**A old professor learns new tricks in Cuba** or **What the Cuban people taught me**

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After 27 years as a Geology professor in Vermont, I settled into my Air Canada seat ready to leave a January Montreal blizzard for Santa Clara, Cuba. I wasn’t exactly happy. With an antsy new grad student to mentor, two teenagers to parent, and a 200 person class to teach, I was headed to Cuba, for meetings – not fieldwork. Using spotty email, I’d communicated for the past couple weeks with Rita and Alejandro, two Cuban environmental scientists. When the emails started, I assumed we’d meet, hire a truck, and head off sampling rivers. That’s how it worked in Africa, Bolivia, even in Greenland, but not Cuba. Sampling wasn’t going to happen on this trip and I was impatient and frustrated that I was wasting precious NSF funds and everyone’s time.

I thought I knew teamwork. I’d sampled icy streams in Greenland and eaten desert dust in the Namibia. My students and I bagged rocks, did chemistry, typed papers, and published. Then, at 56, I went to Cuba and realized what I had been doing wasn’t teamwork; it was work in far-away places with people who looked, acted, and talked like me.

The day President Obama landed in Cuba, I was SKYPEing with a collaborator, “We study how agriculture affects erosion in China, why not Cuba?” The goal was simple, how did the Cuban landscape reflect the adoption of conservation agriculture in the 1990s? That change resulted from the Soviet Union’s collapse and the life-threating shortages of food, fuel, and fertilizer that followed. We wrote the grant and NSF reviewers agreed, interesting science.

Days were filled with hours-long meals, fixing flat tires, and wandering through towns papered with Obama broadsides. I slept in a century-old home staring at 14 foot ceilings. At 7 am, in Cienfuegos, a city with no supermarkets, Marta, with a mix of hand gestures and Spanish, served breakfast. She cooked eggs as we liked them, offered tropical cakes, poured steaming coffee scented by evaporated milk, and heaped piles of slippery mango. During the day, we talked and listened with our translated colleagues in a conference room as scorpions scampered across the floor, but mostly we toured labs and in broken Spanish and English, spoke and took pictures. Before lunch, we were on the lab steps posing as a group, everyone grinning proudly.

When we brought out American snacks, our hosts insisted gifts must be shared with the entire lab. In tropical sunshine, dozens of people ate maple candies. We drove an hour to our homestay packed 3 abreast in a lime green ’57 Chevy stopping to see *Organoponicos* where immense cabbages spilled from shaded beds. In the shadow of Soviet-era highrises, we snapped photos arm-in-arm. After 56 years, it took two days for me to know - my American vision of teamwork in faraway places, wasn’t. My new Cuban friends showed me that real teamwork involved listening better, slowing down, accepting the ways of others, and getting to know a place and a people – a distinct lack of hierarchy and power.

Since then, we’ve worked across Cuba in bright yellow minivans packed with Cubans and Americans - students, faculty, scientists all sweating together. Spanish speakers next to English speakers waist deep in rivers. We work quickly but this is not grab-and-go geology. On the last night of one trip, we searched for a restaurant that could seat all 14 of us at one table because that’s what teams do. Between fieldtrips, we make analyses in labs 2500 kilometers apart and all the data go to everyone. Our papers and abstracts have a dozen plus authors.

Cuba and its people have changed me, an old, white, long-tenured professor. I am surely not the only American who could learn teamwork, respect, and a sense of our place in the world from the Cuban people. We Americans, who spend so much time competing and taking sides, could do well to understand our neighbors, people shunned since before I was born. Every day, we hope to welcome our Cuban teammates to America and share our way of being, our labs, our farms, and our rivers with them – our course, that can’t happen until our government gives Cuban scientists visas. Let’s get on that. It’s about time.