



# 1

## GETTING THE MOST OUT OF FIELDWORK

### OVERVIEW

This introductory chapter addresses the following questions:

- How can you get the most out of fieldwork?
- What is fieldwork and why is it important in university level geography?
- What is meant by 'the field' and how can you engage with it?
- What are the key concerns and criticisms of fieldwork? These encompass the intellectual relevance of fieldwork; its practical value to you as a student; its financial and environmental costs; and its ethics.

The chapter invites you, as a student, to enjoy fieldwork but also to take it seriously, asking challenging questions about and through the field.

### INTRODUCTION: FIELDWORK AND GEOGRAPHY

Fieldwork is compulsory for many geography students and a recommended option for most others because it occupies an important place within academic and professional geography. It has been suggested that fieldwork is to geographers what clinical practice is to medicine. For better or worse, fieldwork is often treated as an 'initiation ritual of the discipline' (Rose 1993: 69) and the field is 'depicted as the locus of becoming for the real geographer' (Powell 2002: 267). This is as true of undergraduate geographers as of their professors. As Felix Driver has noted, this commitment to fieldwork reflects the 'assumption ... that that the complete geographer is one who can conduct fieldwork according to certain standards – in other words, safely, skilfully and effectively' (2000: 268). Moreover, it is often suggested that fieldwork is what distinguishes genuine geographers from mere interlopers. Canadian geographer Cole Harris puts it this way:

There are geographers who do not enjoy fieldwork. One of my colleagues in the late 1960s, an eminent spatial theorist, could not abide the world as it presented itself to the senses. It was too cluttered. He liked to be driven, and he would sit in the back seat of a large car with the blinds



down. At home he watched gangster films and adjusted his equations. But most of us are not such purists. We are more inclined to take the world as it is – or as it seems to be – to get out into it, look hard at it, ask questions about it, and grapple with the conundrums so presented. This usually means fieldwork ... (2001: 329)

Having ‘been there’ is said to lend credibility not only to geographers themselves but also to their research findings and claims, even though these truth claims have increasingly been interrogated and contested as we explain in subsequent chapters.

The importance of fieldwork in the geographical tradition reflects the influence of foundational geographers and geographical institutions, who defined modern geography as a field-based discipline. Carl Sauer, who headed the Geography Department at the University of California, Berkeley, and is often regarded as the father of North American Geography, famously declared that ‘the principal training of the geographer should come, wherever possible, by doing fieldwork’ (Sauer 1956: 296). He practised what he preached: running weekend fieldtrips in the local area and spending his summers and sabbaticals further afield, particularly in Mexico (West 1979). In doing so he renewed a fieldwork tradition which he inherited from and shared with others, including fellow American geographers such as William Morris Davis (1850–1934) and institutions such as the Association of American Geographers (AAG), which cohered around a shared interest in fieldwork and field-based data and convened annual field conferences in the 1920s and 30s (Mathewson 2001; Rundstrom and Kenzer 1989). Fieldwork was also important to geographers and geographical institutions outside the United States. These included explorers: the most important geographical institution in the Victorian period, the London-based Royal Geographical Society (RGS), committed itself to carrying out ‘important Expeditions in every quarter of the Globe’ (as its royal charter of 1859 put it) (*Times* 2009: 2). Fieldwork was promoted by educators too, with a ‘cult of the field’ in the early years of British state schooling from 1870 onwards (Ploszajska 1998: 758). And when Geography had become established in British universities the commitment to fieldwork continued, both in the research activities of geographers and undergraduate curricula.

This commitment to fieldwork has been reaffirmed, both by geographers working broadly in the tradition established by Sauer and by others with very different perspectives. Cole Harris has reflected that for him, and indeed for ‘many a geographer’ he has known, ‘the high points of a working geographical life have been exhilarating experiences in the field’ (2001: 329). His commitment to fieldwork is echoed by geographers from other traditions for whom ‘the field’ and fieldwork mean very different things. William Bunge, whose radical and creative geographies both emerged from and challenged quantitative and analytical work within the discipline in the 1960s, criticised what he saw as an emerging tendency to ‘cite not sight’ (Bunge 1979: 171). He encouraged geographers to get into the field and find things out for themselves, and he set an example for how they might do so that would involve members of the public in the process (Chapter 9 explains how). More recently, others have reaffirmed the commitment to fieldwork and the geographical tradition in which the field is accorded a

central place. David Stoddart introduced his inspired history of the discipline, *On Geography* (1986), as ‘a book written from the field and not from the armchair’ (p. xi), and fieldwork in all its forms is central to that book, which celebrates a world ‘of great beauty and diversity, waiting for exploration’ (p. x).

Fieldwork is not just an Anglo–American geographical tradition. It has also been important to geographical research and teaching in other parts of the world too. In Singapore, for example, it has flourished in the context of wider efforts by educators, supported by the Ministry of Education, to encourage independent, creative and critical learning (Chuan and Poh 2000). Similarly, in other countries from Argentina to Hong Kong, geographers have stressed the ‘irreplaceable’ role of fieldwork and successfully campaigned for its place on the curriculum (Kwan 2000; Ostuni 2000). So, to an extent, there seems to be a broad international consensus on the value and purpose of geographical fieldwork today.

