

## Successful Conservation and Sociological Involvement: An Integral Pair?

*Nikolay Kazakov, PhD Candidate in Interdisciplinary Ecology*

Ten years after the Rio Summit of 1992 I found myself in an interesting situation. Fresh from school and having adopted a local community capacity-building project, I was so excited about making changes that impacted people's lives. But my enthusiasm subsided after I found it impossible to report any meaningful results.

We had all kinds of meetings, trainings and educational materials. NGOs were created and functional, but how much capacity did we really build? My colleagues thought that I behaved strangely: "If the sponsor is happy with the number of trainings and pictures of smiling people, what else do we need? How can we absolutely know that we are doing the right thing, right?"

Research has identified that, in spite of hundreds of local capacity-building projects throughout the world, the knowledge of "what the right thing is" and "whether or not we are doing it" does not exist within the conservation framework. In other words, we are not sure what we are building, and we cannot perform any needs assessment. We do not have any actual indicators of success or measurements of progress. We just spend money on what we assume is "the right thing" and expect something good to happen. Agrawal and Redford (2006) described the



**Nikolay Kazakov chatting with a villager in the Guatemalan town of Uaxactun.**



**For six dollars a day, people from nearby communities clear a forest for ranching.**

situation as “shooting in the dark.”

Why does this happen, I questioned. But then, I thought that we just need more time to develop better knowledge of humans’ role in ecosystems.

Now, working in Maya Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala, I am confronted with this specter once again. Here, the impossibility to enforce fortress approach triggered establishment and development of community forest concessions in the multiple-use zone (MUZ) of the reserve. Millions upon millions of US dollars were spent to initiate and develop the process which resulted in significant success—in the last 15 years the concessions were able to conserve MUZ better than the Park Service, police and army (Bray et al., 2008).

At the same time, after the main supporting source of funds was removed, the concession system started collapsing. My research showed: no advanced methods of community development had been used, and practically no social research was done.

If we recognize that people are the key to conservation why don’t we adequately measure and research them? Practically all social research within conservation is primitive, lacks rigor, and uses simplistic analysis (e.g. Browne-Nuñez & Jonker, 2008).

Why doesn’t conservation use the best available sociological research? We don’t know what we don’t know? Or we don’t want to know what we don’t know? How many more years do we need to pick up and read existing literature on community capacity (e.g. Al, 1996; ASDC, 2007), community development, modern methods of social research, etc.? Why do we keep reinventing the existing wheel of community research, and do it so poorly? Why don’t we have measurements after spending millions of US dollars for changing people? Is it because we don’t know how, because we don’t care, or because we specifically don’t want to?

I have no problem with conservation organizations changing their focus in pursuit of money, but I do a problem when we refuse to perform a quality job for the money (Chapin, 2004).

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## Conducting Mail Surveys in Japan

By Ryo Sakurai, M.S.  
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How many times have you received a mail survey? It can be a survey conducted by the government, city offices, companies or any other group. Did you actually complete the questionnaire and return it? You might have thrown it away once you realized that it was a mere survey, not a letter from an important friend. You might have opened the envelope but then realized that the questionnaire looked much longer than you expected and thrown it away.

Although in the US we receive some type of mail survey once in a while, in my country, Japan, mail surveys are not popular. Mail surveys are considered an ineffective polling technique that achieve relatively low response rates, usually no more than 20-40% in Japan (Jussuaume & Yamada, 1990; Aoki, 2001). Since low response rate can reduce the power of generalizability and validity of a study, Japanese textbooks recommend mail surveys far less often compared with other survey methods such as interviews or phone surveys (Inamori, 2005).

In the US, the development of the Total Design Method (Dillman, 1978) increased response rates of mail surveys; following this method, a 60% or higher response rate could be reasonably expected (Salant & Dillman, 1994).

One of the purposes of my research, conducted in summer 2008, was to test the US mail survey method in Japan, and to understand its effect in raising the response rate in a different environment, culture and people. The survey queried individuals' knowledge of and attitudes toward black bears (*Ursus thibetanus*) which live in Japan.

I followed the Tailored Design Method (Dillman, 2007), a revised version of Total Design Method, and sent out pre-notice letters, questionnaires, reminder postcards and replacement questionnaires, one after another. A 6-page questionnaire, with a pencil as a material



Japanese newspaper article on Ryo's study. Photo courtesy of Ryo Sakurai.

incentive, was sent out to 600 residents in the rural village, Otari, and 600 residents in urban city, Nagano, both in central Japan (Fig. 1). These residents were chosen based on a random sample that was selected from the telephone directory.

