



Volunteer Jenny Giles and colleagues collect information on shark species on sale at a Bali market.

Roger Beckmann reports on some of the activities of Australian Volunteers International, forging new bonds with our neighbours

Wandering around remote Indonesian fish markets, buying the occasional shark and wrestling it into a taxi to take back to the lab is an example of what volunteers in ACIAR projects might get up to. This is what Jenny Giles recently found herself doing.

She had studied marine ecology and Indonesian language at university, and was working for CSIRO Marine Research in Queensland, when she took the opportunity of becoming a volunteer with Australian Volunteers International (AVI), allowing her to use her skills in an ACIAR project.

She moved to the Indonesian Fisheries Gondol Research Station, on the north coast of Bali, in August 2004. So began an interesting, busy and fruitful year in an ACIAR fisheries project, in which Jenny helped local scientists carry out market surveys.

A long-standing agreement between ACIAR and AVI allows Australians volunteering for overseas work to participate in ACIAR projects. In 2004, the two organisations signed a new memorandum of understanding to renew their ties and facilitate the use of volunteers in projects. Both organisations believe in forging connections between Australia and its neighbours at the community level, and in the idea that, through helping, we are also learning.

The current and former AVI volunteers contacted for this article share that belief. All feel that their volunteer placements contributed to local scientific research while also enriching them – not financially, of course, but the volunteer spirit is not motivated by that. Indeed, most volunteers were grateful that they received an allowance that was probably slightly above the average local wage. They did not feel short of money, provided they lived like the locals and avoided tourist areas.

Peanut problems

Kim-Yen Phan-Thien, from Sydney, volunteered to AVI and is working as a research assistant at the Indonesian Legume and Tuber Research Institute in Malang, East Java. Although she is still in her 20s, Kim is experienced as an Australian abroad, having spent most of 2004 as an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development in China (working on another ACIAR project).

She started in Indonesia in 2005. AVI sent her

LEARNING THROUGH HELPING



Kim-Yen Phan-Thien interviews a farmer as part of her research into "human relationships".

for in-country language training in Yogyakarta, before she started working on an ACIAR project on aflatoxin, a food toxin, in peanuts.

“It was hard to know where exactly I would be helping out until I got here,” Kim says. “Other staff members were obviously already very experienced. But ACIAR’s original project was enlarged to include study of the peanut supply chain. And that’s where I got involved.”

Kim has a degree in agricultural science from the University of Sydney and experience working with plant growth regulators. But volunteers must be adaptable and resourceful. Kim happily turned her hand from plant physiology to socioeconomic analysis to fit in with the needs of the project.

Her work involves tracking peanuts from farm gate to kitchen plate, with detailed interviews and a cost-benefit analysis of each stage of the product’s movement through the supply chain. Although she now speaks Bahasa Indonesia, she is usually accompanied by a technician to help translate into the Javanese spoken by the locals in the area.

Growth of the aflatoxin fungus and the associated toxin production are mainly determined by environmental conditions. In Indonesia, the problem tends to occur after harvesting (in contrast to the Australian situation, where pre-harvest contamination is more common).

So it is important that people involved in manufacturing and distribution know about the problem and how to minimise it (for example, by ensuring that peanuts are stored under conditions of very low humidity).

Kim was interested to see that Indonesian farmers do not usually organise the harvesting of their crop. Instead, traders offer farmers a sum of money in advance based on an estimate of final crop yield. If the deal is accepted, the traders then organise and pay for the harvesting. As a result, farmers have relatively little interest in the harvesting conditions and the postharvest fate of their crop. So, it is not enough for the scientific word to get out only to farmers. Instead an understanding of the entire supply chain in Indonesia and how it works is important if the problem is to be successfully addressed.

Kim’s surveys involve some tricky, subjective concepts. It is not quite the same as the science she has done in the past.

“We are finding out about the relationship between farmers and traders. How do farmers choose their trader? I need to ask about qualities such as trust, honesty, and satisfaction. These are culturally loaded terms.