Finally, we should add that the fieldwork tradition has not just been inherited and shaped by foundational figures – who were once called ‘fathers of the discipline’ and now increasingly will include ‘mothers’ too. Fieldwork also relies upon those who participate in and support it. These include workers who provide transportation and accommodation, ranging from guides and porters in nineteenth-century expeditions to flight attendants, drivers and cooks today. Ultimately, undergraduate fieldwork sinks or swims as a result of the ways in which students themselves engage with it. Pedagogical articles about fieldwork often quote favourable feedback from students, explaining how trips to the field brought course material to life – ‘seeing how it mattered’, as one student put it in a course evaluation (Hope 2009: 175) – and sometimes tracing forms and degrees of learning from and engagement with field projects. These surveys suggest – and when published are intended to suggest – that it is not only academic geographers who believe in fieldwork, willingly participating in the fieldwork tradition, but students as well. It will be necessary to revisit glossy claims such as these. For now, though, the point is that on some level the fieldwork tradition is alive and well and that students are playing their part in making it so.

On the other hand, fieldwork means different things in different times and places. The fieldwork tradition in geography is marked not only by continuity but also by change and diversity. Not just one tradition, it is comprised of a series of traditions which are variously performed and contested. We should not do fieldwork simply because others have done it. Rather, we must ask challenging questions about what fieldwork is and what it should be, and also about what the field in fieldwork is and should be.

## WHAT IS FIELDWORK?

As noted in the introductory chapter, fieldwork means different things in different times and places, though it is usually understood as supervised learning that involves first-hand experience outside the classroom (Loneragan and Andersen 1988: 1; Gold et al. 1991: 23). This is not

as straightforward as it first appears because different people have different understandings of ‘geographical issues’. One textbook on fieldwork advises geography students not to ‘become too interested in historical facts about towns or buildings’ and to ‘avoid biological information about the animals and plants you find’ (Glynn 1988: 3). We prefer to define the geographical more inclusively however – not to exclude the historical or biological, for instance, but to regard these and other phenomena through geographical perspectives. We would also note that, while this book is concerned with fieldwork *for human geographers*, and while fieldwork is important in defining geography as a discipline – making it ‘an identifiable subject in university and national academic regimes’ (Pawson and Teather 2002: 275) – geographical fieldwork is closely related to and informed by fieldwork in other disciplines, such as anthropology and cultural studies.

Having started with a simple, general definition of fieldwork, it is now necessary to acknowledge that this has been conceived in many different ways: for example, as a means of teaching and learning specifically geographical concepts such as scale; of appreciating the ‘glories of God’s creation’ (Marsden 2000: 17); of exchanging the stuffy and formal atmosphere of the classroom for the healthy and stimulating world outdoors (Geikie 1887; Knapp 1990); of inculcating values of patriotism and citizenship (Layton and White 1948); and even of advancing international peace and understanding (Marsden 2000). So fieldwork means different things to different people in different times and places. Gold et al. (1991) identify three distinct traditions of or approaches to fieldwork, which have their own histories but have also overlapped: ‘the exploration tradition’ which responds to ‘the desire to go and see new places’; ‘the regional tradition’ which examines ‘the interrelationship of physical and human phenomena in regional associations’ (1991: 22); and ‘observation and empiricism’ which started from ‘observable facts’ and ‘also contributed to an emphasis on active learning through fieldwork’ (1991: 23). These traditions are not simply different; they are frequently at odds, with their visions of fieldwork contrasting and often conflicting. Fieldwork, they collectively suggest, is a diverse and contested set of practices: views are expressed about which kinds of fieldwork are better and the reasons for this.

The definition of fieldwork as learning out of doors is often qualified with reference to a distinction between fieldwork and tourism. The chapter on fieldwork in a manual on teaching geography in higher education begins with a dour warning: ‘One should not ... confuse a fieldtrip in geography with picnics, outings or senior class excursions’ (*Field Training in Geography* by P.F. Lewis, quoted by Gold et al. 1991: 21). Critics have dismissed fieldwork as ‘academic tourism’ (Mowforth and Munt 1998: 101) and condemned fieldwork that smacks of tourism, which is often presumed to be uncritical and neo-colonial. Indeed student fieldwork may sometimes be guilty of this. Dina Abbott (2006) felt uneasy about a fieldtrip to the Gambia in which British students were taken on a tour, which introduced to them the small West African country’s history as a slave trading post. Tourists, and students among them, ‘are welcomed with a potted history of enslavement and after they feel they have “done Gambia”, return to the boat’ (2006: 330). Her pessimistic conclusion is that these students

are 'indistinguishable by local people from another set of "white" tourists' (2006: 335). More lighthearted, but otherwise similar claims are often made by the colleagues, friends and relatives of fieldworkers, who jokingly or otherwise accuse us of taking holidays at the expense of others.

Fieldtrip leaders reply to these charges by making a distinction between fieldwork and tourism, and also between more and less credible forms of fieldwork, by asserting that 'this is not a Cook's Tour'. Neil Coe and Fiona Smyth (2010: 126) put it this way:

Many [geographers] will have had first-hand experience of a certain mode of field teaching in which the teacher/lecturer assumes the familiar role of knowledgeable expert. In this mode, students are treated to a carefully planned tour with the lecturer offering commentary, explanation, interpretation and leading discussion at, and between, the various sites of interest. In some instances local experts are also enrolled to offer their privileged knowledge on the topic at hand. Students are largely passive recipients, responding only to direct questions and taking notes on what is being said. The lecturer, in effect, assumes the role of 'tour guide'.