Before conducting this study, my colleagues and other researchers in Japan were very skeptical about what my results would be. They made such comments as “I assume you will not even get a 10% response rate,” and “Local people are not used to answering mail surveys. Who will do such a long questionnaire for you?”



***Ryo preparing the 1200 mail surveys for shipping.***  
Photo courtesy of Ryo Sakurai.

So how was the result?

After a month and a half, I got 371 responses from Otari, and 278 from Nagano. Subtracting the questionnaires that did not reach their destination, the response rate was 66.7% in Otari and 48.3% in Nagano. It was much higher than what most Japanese researchers expected and most Japanese textbooks predict. The American method (Tailored Design Method) certainly was effective, even in a different culture (Japan).

Is it because of the method, the Tailored Design Method, or are there any other additional factors that contributed to such a high response rate?

One reason for the high rate could be that people were very much concerned about bears in the area. In Otari, a junior high school student was attacked by a bear on his way to the school, and lost his eye about

two years before the survey was conducted. Because of this shocking incident, people in Otari may have been really concerned about bears and were eager to express their worries.

The second possible reason was the survey’s advertisement in a local newspaper. An editor of the local newspaper, Shinshu Daily Paper, interviewed me and wrote an article about my performing this study. The majority of people in Otari and Nagano read this paper, and some people might have answered my survey after reading the article because they became interested in the survey beforehand and knew who would be conducting it (a man with a suit!) (Fig. 2).

I am not sure how much of the high response rate was due to the Tailored Design Method, and how much was due to prior interest in this topic and the newspaper article about the survey.

Even though this study was one of the first approaches to break the myth that mail surveys achieve a low response rate in Japan, it is necessary to investigate how and why it worked so well and in what situation it will not work.

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## A Word from the Director...

*Dr. Stephen Humphrey, SNRE Director*

As the calendar year draws to a close, things are going well in SNRE. Our effective and loyal staff are still here. Cathy Ritchie has been with SNRE (and its predecessor CNRE) for 16 years, Meisha Wade for 10. We have some terrific students assisting in the office, handling reception, secretarial, purchasing, travel, information technology, and webmaster services: Kiah Barrette, Matthew Beaton, Brittany Burtner, Kirsten Kardasz, Cynthia Ocampo, and Jason Reeder. There's a steady buzz of activity in the office. Everything gets done, and well! Dr. Kelly Reiss has just finished teaching the foundation course in Environmental Science. Dr. Ignacio Porzecanski taught the capstone course, Critical Thinking in Environmental Science, and has departed for an austral summer Christmas in Uruguay. Dr. Leda Kobziar is wrapping up a semester of research in fire ecology and preparing to teach in the spring.



***Dr. Humphrey, SNRE Director***  
**Photo courtesy of SNRE.**

We're seeing strong interest in the undergraduate program in Environmental Science and graduate program in Interdisciplinary Ecology. Undergraduate enrollment grew to 147 students, while graduate enrollment grew to 136. The rising generation sees serious challenges to the natural resources supporting society and novel threats from climate change and peak oil. They're responding through degree work in SNRE to prepare to meet these challenges head-on. Our goal is to provide students with the knowledge and tools they'll need to succeed.

Now graduate applications are rolling in. These will drive our work for the next several months. The unusual interdisciplinary program is magnetic and draws attention worldwide. SNRE does matchmaking with our 287 affiliate faculty across the university, to place applicants carefully with strong mentors and find financial assistance to the extent possible. The result is a remarkably strong, diverse community of graduate students, with 75% at the doctoral level. Their failure rate is very low, a source of pride for us.

Recently we added something to the graduate webpage to help students think about tailoring course selection to their individual needs and interests: a conceptual diagram of the [social-](#)

[ecological system](#). Students are advised to consult and discuss this with their advisors, to map their research interests within the framework as a tool to identify appropriate coursework.

We just completed a survey of the employment of the 25 doctoral students graduating since Summer 2005. Eight are academic faculty, four in the U.S. and four international. Five are academic post-docs, all in the U.S. Four are in government, three federal and one state. Seven work for non-profit organizations, four in the U.S. and two international. And one works in industry/business, optimizing crop management and erosion/pollution control on a large farm. The most effective way to stay in touch has been through Facebook. We set up a "School of Natural Resources and Environment Alumni and Friends" group, and we're actively contacting alumni to build this network. It's great fun to hear from alumni and find out what they're doing.



## The Herpetology Conference, 2010

*By Kirsten Hecht, M.S. candidate in Interdisciplinary Ecology*

The longest running regional herpetology symposium in the United States is returning to the Paramount Plaza Hotel and Suites Conference Center in Gainesville, FL. The 33rd Annual Herpetology Conference will take place Friday and Saturday, March 26-27, 2010.

