

Tales from the Field

Troubles come in threes

1) There is a color transparency in my collection that shows me in swimming trunks on the edge of a small, very remote lake in the New Guinea Highlands with the end of an airline from a large compressed air cylinder taped into my nose. Not recorded is my attempt, so taped, and with the air trickling into my nose, to haul myself seven meters down the anchor rope in the centre of the lake in an abortive attempt to retrieve the remains of essential coring apparatus lodged at the bottom of the lake. Having assembled the equipment (a Mackereth Mini-corer) on the lake-side, I had failed to check a vital coupling which had become detached from the retrievable part of the gear. Once I hauled up what I looked forward to enjoying as our first sediment core, I discovered that my haste had led to disaster. After two fruitless days of hunting for garages and Public Works Department depots with lathes I eventually resorted to making the coupling by sawing off the tops of the brass core caps with a junior hacksaw and spot weld-

ing the remaining thread onto the corer.

2) We moved on to our next lake (Egari) with this rather delicately assembled apparatus only to discover that the local villagers, would not cooperate until we had spent a morning with their ace marksman who, with his bow and arrow, stood in our inflatable boat as we quietly rowed around the small crater lake looking for the freshwater crocodiles that an agricultural extension officer had put in the lake much to the disgust of the villagers. None was seen, but help was agreed and our coring went well.

3) The third contretemps came when I returned to resample the lakes and visit others six years later. A mishap suffered by an ANU expedition the previous year had led to the drowning of a local man and there was a problem of 'payback'. I therefore avoided using a boat and did all the coring by swimming out with a 'Russian Corer' and up to 4 meters of rod, while using the buoyancy of two life jackets to keep afloat. At the last lake we sampled, I had been assured that it was safe to go up to the crater and do our coring, so I happily swam out into the lake, life jackets in-

flated and corer at the ready. I then looked up to see an arrow fly just above me. There were angry noises coming from the edge of the lake. I beat a hasty retreat to discover a rather vociferous, English speaking villager from the other side of the lake explaining that there was a battle on for possession of that area and didn't we know. Eventually he calmed our fears by reassuring us that they had given up fighting for the afternoon and we'd be OK. At that time, in 1979, fighting had sprung up all over the western and southern highlands and sadly, this turned out to be my last field work in the area.

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Fig. 1: Helpers from Egari village getting ready to look for fresh water crocodiles in the lake (Photo: F. Oldfield)

Do you have an interesting and humorous story from your paleoenvironmental fieldwork? If you write it down in 500 words or less and send it to us, we will put it in PAGES news!

Inside PAGES

The Pages IPO is undergoing some major staffing changes. Our office manager, Selma Ghoneim, began maternity leave in October and is not expected back in the office until March next year. Congratulations Selma! Selma's duties will be temporarily redistributed among the other office staff. Additionally, starting January 1, the IPO loses our science officer, Isabelle Larocque, who is returning to full time research. Isabelle did a great job at the IPO and we will miss her various skills. Isabelle will remain active in PAGES focus

5 and we hope maybe to entice her to return to Bern as a guest scientist some day. As a result of Isabelle's departure, Christoph Kull, currently our graphics coordinator, will take on additional official duties as science officer. In addition, beginning in June, Leah Christen-Witton, an Australian citizen resident in Bern with a background in science communication, will join us as to cover various outreach tasks and meeting organization.

Call for Contributions:

The next issue of PAGES News will compare Rates of Change in various aspects of the Earth system as reconstructed in Paleostudies with those measured in the present day. Andre

Paul from Bremen (Germany) will coordinate this issue. André was a visiting scientist at the IPO from July to September 2002. Science highlights that fit within this theme, as well as the usual workshop reports and program news, are welcome. If you are interested in contributing, contact André Paul for science highlights (apau@geo.palmod.uni-bremen.de) and Christoph Kull (kull@pages.unibe.ch) for all other matters.

All submissions should follow the instructions for authors on our web-site (www.pages.unibe.ch/products/newsletters.html) and be submitted by February 15, 2003.