Coe and Smyth go on to describe more progressive, student-led fieldwork. Others have drawn similar distinctions. Yi Fu Tuan (2001: 42) expressed scepticism about fieldwork that may be 'little different from the rounds that tourists make', but suggested another model of fieldwork in which students played a more creative and active role. These distinctions between passive and active fieldwork are not always fair. On the one hand, it can be helpful to begin a fieldtrip with an orientation, in which students are given their bearings and introduced to the basics of life in a place that is new to them before they embark upon independent projects and explorations (Herrick 2010). On the other hand, student-centred fieldwork is not new. Previous generations of fieldworkers also tried to design fieldwork that was exciting and engaging for students. This commitment to active learning is widely accepted and has been for some time. As S.W. Wooldridge put it in more than half a century ago, 'proper fieldwork' was about 'doing' and not about students being told (1955: 79; quoted by Marsden 2000: 31). Bill Marsden generalises that 'fieldwork has always been associated with what might be called the progressive educational front of geography' (2000: 33).

The difference between tourism and fieldwork, and between passive and active forms of fieldwork, is not just something for the fieldtrip leaders to think about. As a student you can also take responsibility for your own learning, ensuring you play an active part in the field. When we asked students who had been with us on a fieldtrip to Vancouver to reflect on 'the difference between fieldwork and tourism', these were some of the things they said (in a survey conducted after the fieldtrip ended):

Fieldwork incorporates a different level of interaction, as we studied areas and issues that most tourism would not fully understand or even want to engage with. (Hannah)

You have to make sure that although you can have fun on the field trip, the primary reason is to work and gain skills. (Anthony)

Tourism is visiting a destination for recreational, leisure or business purposes and creates money for that destination, whereas fieldwork is research in that particular destination with a goal for a project in which study in this area is necessary. (Soraya)

I visited areas of Vancouver I wouldn't have on a tourist holiday. (Elizabeth)

Another thing, which these students might have added, is that fieldwork can be very hard work (Figure 1.1). This is particularly true of long-haul trips, in which lengthy flights cause fatigue and jet lag can limit the ability of both staff and students to 'hit the ground running' (Nairn et al. 2000). So a fieldtrip is not a holiday, and also a good student fieldworker is an active learner, always asking and seeking answers to questions. This is something that we would encourage every student reading this book and taking fieldtrips of their own, to reflect on.

Another way in which approaches to fieldwork have changed over time, prompting student fieldworkers to ask challenging questions about what fieldwork necessarily involves, has been



**Figure 1.1** Though your friends might think you're off on holiday, international fieldwork can be hard work! (Photograph by Richard Phillips)

in their shift away from a traditional model of 'stout-booted' fieldwork. Gillian Rose (1993) influentially challenged the gendering of geographical fieldwork, calling upon geographers to move away from a set of practices that were closely associated with able-bodied men. While criticisms such as these may have turned some geographers off fieldwork entirely, they have nonetheless inspired others to rethink the ways in which they conduct fieldwork. Consequently, it is no longer fair to generalise that fieldwork is the preserve of 'men observing from on high'. Nowadays fieldwork is more diverse and inclusive, involving 'interviews and children, laptops and urban settings, local collaborators and researcher reflexivity – and of course *women*' (DeLyser and Starrs 2001: iv).

New approaches to fieldwork have been recognised not only by progressives but also by traditionalists as well, who have not always welcomed the changes. For example, in 2009 a number of critics argued that the RGS was losing touch with its roots, claiming it had 'not sent out a field research project for more than ten years'. 'Dr Livingstone', they regretted, had morphed into a field-shy 'Dr Livingroom' (*Times* 2009: 2; Maddrell 2010). These debates and disagreements are important to acknowledge here because they remind us that fieldwork is not simply a tradition to be inherited, but a complex, contested and changing set of practices. Students need not accept definitions or models of fieldwork handed down by generations past and various 'great' geographers – from Carl Sauer to Gillian Rose. On the contrary, you can ask challenging questions about fieldwork: why, where, and how it is done. This means taking responsibility for your own fieldwork, engaging critically with the debates about fieldwork that have been introduced here, and which will be explained in more detail in this book, and deciding for yourself how *you* will approach the field.

## WHAT IS THE FIELD? WHERE DO YOU NEED TO GO TO DO FIELDWORK?

It has been said that 'the field' is to geography what 'the dig' is to archaeology, or 'the archive' to history: 'both a literal place and a key imaginary' (Kearns 2002: 76). But where or what is the field?

Fieldworkers have gravitated towards all sorts of of places. Sauer was not the first to be drawn to high points from which broad vistas were visible. An English educationist, writing in 1885, argued a similar point: that 'a pupil should receive first impressions of geography' from 'some commanding eminence' (Bain 1885: 273, quoted in Marsden 2000: 16). Others have taken a broader view of where fieldwork can be conducted. For some, the field can be anywhere outside the classroom and away from home: somewhere sufficiently far away from the surroundings they know and take for granted. Others, however, have argued that fieldwork can and should be conducted close to or in the home. Another English Victorian educationist argued that 'teaching, like charity, should begin at home' (Laurie 1888: 96–7, quoted in Marsden 2000: 16) and this has been followed up belatedly in geographical research on geographies of home