Since 1976 the Herpetology division of the Florida Museum of Natural History has hosted the annual Herpetology Conference. The School of Natural Resources and Environment (SNRE) and the Reptile and Amphibian Conservation Corp (RACC) will both help to sponsor the event. SNRE provides web services for the conference, and recent managers of the conference have all been SNRE graduate students. Money raised by the conference underwrites the cost of the conference, funds research--often by students at the University of Florida, including those in SNRE--of a variety other herpetological projects usually related to conservation.

The Herpetology Conference provides a relaxed atmosphere and a unique, inexpensive opportunity to network with others interested in reptiles and amphibians. The conference's philosophy is to bring together all phases of herpetology, and through these phases interaction, be more effective in advancing the importance and understanding of reptiles and amphibians. It is also a great place for students to present their research.

"In previous years we've had everyone from high school students to members on the National Academy of Sciences make presentations," said Dr. Max Nickerson, curator of herpetology at The Florida Museum of Natural History. "Although we have more attendees from the southeastern United States, we typically have individuals from many states and some foreign countries."

The conference serves as a venue for scientific and technical interest groups to come together and discuss important issues. Participants can listen to research presentations on a wide variety of topics. Past topics have ranged from life history and ecology of reptiles and amphibians to tips on photographing animals and herpetological travelogues. This year a



***The 33rd Annual Herpetology Conference actively seeks to unite all aspect of herpetology. In doing so, it hopes to increase understanding and curiosity in reptiles and amphibians Photo courtesy of UF SNRE Special Collections.***

special session is being planned to address the important and complex issues currently facing Florida's herpetological community, such as invasive species and pet trade regulations.

Besides a variety of talks, this year's conference will also offer a poster session for students to share their work--or research proposals--and receive feedback from other attendees. Participants will have a chance to bid on art, rare reprints and books in the silent auction, and they can browse merchandise from several vendors. One of the conference's highlights is the BBQ social and live auction, which will take place on Friday night. In the past the auction has featured everything from reptile and amphibian themed antiques and jewelry to field equipment and live animals.

Those wishing to get involved with the conference have several options. Abstracts to present a poster or presentation are currently being accepted until January 11, 2010. Those who don't have research to present but would like to be actively involved are encouraged to volunteer. Volunteers traditionally receive discounts for the conference. Donations of any type are always appreciated. Monetary sponsorships help provide awards for the poster session and travel funds for students. Merchandise or gift cards can also be donated for use in the live auction or by attendees. Anyone interested in donating to the conference or volunteering should email the conference manager at [kirstenhecht@ufl.edu](mailto:kirstenhecht@ufl.edu).

Preregistration discounts and group hotel rates are available. For more information about the 33rd Annual Herpetology Conference or for directions on submitting an abstract please visit <http://snre.ufl.edu/herpetology>.

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## Alumni Spotlight: Amy Sullivan and Lin Cassidy

*By Amy Sullivan, PhD in Interdisciplinary Ecology in 2004 and Lin Cassidy, MS in Interdisciplinary Ecology 2003 (PhD in Political Ecology 2007)*

Prospective students might be wondering how far or how high one can go with a degree in Interdisciplinary Ecology. Well, at last, there is some empirical evidence from two graduates from the School of Natural Resources and Environment: you can go, at least, as far as the remote mountains of the tiny mountain kingdom of Lesotho in southern Africa, and as high as 2820 meters.



An african bovine selling technique.

Back in 2004, Amy Sullivan graduated with a PhD in Interdisciplinary Ecology after doing her MS in Agricultural Extension / Farming Systems, while Lin Cassidy obtained her MS in Interdisciplinary Ecology in 2003, before completing her PhD in Geography in 2007.

And there we were, not too long after, working together to give input into a development project in a rural community in an area of the world where life is unpredictable and tough, but where the people are adaptable and even tougher...

Our tasks were to conduct a baseline assessment of hazards, risks and vulnerabilities among subsistence farmers who rely heavily on the natural environment for their livelihoods and to train practitioners from other African countries to repeat the

process in their own project areas.

The assessment will allow a large NGO to measure how successful their planned disaster risk reduction interventions will end up being.



Amy at Moteng Pass in the mountain kingdom of Lesotho, 2820 meters above sea level.

Disaster risk reduction, by the way, is an increasingly important approach to sustainable development. It is based on the view that under “normal conditions” most livelihood systems are sustainable but under extreme conditions—where events go terribly wrong—development workers are needed to focus their efforts and help the system.

In rural areas, livelihoods are so strongly linked to the environment and natural resources, that it is important to consider both natural and social conditions – calling for an interdisciplinary, multi-scale approach.



