Absolutely. I think for anyone working overseas, it's best to go with the flow. My parents were missionaries, and I saw with their colleagues that the uptight ones only lasted a few weeks. The ones that were relaxed and went with the flow and didn't try to change everything overnight, they were the ones that thrived. Just be mellow.

Be very sensitive to cultural values and social hierarchies, especially within universities. If you go with a humble and laid-back attitude, you're a lot more likely to thrive long term, and by doing that, then you'll be a lot more effective.

The other thing, too, is to go with an attitude of learning and experiencing. Probably that's even more important. What I see is that people who actually enjoy working overseas, who go for their own benefit as much as the benefit of others, do well. It's hard to change the world in a hurry, so it's best if you enjoy international work as a journey rather than a destination.

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