(Blunt and Dowling 2006). And for some researchers, particularly those interested in education, even the classroom can be a site for field research. Rose (1993) suggests that geographical fieldwork has traditionally paid excessive attention to the unfamiliar and that the field has been constructed as an exotic space. Others concur, complaining that it is too common for fieldworkers to gravitate towards 'special' sites at the expense of ordinary landscapes and everyday phenomena (Gold et al. 1991: 29). Indeed, familiar places such as the neighbourhood, home and classroom may be the most challenging in which to conduct fieldwork, precisely because they are so familiar, and therefore difficult to see afresh. Eric Pawson and Elizabeth Teather, teaching a fieldwork class in Canterbury, New Zealand, found that some of the greatest insights came closest to home:

One student did not have to travel far in order to gain an excellent mark; he and his group analysed the tiny area around the petrol station where he worked part time, assessing the extent of landscape change over the last 4 years and the degree to which global brandholders are implicated in this. Student responses to the Canterbury expeditions indicate that learning to 'see' local places can offer rich delights in the short term – and the acquisition of analytical skills that lie in wait for that overseas trip when the opportunity arrives. (2002: 282)

The anthropologist James Clifford observed that 'when one speaks of working in the field, or going into the field, one draws on mental images of a distinct place with an inside and outside, reached by practices of physical movement' (1997: 54). And yet, as he goes on to argue, these assumptions are not always sound. We have already contested the assumption that the field is necessarily at a distance from home or the classroom. Now it is possible to correct another commonplace assumption about the field: that it is a tangible – discrete or material – place. Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin (2006) describe 'fieldwork' involving the internet, not only as a medium for accessing information but also as an object of inquiry in its own right. And through his research among members of geographically-dispersed networks of Tibet nationals and activists, Andrew Davies (2009) reformulated 'the field' as a network of connected places rather than a single material place.

So, to return to the question of where we should look to find the field in fieldwork, the answer is this: anywhere and everywhere, far and near, in material and virtual spaces, within places and also between them. The diversity of field sites in contemporary geographical research is illustrated in Figures 1.2 and 1.3, in which fieldwork ranges from a group visit to an inner city to participatory research involving children in Nepal (the issues raised by these examples are discussed in this book: group dynamics in Chapter 5, participatory research and participant observation in Chapter 8).

The key to fieldwork is not really where we go but how we approach and justify the places we visit. In other words, the field is as much a way of seeing as it is a tangible place. Felix Driver explains that the field is not just 'there', it is space encountered in a particular way: 'produced and re-produced through both physical movement across a landscape and other sorts of cultural work in a variety of sites' (2000: 267). These encounters have a distinctive 'temporality': unlike most other classes, fieldwork is concentrated in a single block of time, in which learning is particularly intense and takes place in real time. These ingredients (the material and also the





**Figure 1.2** Trevor Barnes leads fieldwork in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. Photograph by Richard Phillips



**Figure 1.3** Lucy Woods, a student from Liverpool John Moores University, helps run a workshop using images taken as part of a participatory photography project in Nepal. Photograph by Sara Parker

virtual geographies of the field; the disciplinary practices that constitute fieldwork; the particular group of students and field leaders involved; and the temporal concentration in a particular place) all establish the conditions of possibility for ‘transformative’ learning (Herrick 2010: 114). In other words, fieldwork is exciting because you never know quite what will happen.

## THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT FIELDWORK

While influential geographers have apparently lined up to endorse and celebrate the fieldwork tradition, and while some have followed words with actions, spending weekends and summers in the field, it is interesting to note that the field tradition is not quite as strong or as universal as it may first appear. To get the most out of fieldwork it is essential to pose challenging questions about this geographical tradition, to acknowledge and to ask why it is that not all geographers love fieldwork. This means facing up to concerns about the practical and intellectual problems associated with fieldwork.

While academic geographers assert the importance of fieldwork they don’t always offer it to students or actually do fieldwork themselves – and when they do, students don’t always elect to take it. In Hong Kong, Tammy Kwan observed a discrepancy between intention and practice in which lecturers and students agreed that fieldwork was a good idea but did not always do it (Kwan 2000). And in the United States, a survey conducted in 2000 found that, while fieldwork was a stable component of undergraduate geography, it was also a minority practice, accounting for ‘only about 5% of the total annual enrolment in geography techniques courses and 15% of all undergraduate majors in geography’ (Peterson and Earl 2000: 216). In other words, the majority of geography undergraduate majors did not take a field methods course. This may be symptomatic of a broader decline in fieldwork, which some observers have detected in academic research as well as teaching. Reporting ‘the decline of fieldwork in human geography’ over two decades ago, Robert Rundstrom and Martin Kenzer (1989: 294) argued that ‘the use of on-site fieldwork component of primary data collection is at its lowest in almost 60 years and has declined sharply since the mid-1970s’. This pattern, if correctly observed, is not universal. In Britain, fieldwork has been transformed by the growth of long-haul travel and also by the apparent willingness of students to pay for their education, borrowing in order to do so where this is necessary. This has increased the range and scope of trips, and via various changes in teaching and learning approaches, has invited students to play a more active part in the fieldwork process.

There are some unfortunate reasons for the relatively modest role accorded to fieldwork in some places: universities declining to invest the time and resources involved in fieldwork; concerns about health and safety in the field; the perceived and real costs of dealing with litigious students and parents; academics failing to follow through on their assertions about the value of fieldwork; students being unable to take time away from the jobs they need to support their studies; fieldwork being costly; and so on (Herrick 2010). If you are student reading this book you will most likely have been offered the chance to go on a fieldtrip, so you may feel that these issues do not directly concern you. However, you should be interested to know some

other – academic rather than simply practical or circumstantial – reasons why not all universities offer fieldwork, and/or why not all students take it when offered. By understanding these concerns about and criticisms of fieldwork, it is possible for you to develop a critical, robust approach to your own fieldwork: to insist on getting the most out of it. These concerns and criticisms define four sets of questions – regarding the intellectual relevance of fieldwork; its practical value to students; its financial and environmental costs; and its ethics – which are outlined in the following paragraphs and answered throughout the course of this book.

