

4 WORKING WITH THE HOST COUNTRY

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This chapter reminds the planner of the importance of making early contact with your hosts, wherever in the world they may be, and describes how to get permission to undertake your expedition or project.

WHY WORK WITH THE HOST COUNTRY?

There are several good reasons why you need to work with your host country from the outset, apart from just simple good manners.

The first is that there may be a legal requirement to do so. Without such authority, permission to enter the country may be denied. Second, there is a moral obligation to respect the territory of others and to ask permission to enter. Third, there are added benefits to you, to your counterparts and to the wider academic community from working with those with local knowledge and expertise. Much research worldwide could not have been achieved without such involvement, especially when there is a need for local knowledge and expertise. Finally, the project as a whole has a much greater chance of succeeding if counterparts are involved in the planning stages, as so much can be achieved with help in-country. There may be funding agencies that specify the need to have a proven commitment to host nation cooperation, before certain grants are made available.

So, early on, take the host country's perspective. Think locally. Consider the views of those with whom you will be working, and in particular identify those people who are likely to have a stake in the project, as members, advisers or supporters. These stakeholders may operate at a national, regional or local level, but whoever you work with the principle will be the same: to build respect and understanding. All your efforts to establish good relations with your host country at every level will yield invaluable dividends for your expedition, its follow-up work, future projects and ultimately for international concord.

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WHO TO WORK WITH

First, you need to identify the key organisations with which you should be working. This will depend on the nature of your project. If you are working in a protected area, the national parks authority will need to be approached. If you are doing any mapping work, you will probably want to work with the national survey and mapping department. If you are mountaineering in a popular mountain region, you are likely to need a climbing permit. If you are undertaking any kind of scientific research, you may need to clear this at ministry level, often through a specific body established to vet and approve scientists visiting the country. In all cases, having a sponsoring body, such as a research institute, a university, school, non-governmental organisation (NGO), mountaineering club or other body is helpful and often essential. Making early contact with these organisations will be a key element of your planning and is likely to need to be over a year before you go into the field. The British Council provides an invaluable service giving advice and helping with introductions and contacts in the host country. The British Council has staff in most countries, so, if your project has research, training and other educational objectives, making early contact will be a good investment.

HOW TO GET IN TOUCH

Try to establish a good rapport with those bodies that you want to work with early on. This will mean presenting enough of your own plans to show that you are doing your homework, while leaving enough room to involve and integrate ideas that might be suggested locally. This is both common sense and good manners. In developing a link, often by email now, keep the line open for ways of working together:

- What are the local priorities that might be integrated with your own interests?
- Are there any suggested topics, locations or on-going projects to which you could contribute?
- Who could join you in the field (e.g. students, researchers, local climbers)?

When you make your first approach, a clear well-written letter that is 100 per cent accurately typed on one side of headed paper, with any supporting information attached, is still the most effective way of making a good first impression. Research thoroughly to whom to write and check their position and correct title. This is getting easier and easier using the Internet. It makes all the difference.

If you can afford it, a planning visit is an excellent investment. There is nothing like a face-to-face meeting to help build mutual understanding. If you are hoping to recruit expedition members or employ translators and field guides, this is also an excellent opportunity to meet them before a commitment is made on either side.

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IN THE FIELD

Continue to 'think local' and be sensitive to cultural and religious differences. Learn as much as you can of the national and local language(s). Even elementary language skills will raise levels of trust dramatically. This in turn should give you confidence and make you a more relaxed and natural person to do business with, and improve your chances of having a harmonious team working together, with the minimum of misunderstanding. I know that this may appear a tall order if this is one of your first projects, but it is important.

FOLLOW-UP RESEARCH AND REPORTS

Your expedition will be collecting data and possibly samples. The intellectual property rights and ownership need to be discussed beforehand – and included in any agreements about collections and type of specimens, deposit of raw data, report feedback, and ownership of photographs and artwork.

Access to all the information collected, including photographs, should be made available to government representatives. Some will want copies of the original field notebooks. Some will be happy with the final report. Be clear about the level at which you are operating, especially if you need to take soil, rock, plant or animal samples. Usually this is possible only if you are working through the national museum or herbarium and there can be stiff penalties if you try to smuggle even a pebble out – without discussing the implications. Try to keep a high level of trust and communications throughout – and, if in doubt, ask.

Sharing the results of a project with local members is a courtesy often forgotten in the rush to get back to the UK. Think carefully how the results of the project can be shared locally, and how all future publications should have some kind of counterpart involvement. Joint authored publications in research and for education purposes are a good goal to aim for. Agreeing the distribution list and making sure that those who can benefit from the project get copies of the report is essential. Assuming that you have established good host country links, it won't be difficult to agree a plan that benefits all members. This might include the need to produce an executive summary that is translated into the local language(s). Looking ahead, perhaps you will want to create opportunities for new-found friends to visit the UK, to meet others interested in the research or project undertaken. This may include opportunities for further training that might not be available locally.

