

Challenges In doing research in a rural area: experiences in Cambodia

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Research in general is not an easy discipline. It is a challenging task that requires patience, determination, resourcefulness and an open mind. If done properly and successfully, it can be a mentally stimulating and emotionally rewarding experience. However, certain types or modes of research can be more challenging than others.

For instance, field research can prove to be more difficult than laboratory-based research. The latter is often performed with a lab assistant, usually in an air-conditioned room, with the latest gadgets and equipment. Unlike the field, the parameters you deal with in a laboratory are more controllable. The realities are different as you leave the "comfort" of the four walls of your office.

So what Challenges lie ahead?

Language barrier. As an outsider - geographically and culturally speaking - it is very hard to communicate with field officers and farmers if you don't speak their language. Worse, if the farmers and field officers do not speak a common language or dialect disaster may not be far behind! (charades and pictorial...anyone?)

Local field officers' unfamiliarity with research methods. Participatory research is a new world to them. From mere spectators they become keen observers. From advisers they become students of the farmers. Provincial field officers are used to providing technical support and a channel for new information to farmers. They consider it as a deviation from the norm when they are expected to sit down, work and generate information with the farmers.

Culture and traditions. A researcher should consider culture and local traditions as very important aspects to observe and pay attention to when doing research in a rural area. We need to take time to know first how people live in the province, their common values and their way of living.

What do I do to overcome or adjust to these challenges?

Proper use of gestures and body language. We have a saying that "action speaks louder than words". I think this is true. Explaining to rural folks, especially farmers, what you want by drawing things or using hand signals can be effective ways of overcoming barriers in communication. Sometimes it's really difficult especially if you also do not know what to explain! But often you can get away with your own confusion by using gestures and using appropriate body language which can inject humour into the situation.

Providing motivation and a role model. This can be done in several ways. If we want local field officers and farmers to learn how to do research, we should set an example to them. As a Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu once said: "Teach by showing, learn by doing". Farmers and field officers will learn more if we demonstrate what we are teaching them, and thus allow them to see theories in practice.

As a researcher, I have come to accept and even appreciate (sometimes!) - the challenging realities in the field, especially in the rural areas. I also learned to focus and pay attention not only to my research but also to the people involved in the research. While the activity is ongoing, we generate not just data for our study but also valuable lessons, ranging from how to speak English "the Khmer way" to dealing with socio-cultural barriers encountered in the communities. We also come to realize that local people such as the provincial field officers have the same problems and challenge: in working with us. In the end, it becomes a mutually beneficial experience since we all eventually learn to adjust to each other and facilitate each other's learning.

Life History Workshop

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The Life History Workshop, held at AIT aquaculture outreach building on 27th-31st August 2001, brought together 12 participants (field research staff) from 5 countries from South (India and Bangladesh) and Southeast Asia (Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia) involved in the DIFID project.

Self-recruiting species (SRS) have been defined as animals that do not require repeated stocking in farmer-managed systems and include both indigenous and exotic species. The aim of the SRS project is to develop management strategies for self-recruiting species in aquaculture systems, to optimize production of and access to SRS within the livelihoods of the poor. To do this, we need among other things, good information on the basic biology of the species. However, we currently don't know much about the biology of these species. Life history training was necessary in order to provide each team involved in the project with the capacities and the technical support to explore by themselves the life history of the important SRS in their country. It includes step by step guidance on fish collection, identification and analysis of their main biological characteristics: where and how a species lives, its growth rate, its reproductive traits, its feeding habits and other aspects of biology. Such studies are indispensable for understanding the basic biology and for planning the management of a species. Dr Darrell Siebert, an eminent taxonomist from The Natural History Museum of London shared his experience with the participants, and led the lectures, practical and working groups during the 5 days of the workshop.

For practical work each team brought formalin - preserved specimens from its country; this collection of SRS was used as a basis for training. The first 2 days were devoted to fish anatomy, identification and taxonomy rules, the participants learnt how to make the observations and measurements necessary for a determination of the species. The 3rd day was focused on sampling and how to ensure good preservation of specimens. We also discussed how to get age and growth data (length frequencies and otolithometry). During the 4th day the participants learnt about techniques to study reproduction (gonad weight, GIS indices) and food habit (stomach contents). Finally, on the last day each team had the possibility to test their ability in designing a life history study, data collection and strategy development for their country.

This workshop was a good opportunity for participants to share their knowledge, experiences, to compare the resources of their countries and to work together. Although this training focused on fish, non-fish SRS species are no less important and this will be taken into account in subsequent phases of the project.