### Is fieldwork relevant in the digital age?

Fieldwork was central to the discipline of geography during the heyday of regional geography, but the discipline has since moved on both technologically and theoretically and this raises questions about whether or not fieldwork has moved on with it. During the quantitative revolution of the 1960s, geographers turned increasingly to secondary numerical data (Rundstrom and Kenzer 1989). This seems to have accelerated even more in the digital age. A recent survey of heads of American geography departments showed that fieldwork had been displaced by ‘technical-applied courses’ in many cases (Gerber and Chuan 2000, 11; see also Peterson and Earl 2000). A minority of these respondents felt that field methods had become obsolete in an academic environment dominated by information technologies. This sceptical minority challenges the rest of us, who continue to believe in the value of fieldwork, to explain its ongoing relevance – in a discipline that has been transformed technologically.

But fieldwork need not be rendered obsolete through new technologies; it may be enriched through them and in turn it may mobilise and animate these technologies, exploring and exhibiting their possibilities. Indeed, the survey of American geography departments cited above found that some of the strongest fieldwork courses – including those that had proven most appealing to students – were the ones that absorbed new technologies. The authors found that successful fieldwork would bring together ‘a blend of traditional skills and concepts with the purposeful application of new technology’. Fieldwork, they concluded, could facilitate an ‘understanding of fundamental concepts in ways that classroom and digital laboratory instruction cannot’ (Gerber and Chuan 2000: 11). The possibilities for embracing technologies within fieldwork are impossible to review exhaustively or keep pace with in a book such as this. A decade or so ago the emphasis was placed upon technologies such as GPS and GIS (Peterson and Earl 2000), and though these remain important today the cutting edge has moved on, with more attention – at the time of writing – being turned towards communication technologies such as Twitter, through which projects are managed and findings both produced and disseminated in real time. The result is that any ‘how to’ guide or survey of existing information and communication technologies would quickly become obsolete. But technological initiatives are nevertheless considered in every chapter, and these illustrate the spirit and some of the ways in which fieldwork may engage with the technological possibilities. Chapter 6, for example, discusses the use of visual and sound recording and manipulating technologies in fieldwork, and also the applications of internet and communications technologies in the field.

### Is fieldwork an escape from theory?

It has sometimes been suggested that geographical fieldwork is an escape from theory and that by retracing the footsteps of 'great' geographers past there is a tendency for us to lose step with contemporary debates. Thus, while acknowledging Carl Sauer's influence and legacy, Peter Jackson has been critical of those who would seem to imitate his work, endlessly mapping 'the physical or material elements of culture' such as 'culture traits from log buildings to graveyards, barn styles to gasoline stations' (Jackson 1989: 19). In his groundbreaking work in the 'new cultural geography', he called for more attention to 'non-material or symbolic qualities of culture' (1989: 24). In other words, Jackson called for fieldwork to be renewed and re-engaged with theoretical debates, thereby ensuring that it led rather than followed these. This argument has been influential. Today, geography students undertaking fieldwork would generally now understand that fieldwork is no longer generally understood as regional geography, in the sense of being all about the place visited. Fieldwork is underpinned and engaged with theoretical debates (as discussed in Chapter 3). Contemporary students have increasingly turned to the sorts of places neglected by earlier generations of human geographers – to cities and contemporary culture rather than rural and historical cultural landscapes, for example (Burgess and Jackson 1992). This reflects a broader reinvention and reassertion of fieldwork within the discipline which has been going on for some time. Though one form of fieldwork-based regional geography has declined others have emerged. William Bunge, pioneering a new critical geography in the 1970s, reinvented fieldwork for an emerging radical geography. Shifting the locus of fieldwork from rural to urban settings and from historical to contemporary concerns, he ran large-scale projects in Toronto and Detroit which involved communities in research and participatory geographies (as discussed in Chapter 9). More recently, others have innovated with fieldwork within broader efforts to forge new regional and place-based geographies. Contesting claims about the death of fieldwork, David Wilson (1990: 219) identified a 'reconstructed regionalism' that 'uses critical social theory to revive field studies'. This movement began in the 1980s with the new regional geography of Allan Pred, which investigated 'the fusion of unique and broader forces' through detailed empirical and archival research and reasserted the importance of primary data collection (Wilson 1990: 220). And while these geographers have reinvented fieldwork by embracing new technologies and speaking to new theoretical debates, others have renewed the role of fieldwork in teaching and learning. They have asserted the importance of fieldwork to cutting edge pedagogical developments such as Problem Based Learning (PBL), in which students devise their own problems and the strategies for solving them and thus become more active and self-reliant (Marsden 2000: 32; see also Pawson and Teather 2002). These disparate developments illustrate the inventiveness of geographical fieldworkers and show how each new generation of geographers has reinvented and renewed fieldwork, thus making it relevant for their own times.

These theoretical and pedagogical arguments speak to fundamental questions which any geography student or researcher would do well to consider before planning fieldwork. What

can you do in the field that you cannot do in front of a computer or in a library or classroom? What can you do in the field that does not simply retrace the footsteps of great field-based geographers, but advances contemporary debates as well as geographical knowledge? The bottom line must be that you can learn or illuminate something in the field that it will not be possible to achieve in the classroom. Peter Jackson illustrates this point in the following Postcard.