“You can translate the words, but they may mean something quite different to a Javanese Muslim. For example, I’ve learnt that if you ask whether a trader has a good reputation, it may not be interpreted in the context of dealing in peanuts. Instead it could have more to do with whether the man is religiously devout. Hence, I’ve always got to be on the lookout for cultural loading in the way I ask questions and interpret answers.”

Kim is learning fast about how to work in the social sciences. She is taking advice from experts in the field and reading widely. ACIAR paid for her to attend a conference in Thailand that helped her learn from others carrying out similar work in Southeast Asia.

“I volunteered thinking I would be working in the lab on aspects of the plant-fungus relationship. Instead I’m working on human relationships!”

Australian project leader Dr Graeme Wright, of the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, is thrilled with the contribution Kim has made to the project. “The main benefit has been to provide a full-time presence for a range of project activities in Indonesia, which is always difficult to achieve via the normal short-term visits made by other Australian personnel,” he says. “She has been able to keep the Australian project leaders in contact with ‘happenings on the ground’ in Indonesia, as well as adding significant



Manual shelling of peanuts: sorting of peanuts for consumption is being encouraged as aflatoxin contamination is typically worse in diseased, damaged or immature kernels.

BID TO CONTROL AFLATOXIN

Peanuts everywhere are susceptible to infection with a fungus (*Aspergillus flavus* and related species) that releases a highly poisonous and possibly carcinogenic toxin. Infected nuts are usually discoloured and wrinkled. The issue is a serious one for the peanut industry, and aflatoxin levels must be regularly monitored.

ACIAR project PHT 97/017 (Reducing aflatoxin in peanuts using agronomic and bio-control strategies in Australia and Indonesia) is working on ways of reducing aflatoxin in the Indonesian and Australian peanut food chains, via a range of management strategies, which are aimed at minimising the environmental conditions conducive to fungal growth during both the pre- and post-harvest phases of the crop.

value to the project by her initiation of new activities, such as the supply chain studies.”

But Kim still helps out in the lab during busy times. Like other volunteers, she also finds that her English skills are in demand, and she helps colleagues when she can by proof-reading journal articles and giving practice and tuition for any English tests they are facing.

More than teaching English

Being an informal English ‘teacher’ was also something that Leigh Nind did during her stay in Ho Chi Minh City as a volunteer from 1996 to 1998. Leigh was working at Vietnam’s National Veterinary Company (Navetco) on an ACIAR project dealing with diagnostic methods and vaccine development for duck plague and, later, on similar tasks for *Pasteurella multocida* infections in pigs and poultry.

Leigh was finishing her PhD (through the University of Queensland) when she went to Vietnam. It was an eye-opening experience for a young person. At that time, Vietnam had only recently ‘opened up’, and she was the only foreigner on site at Navetco’s headquarters.

As a foreign woman in her mid-20s, many Vietnamese colleagues concluded that she must have been employed as an English teacher. Why else would such a young woman be there? And, of course, whenever possible she helped staff with their English, whether in conversation or writing. Indeed, it took a while for people to realise that she was there because of her scientific and veterinary skills rather than to correct their English.

“It was very useful to have the ACIAR in-country manager there



Leigh Nind (second from left) catches up with former colleagues at Navetco on her visit to Vietnam in 2004.

to resolve issues like this. Eventually things fell into place.”

Leigh had attended a one-month intensive language course through Navetco and the Overseas Service Bureau (as AVI was then called). But this was not enough to make her fluent in a language as challenging as Vietnamese. “There were interpreters in Navetco, with whom I worked closely. But gradually my language skills improved as I interacted with locals every day.”

While in Vietnam, Leigh was quite isolated from the outside world, as there was no ready access to the internet and email at that time. “I stayed with a local family, renting a single room from them, living like anyone else.” The rent for her room in the four-storey apartment building was about US\$300 a month, which was half of the monthly allowance she was paid as a volunteer.

“I came to appreciate a communal life. When I got sick, people in the building looked after me, bringing me meals. I made wonderful friends, whom I still know today. And I have been back since and renewed my ties.”

Shared stock

When not dealing with sharks in the market in Bali, Jenny Giles also found that her ability to speak Indonesian was an important attribute. At the research station she helped her co-workers develop their English writing skills, and provided support for visits from international project collaborators.

