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

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I settled into my seat on a plane bound for Cuba feeling frustrated. When I planned the trip, I had assumed that my Cuban collaborators and I would hit the ground running, heading out into the field straight away to collect water and soil samples from rivers. That’s how I’d done fieldwork in Namibia, Bolivia, Israel, and Greenland. But not in Cuba, I was slowly learning. Five days earlier, one of the Cuban scientists had emailed to inform me that we’d be meeting only to talk about our planned project. Sampling would happen during a later trip, she wrote. That left me feeling impatient and unhappy. Why did I need to get on a plane to have a meeting? But I’m thankful I made the trip because it taught me a key lesson: It was I—not the Cubans—who had a flawed approach to doing field science.

When I got to Cuba, the youngest of my collaborators greeted me at the airport with a broad smile, a “welcome to Cuba” in perfect English, a strong handshake, and hug. The next day, we drove to El Centro de Estudios Ambientales de Cienfuegos, the environmental research center where he worked. In the morning, a dozen of us met in a modern, air conditioned conference room, as scorpions scurried across the floor. Each of us gave a presentation about our science expertise and what we hoped to learn from the study of Cuban river water and sediment.

Then, the group toured every lab in the building. I met other scientists, technicians, secretaries, students, and the cook. Some spoke English; others communicated to me in Spanish while my collaborator translated. I was impressed that I was introduced to each and every person in their center. The lack of hierarchy—the “team” atmosphere—was unlike anything I’d experienced before in academia.

The next day we met again and for the first time, worked as a team. Together, we poured over maps to pick two dozen sample points along rivers in central Cuba; we learned from the Cubans which roads were passable and where the maps were wrong; we made lists of equipment we’d need to bring from the States to make the fieldwork happen; we planned sampling day-by-day so our Cuban teammates could secure the needed permits. I was learning – there was no way we could have done research in Cuba without our team.

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 authors.

Cuba and its people have changed me, a long-tenured professor. I spend more time listening in class now, more time building teams in our lab, and more time illustrating how different cultures interact with the Earth around them. My classes respond. Students are happier, we work together to understand the material, there’s far less complaining and far more student engagement. My new Cuban friends showed me that real teamwork involves listening better, slowing down, accepting the ways of others, and getting to know a place and its people – everyone has a voice and is part of the decision making. Our science is better for it and our first paper together, about river water quality, would never have happened, if not for these two days of meetings.

We Americans, who spend so much time competing and taking sides, could do well to understand our Cuban neighbors, people shunned since before I was born. Every day, we hope to welcome our 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; we have so much to learn.