*Postcard 1.1: Chicken Run. Peter Jackson, who is leading a research project on geographies of food, explains why it is important to get into the field, which in this case is a factory farm for chickens. As he explains: 'visiting the farm raised all kinds of issues that might have escaped me had I stayed in the office' and relied upon data collected by others.*

*My first visit to a broiler house, where intensively-reared chickens are 'grown' to their full slaughter weight in around 40 days from hatching, was a revelation. I was studying the development of the modern British chicken industry, tracing all the links in the supply chain 'from farm to fork' and, having interviewed the retailers and done some consumer focus groups, it was time to visit the broiler sheds. I went with my colleague Polly Russell to visit a farm in Dorset where Polly already knew the farmer quite well, having recorded her life history over a number of previous visits. From this and other interviews I knew that the farmer was well regarded in the industry as someone whose animal husbandry was considered a model of good practice. As we entered the first shed I was taken aback by the number of chickens, lined up in neat rows, with several thousand in each shed. I didn't find the conditions as shocking as battery farming, where chickens are kept in cages for their eggs, though animal rights campaigners object to the high stocking densities at which many broiler chickens are kept. What impressed me most was the matter-of-fact way that the farmer 'walked the sheds', using her expert eye to detect any problems with the heating, lighting and water supply, stopping to pick up any animals that were injured and, occasionally and abruptly, wringing the neck of any bird that was suffering and needed putting out of their misery. When we stepped outside, the dead birds were disposed of in a large metal incinerator.*

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*The farmer clearly cared about the welfare of her birds, even though they were, to some extent, just a source of income. She said it was hard to feel emotionally attached to chickens, compared to the way she cared for her pet dog, for example. There were so many of them and the turnover was so rapid. But she could immediately sense when something was wrong as she walked the sheds several times a day: were they listless or flighty, noisy or unusually quiet?*

*As we talked it became clear that our farmer had no time for the 'modern housewife', blaming her for most food safety issues when chicken has been stored or cooked incorrectly. She felt a real sense of injustice that the 'poor ruddy grower' got the blame for outbreaks of *Campylobacter* and other foodborne diseases which would be drastically reduced if consumers had better culinary knowledge and skills. She blamed the supermarkets for relentlessly pushing down prices at the farm gate, and accused foreign growers of unfair competition, using antibiotic growth promoters and other methods that were outlawed in the UK or injecting poultry with water to increase their weight as has been reported elsewhere in the EU.*

*It was hard to come away from the sheds without some sympathy for the modern-day chicken grower as well as greater insight into the lives of the chickens themselves. Many of the consumers we talked to expressed a nostalgic longing for a lost 'golden age' of farming, wanting chicken to taste liked it used to in some imagined past. This may be understandable, given the rapid intensification of agriculture in recent years, but it ignores the fact that our mass consumption of chicken only became a reality in the last couple of generations (since the 1960s). Before then chicken was a treat for most families, to be enjoyed on high days and holidays, rather than the cheap and ubiquitous source of protein that it has become today.*

*Visiting the farm was a good 'reality check' for when consumers talked fondly of times past and when retailers employed rose-tinted images to sell intensively-reared birds. Being 'in the field' also served as a reminder, as one of our other informants told us, that there's a living thing at the end of the supply chain and that animals can't be treated just like any other commodity. We saw at first hand the way that nature can fight back, with chickens developing hock burn and other unsightly conditions when they are kept at too high a density or when the ratio of breast meat to leg strength means that they*

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*(Continued)*

*'come off their legs'. For a city boy like me, visiting the farm raised all kinds of issues that might have escaped me had I stayed in the office and simply read the focus group and interview transcripts that Polly was recording. While our project focused on the way food is 'sold with a story', it was vitally important to combine our discursive and narrative methods with some direct observation 'in the field'.*

### Will fieldwork equip you for today's job market?

A survey of American students taking fieldwork courses found a mismatch between students' and professors' expectations of fieldwork. The survey found that, where there was some element of choice involved and students had actively opted for fieldwork, the most common attractions were practical, concerned mainly with enhancing skill sets and prospects for employment (Peterson and Earl 2000: 222). The top five reasons given by students taking field classes were:

- 1 The course was required for a degree programme.
- 2 To practise, learn and develop job-related skills.
- 3 To learn how to use equipment in the field.
- 4 To develop the skills required for conducting geographic research.
- 5 General enjoyment or appreciation of learning in an outdoor environment.

Interestingly, professors and lecturers running fieldtrips had different perceptions of student motivation, fondly imagining that students were driven by purer academic passions, as follows:

- 1 Fundamental scientific skills.
- 2 Geographic problem solving.
- 3 Applying geographic concepts in the field.
- 4 Acquiring skills with direct career applicability.
- 5 Applying new technologies.

This could be interpreted to mean that fieldwork does not always fulfil its potential and/or provide students with what they are looking for in their education. Arguing this point, Rundstrom and Kenzer (1989: 300) attribute some of the 'gradual elimination of the teaching of fieldwork' to 'increased student interest in acquiring "marketable" skills'. Another,



more positive interpretation of the survey findings is possible though: that professors and students agree on the broad objectives of fieldwork – in developing learning skills, encouraging engagement with new technologies and/or techniques, and relating to debates about the contemporary world – but they have different ways of expressing this and different understandings of its importance. The challenge for you in taking fieldtrips is to understand how the skills you acquire on these trips can be listed on your *curriculum vitae* or *résumé*, mentioned in job interviews, and otherwise used to enhance your employment prospects. This is explained in Chapter 2, which shows how fieldwork fits into a geography degree as a whole, and helps you to see how fieldwork can provide you with the skills and experiences that will make you more employable.

