

Building Capacity for Tropical Biology and Conservation as Graduate Students Build Their Own

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How can graduate students from temperate and tropical countries develop effective partnerships with local stakeholders for advancing tropical biology and conservation? We examine knowledge exchange between graduate students and host-country partners during field research, including local communities, universities, professional researchers, conservation practitioners, and policymakers. These partnerships have the dual benefit of building scientific capacity in tropical countries and enhancing the scientific and practitioner skills of graduate students in tropical biology and conservation. We focus on collaborative experiences from Brazil, Bolivia, southern Africa and Guatemala at multiple scales: monitoring tropical tree populations with local communities; collaborating with local biology professors to support undergraduate research and training; partnering with local professional researchers and conservation practitioners to bridge scientific and experiential knowledge; and working with regional policymakers in applying scientific data to conservation planning. Through these field experiences, graduate students gained leadership skills and enhanced the quality of their research by responding to pertinent issues. Learning platforms were created in which ideas were exchanged, mutual capacity was built, and trust was developed for continued collaborations. Graduate students who engage in collaborative research must balance the needs of academia with those of host-country partners; active mentorship and institutional support are critical in allowing them to do this. Extra time, energy and funding are also needed to genuinely invest in such knowledge exchange. These opportunities, however, provide substantial rewards for graduate students and host-country partners alike, and for advancing the science and practice of tropical biology and conservation.

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