But her main work involved conducting biological surveys on shark and ray catches in local fish markets, as part of ACIAR’s project on artisanal shark and ray fisheries in eastern Indonesia.

Jenny was part of a large project to help in the management of elasmobranch (shark and ray) fisheries that straddle the marine divide between Australia and Indonesia. The research involves comparing the genetics of Indonesian elasmobranchs with those found in Australian waters, to see to what extent the stocks are shared. This is vital information for the management of shark and ray fisheries on both sides of the border. In Indonesia, a wide range of products is obtained from sharks and rays, primarily for export to other parts of Asia. Shark fin is the highest-value product and it is this export demand that tends to drive the market.

Jenny visited numerous fish markets in Bali, Java and Lombok, where she and her Indonesian colleagues examined and identified the produce on sale, occasionally taking samples for genetic testing, gathering reproductive information and collecting specimens to build an Indonesian reference collection. (Hence the occasional need to fit a large dead shark into a small taxi!) Indonesia has the greatest diversity of sharks and rays in the world, so there was plenty for Jenny to find, and it sharpened her taxonomic skills.

Jenny is fluent in Bahasa Indonesia, but of course most of the locals spoke Balinese or another regional language as a first language. With the help of her Indonesian colleagues she learnt how to negotiate the gap between Indonesian and the local language.

In the end, Jenny became immersed in local life, joining a gamelan orchestra and performing in local temples. Her many friends and colleagues called her the shared stock – as she formed such an effective bridge between Australia and Indonesia.

“I believe my presence gave both my Australian and Indonesian colleagues a closer understanding of the needs and priorities of both sides,” she says.

Culture shock?

AVI helps to prepare volunteers for the inevitable culture shock and readjustments that will come when trying to live on a local allowance in a developing country whose customs and language are usually quite different from Australia’s. No amount of pre-departure workshops and briefings, however well presented, can fully prepare people for the reality, and all the volunteers acknowledged a period of adjustment at first. Most were already aware of cultural sensitivities, in terms of their own dress and behaviour, and these lessons were quickly reinforced.

But culture shock can also operate in reverse. Jenny, who was in a remote and non-tourist part of Bali, recalls being mildly shocked when meeting other Australians there.

But it is when returning to Australia that volunteers often feel culture shock all over again. They leave behind friends, a familiar way of life, the sights, sounds and smells that they have become accustomed to, and the language that they have been regularly speaking.

As Leigh Nind puts it: “I came back and found it hard at first to adjust to the move from a collective way of life to a highly individualist culture.”

It can also be hard to find a job back home, unless the previous position has been kept open. Leigh had to start job-hunting straightaway, and is now a senior veterinary officer with Biosecurity Australia in Canberra.

Looking back on her time, she is thrilled that she played a small part in the eventual development of a rapid diagnostic test for duck plague, and the formulation of an effective cheap vaccine, made in Vietnam. The result has undoubtedly helped maintain duck populations (an important food source), thereby enriching the country. But Leigh feels she too has grown richer from the experience. And so do the other volunteers.

Jenny, for example, believes that the professional skills she learnt in Indonesia are highly transferable to her job back in Australia. Among other things, working in Indonesia made her more resourceful, flexible and patient – all of which help her to work effectively across two widely different cultures.

The benefits are clear all round: ACIAR gets skilled personnel, embedded in the partner country with local scientists and operating on a local salary; AVI increases its pool of volunteers and useful, worthwhile and well-organised projects in which to place them; and the volunteer gets a challenging and enriching experience that can bolster their skills when they return.

The unique position of the in-country volunteer helps ensure that the project really acts as a bridge. The volunteer is the embodiment of the notion of a partnership. Ideally, the volunteers can give invaluable feedback on local priorities to senior managers in both countries so that the project can be fine-tuned in a way that ensures its results deliver benefits where they are needed.

A footnote: ACIAR project leader Dr Graeme Wright reports that his son Dan is going to Cambodia in 2006 as an AVI on an ACIAR fisheries project. ◀