### Is fieldwork environmentally sustainable?

Long-haul fieldtrips make large carbon footprints. This raises some challenging questions. How, if at all, can students and universities justify and minimise these carbon footprints and the various other environmental impacts of fieldwork? What is the carbon footprint of any given trip and how can this be reduced? There are no easy answers to these questions, and the best answers – both verbal and practical – probably have yet to be thought of. Once again, we would pose this question and hand it over to you, the student, who must consider the potential environmental costs of your own fieldwork and make some decisions about how to reduce these and whether they can be justified at all. We can help with the first part of this, though, which is to get past simplistic statements about ‘large carbon footprints’ by specifically assessing the carbon budgets for fieldwork. This is a necessary first move in attempts to reduce and mitigate these environmental impacts. In Postcard 1.2, Chris Ribchester illustrates how the carbon budget for a fieldtrip can be assessed and provides some initial pointers on how fieldtrips can be redesigned to reduce their negative impact and envisage positive impacts. He explains how students at one English university monitored the carbon footprint of their fieldwork. The results proved surprising: for example, they found that an international expedition to Norway generated less carbon than a week on the English coast.

#### *Postcard 1.2: The carbon footprint of fieldwork, by Chris Ribchester*

*A small team of students will take responsibility for monitoring the details of travel to and from a fieldwork location. This is just the start of a process of assessing and potentially mitigating the carbon footprint of fieldwork conducted through the University of Chester. Carbon counting does not stop with travel, but also considers energy used in other ways: from heating field centres to the production of food consumed in the field.*

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

*Responsibility for this lies partly with tutors as they contemplate new field courses or revise existing trips. But it is a joint responsibility and even if the general parameters of fieldwork are set by others students can influence the carbon footprint of fieldwork particularly when designing and carrying out independent research projects. As a simple example I am reminded of a group of three students, studying rural settlement change on a recent residential field course, who decided to walk between each of their eight study villages instead of taking the option of being transported by minibus or using the occasional service bus. Not only did they reduce the footprint of the trip by a few kilograms of carbon dioxide, they gained a much stronger insight into the day-to-day experience of living in an area of low population density and relative isolation.*

*We are bombarded with information about how to live a greener lifestyle and in many respects it is this same guidance which can be used to inform fieldwork design. This raises various questions: Where is the nearest place to study the phenomenon that you are interested in? Will the use of public transport to get there, or travel around when you are there, mitigate the footprint? What accommodation options do you have? Camping is a low energy activity, although all that processed, tinned food carries with it lots of embedded carbon. Field study centres offer the fundamental carbon-saving attribute of communal living and the sharing of resources. Moreover, it's now fairly unusual to find a field centre not committed to some form of eco-friendly action, for example recycling, or at least the partial use of renewable energy sources and the purchase of local foods for the kitchens.*

*While much of the information needed to make low-carbon fieldwork choices is now accessible, calculating the carbon footprint of a field course is more complex. However, a bespoke carbon footprint calculator for this purpose has been developed and is available for anyone to download: <http://gees.ac.uk/resources/hosted/fwCO2/co2ftprnt.htm>. It uses a spreadsheet with the opportunity to enter data on all the key elements of fieldwork (travel, energy use, food eaten, consumption and waste/recycling). As well as the overall footprint, the relative size of these different components is shown as part of the final output. More details about the calculator methodology are provided in Table 1.1.*

*We have used this tool now for a number of years, with students and tutors working together to collect the data and review the spreadsheet. We have shown that, in the right circumstances, fieldwork*

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

*can deliver a significantly lower carbon footprint when compared to a 'normal' lifestyle. So far our 'record' is a 60 per cent reduction for a residential field course based in and around the Centre for Alternative Technology, Machynlleth, in mid-Wales. However, the figures don't always turn out as you would expect: despite the lengthy journey from Chester to Norway, this summer campsite-based expedition tends to record a lower footprint than a winter field centre-based trip to the Devon coast, notwithstanding the extra jumpers that are worn.*

**Table 1.1** The carbon footprint calculator devised by Chris Ribchester (Postcard 1.2) processes the following variables

Calculator component	Key specific variables	Some considerations
1 General details of the trip	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of participants</li> <li>• Duration</li> <li>• Number of non-group members staying at the same accommodation</li> </ul>	Knowing how many other people have used the same accommodation as you is particularly important as it allows the energy use figures to be weighted proportionally.
2 Transport (mode and distance travelled)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By plane and ferry</li> <li>• By private transport, including minibus and coach</li> <li>• By public transport</li> </ul>	The calculator utilises various freely available tools to assess transport emissions, although note that the outcome of air travel calculators does vary, dependant on the multiplier used to account for the greater damage caused by the release of greenhouse gases in the upper atmosphere.
3 Energy used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Electricity</li> <li>• Mains gas</li> <li>• Liquid petroleum gas</li> <li>• Bottled gas (butane or propane)</li> <li>• Oil</li> <li>• Coal</li> <li>• Wood</li> <li>• Renewable</li> </ul>	Something to watch out for here is how the electricity is generated – check for green tariffs, which will lower the carbon footprint to some extent. For the purposes of this calculator, the direct use of renewable sources (e.g. wind, water, solar) counts as zero emissions.
4 Food (diet)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of meat eaters</li> <li>• Number of vegetarians</li> <li>• Number of vegans</li> </ul>	The energy used in farming, processing and transporting food generally forms a significant proportion of personal carbon footprints, although this is affected to some extent by what you eat (generally a non-meat diet is more carbon-friendly!).