Lin driving through Lesotho

Needless to say, we learned more than we taught, and may it be forever that way! It is humbling to be called on to coordinate the locals’ wealth of knowledge and restructure it in a way that can meet the challenges of a rapidly changing environment and society. And it was great to learn that the skills we acquired through SNRE were relevant and useful!

Since graduating, Amy has worked in transboundary water governance at the International Water Management Institute (one of the CGIAR institutes) in the Limpopo and Volta river basins and as a consultant across Africa on projects ranging from small-scale irrigation to linking women to markets. She is now working with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) on a project design document for a network to collect, synthesize, and disseminate lessons learned on agricultural water management across sub-Saharan Africa.

Lin returned to her home country of Botswana in late 2007, where she resumed consulting in policy matters and natural resources management while waiting to hear whether her application for a post at the University of Botswana’s Harry Oppenheimer Okavango Research Centre would be successful. Later, while working at the Lesotho consultancy, she learned that it had been accepted, and started work at HOORC in March 2009. She is now a Research Scholar combining political ecology and spatial analysis as focal areas, and is happy to be able to conduct fulfilling, applied research while living in her home town on the edge of the Okavango.

## What's New in the SNRE Student Council

*By Matthew Beaton, Editor-in-chief of The Source*

It's been another exciting, action-packed semester for the SNRE Student Council. During the past semester, the council engaged in public service and numerous student led research discussions.

Early in the semester, in October, the club performed a natural resource beautification project.

"One of our larger projects was doing the Tumblin Creek cleanup," said Carrie Vath, SNRE Student Council Graduate President. "So, we went out and picked up trash and debris over there."

Numerous on-campus clubs do clean-ups in Tumblin Creek which empties out of Bivans Arm Lake, runs across SW 13th St. and dies out just before the Shands at Agh Hospital.

"It's our service component of the club," Vath said.

The goal of the club is not simply to engage in community service but to create opportunities for students to learn and share from each other.

"One of the things that we are really trying to do is provide a connection between undergraduate students and graduate students," Vath said.

At the council's initial meetings, Vath and the other position holding members sought out undergraduate members' research interests. Based on those interests, they recruited graduate students in SNRE to share their research at later club meetings.

"They come in and do a 20 to 30 minute presentation on their research," Vath said. "That way students are seeing what's going on in the field."

The council also put on a very popular panel discussion, detailing the rigors involved in entering graduate school. Held on November 9th, the panel discussion consisted of five graduate students who were questioned by undergraduates, regarding the planning and preparation needed for graduate school.

"Students were able to come in and ask a bunch of questions: how they apply, how they find an advisor, what were these students' experiences?" Vath said.



**SNRE Student Council Graduate President Carrie Vath Photo courtesy of Carrie Vath.**

About 20 undergraduate students attended the session, and the student council plans to hold another similar panel discussion during the spring semester, likely sometime in March.

Throughout the semester, the council met—and will continue to meet—once a month, usually on the last Thursday of the month, from 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. The meeting location changes based on room availability, but one can email Vath at [cvath@ufl.edu](mailto:cvath@ufl.edu), and she will keep you informed of the meeting's location.

As they look to the spring, the council has plenty of exciting events on the horizon. The first of these is the council's annual coffee fundraiser. They will be selling SweetWater Organic Roasters fair trade coffee to raise money which will go toward student travel expenses.

"The money that we make all goes into the travel grant," Vath said. "So, that we can give money to graduate students and undergraduate students that are traveling to conferences."

The coffee will be sold by the pound. Students, faculty and nonstudents can sign up in Black Hall Room 103 to purchase as many pounds as they like. The flavors include Breakfast Blend, French Roast and Decaf. The price ranges between \$12 and \$13 per pound for the coffee. The fundraiser will run through the month of January.

Once that fundraiser concludes, the council will begin selling t-shirts. It will start in February and run until the semester's end. Vath estimated that the t-shirts will cost around \$15 or \$20 dollars, though she was unsure of the exact number.

Also during the spring, the club will hold the Distinguished Speaker Event, featuring Dr. Arun Agrawal, an expert in international development and environmental conservation. He is a professor at the University of Michigan and a former University of Florida faculty member. The event will be held on April 9th.

Looking back on this semester and on toward the future, Vath was pleased with what the council has accomplished and is eagerly anticipating its upcoming events.

"This has been my first year being the president and it has been wonderful to work with the undergraduate office," Vath said.

"It's been a lot of fun and really great, and I'm excited about our upcoming spring events."

Carrie Vath – President ([cvath@ufl.edu](mailto:cvath@ufl.edu))

Check out the SNRE Student Council's web page for more news and updates: <http://snre.ufl.edu/people/studentcouncil.html>