Table 1.1 (Continued)

Calculator component	Key specific variables	Some considerations
5 Other consumption and waste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How much money spent on non-food items</li> <li>• Paper used</li> <li>• Waste produced (number of bin bags)</li> <li>• Proportion of items composted/ recycled</li> </ul>	The amount of embedded carbon in other forms of consumption is included in the calculator although, as with food, this is a notoriously complex exercise and tends to be based on general estimates. The carbon footprint of waste produced is weighted downwards on the basis of the proportion of kitchen/garden waste that is composted and other items that are recycled.

### Is fieldwork ethical?

The environment is just one among a series of worries associated with non-local fieldwork. Others include the social consequences associated with intruding into the lives and geographies of others, through intellectual curiosity and in order to develop skills and conduct exercises rather than generally to immediately contribute to the people and places studied. Fieldtrips are often brief, asking quite a bit of the people encountered along the way, and potentially giving little or nothing back. This opens up a new and challenging question: what are the ethics of doing fieldwork and how, if at all, might the ethical challenges associated with entering, observing and representing someone else's world be overcome? These questions are elaborated on in Chapter 4, which explains that as a student you need to take responsibility for the ethical implications of your own fieldwork, and guides you in doing so.

Fieldwork also raises another set of ethical issues, which are concerned with the internal dynamics of the group of students and academic staff who travel into the field together. Fieldwork is almost always a social experience and the experiences of travelling and working together have not always been positive for all members of the group. Some students have been marginalised by field practices ranging from unnecessarily vigorous walks to heavy drinking in the evenings, to the extent that some geographers, looking back over their student experiences, shudder at the very mention of fieldwork and prefer to teach without it. These relationships are structured by gender and they have been brought to light through feminist critique of geographical traditions and practices, but they are also concerned with other aspects of identity and the body: these include age, differing forms and degrees of physical ability, and so on (Rose 1993). These issues are explained in Chapter 5, which concentrates on the challenging experiences of travelling and working together. We explain that, for many students, the strongest experiences and memories of fieldwork are shaped by the group dynamic: to go on a trip is to travel together, to plan and run projects together, to eat together, and often to

sleep in the same rooms. Fieldwork is as much about getting along, working together, coping with conflicts, and conducting friendships, as it is about anything else. We would call upon students to come up with their own solutions to the challenges of travelling and working together, challenges that have not always been understood or solved by the academic staff leading fieldtrips. We have seen students facing up to and navigating these challenges so we believe you as an individual can do this too and we will provide with you some background and pointers to assist you in this.

By now, it should be clear that our approach is to raise issues and questions that you as a student fieldworker will want to answer as you plan and conduct fieldwork. Rather than answering these questions for you, our aim is to help you answer them for yourself. This is a pathway to conducting critical and imaginative fieldwork.

## CONCLUSION

After reading this introduction you should have a clearer picture of how and why fieldwork is an important component in geographical education. It may have given you pause for thought regarding your own motivations for conducting fieldwork and encouraged you to think critically about your engagement with the field. The key points of this chapter were:

- The use of fieldwork in geography is not universally supported nor conducted. However, there are many reasons (including academic and life-long skills development) why you are being offered a fieldwork component as part of your degree. Chapter 2 discusses this in more detail.
- The ways in which geographers conduct fieldwork have evolved over time and continue to do so. Awareness of these developments has given each individual the opportunity to critically engage with the field and to think through what we study and why we study what we do, and also how we impact on those we observe and interact with. This chapter should have provided you with sufficient background and context to encourage you to think critically about your fieldwork. It may raise as many questions as it answers. If so, it has served the purpose of getting you thinking and these questions will be addressed in subsequent chapters.
- The decision to conduct fieldwork should not be taken lightly given the (often) substantial amounts of time and money that need to be invested. In addition, issues such as the environmental impact of fieldwork activities, its relevance in a digital age and its ethics need to be considered by each individual prior to signing up for fieldwork. As the following chapters will suggest, successful fieldwork requires each student to make informed decisions throughout the research process. Should you choose (or if you have already chosen) to conduct fieldwork, this is the first of many such decisions.

## FURTHER READING/KEY TEXT(S)

- For a wider context and historiography of fieldwork, beyond the scope of this chapter, see D.R. Stoddart's *On Geography* (Blackwell, 1996). Though subjected to serious critique, the exuberance of this book together with its passion for doing geography still makes it worth reading today.
- Dydia DeLyser and Paul F. Starrs (eds) (2001) 'Doing Fieldwork', special double issue of *Geographical Review*, 91(1-2): iv–viii, 1–508. Like most of the geographical literature on fieldwork this is aimed at lecturers and not students, but many of the essays may nevertheless be useful.
- Jacquelin Burgess and Peter Jackson (1992) 'Streetwork: an encounter with place', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 16(2): 151–157. This article describes an experimental fieldwork class, which introduces many of the themes and ideas that we elaborate in this book. Though addressed to teaching staff rather than students, it remains an excellent point of departure for critical and imaginative fieldwork in human geography.