GAINING OFFICIAL PERMISSION TO UNDERTAKE YOUR RESEARCH

Rules and regulations for conducting research are constantly changing, and permission may be required at several levels, which can include national, regional and local

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permits, and perhaps endorsement from key government departments or organisations concerned with your particular area of study or activity. Some countries have set procedures and have appointed representatives in specific ministries to deal with applications. Some procedures are more complex than others, but it is not unusual for permits to take over 12 months to obtain. Make it your responsibility to check current rules, and do not rely on the guidelines set out in a past report, because this may well be out of date.

As mentioned earlier, even if you are not carrying out research you may still need permission. Mountaineers visiting the Himalayan ranges will find permits, peak fees, and even codes of conduct and environmental levies are now par for the course. School and other youth projects may find themselves directed to ministries of sport, education, youth or tourism. The permutations are endless, but the key is to establish early and good contact with those who can advise on the correct procedures and right people to contact.

For those who have not yet established these contacts or are unsure whether high-level permission is required, the following 10-point plan of action, although lengthy, is usually successful, provided you start early enough:

1. Send a neatly typed letter on headed paper to the Ambassador or High Commissioner of the country that you intend to visit. Most countries have a representative in London and addresses can be found in the London telephone directory and also on their website. Ask for details on how to apply for permission to undertake the research/mountaineering/community project that you describe, what visas and/or permits are required and to whom such an application should be submitted. Your letter should include a short statement summarising your overall plan and location in which you are working, in case the plans require special permissions or you are working in a sensitive region or protected area.
2. Send a copy of this letter to the British Ambassador or High Commissioner in the capital city of your intended country with a polite letter of notification. He or she will normally pass it to the Second Secretary to answer. Similarly, copies of these may be sent to the appropriate desk officer at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, King Charles Street, London, for information.
3. Approximately two weeks later, follow up the first letter with a telephone call, asking to make an appointment with a representative in the London Embassy. This will ascertain the progress of your letter and establish a personal contact. If things go wrong later, this courtesy visit will have been an investment. It goes without saying that you must be respectfully dressed when you visit the Embassy and be courteous at all times, even if things are not going your way. There may

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be delays but usually you will have a positive response within a few weeks. On some occasions, an Embassy representative will say that there is no need for a visit, and they then advise the correct procedure accordingly. On some occasions they may simply say that you don't need a research permit and that you may travel on a tourist visa. Please always double-check this, because this seemingly easy option now may cause difficulties once you are in the field.

4. Upon receipt of advice from the Embassy in London, complete the application forms neatly and carefully, making sure to answer all sections and provide any photographs, fees and evidence of authority. The advantage of getting these papers early is self-evident. There may be certain requirements, such as a sponsoring letter from a local research institution, that is required before the application can be accepted.
5. The forms are usually sent either to the London representative (Embassy or High Commission) or direct to the appropriate ministry in the host country. Make sure that you keep photocopies of everything you send, and again send copies of the application to both the British Ambassador and the Foreign Office. In some cases these can be sent electronically. Await replies.
6. If nothing has been heard after a month, write again (even more politely) with copies of the previous correspondence, asking if there is any other information that is required, and state that you would be happy to visit the host country to sort out any further applications if required. (You of course will have to decide whether this is something you can afford.)
7. If nothing has been heard a month later you may like to enlist the help of your new-found diplomatic friends here or over there, who by now have quite a file on your project. Ask if there is any way they can help. Emphasise the support you have for your project within the host country. The amount of effort they will give to processing the permissions for your project will depend on how easy you have made it to process your application, and the importance (relevance to the host country) that they attach to your project. This will be enhanced by any endorsements that you have received from major national (host country) and international institutes.
8. If none of the above has produced any response whatsoever, I would suggest you need to reassess the situation. But this is unlikely and I think you will be surprised at the cooperation that you will receive from all those you contact. However, do make contact with those who know the country well to check if there are any specific reasons why there might be a hold-up.

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9. Once you have your permission, make sure that you get in touch and keep the government ministry with whom you will be liaising informed. Send regular updates on your progress. Write to ask for an appointment as soon as you arrive. If you need to make contact with other ministries, ask for letters of introduction. This may be important if you are expecting temporarily to import any freight without having to pay customs duty.
10. Finally make sure that you fulfil any agreements that you signed while applying for permission. This may include presenting a copy of your preliminary report with key ministries before leaving the host country and depositing a duplicate set of biological specimens with the appropriate natural history museum. Failure to do this can cause serious repercussions to you and to others who follow in the future.

Don't forget that it will be your positive international attitude with impeccable manners that makes you the field diplomat, a prerequisite for all expedition members, at all times. Good luck.

USEFUL WEBSITES

British Council: www.britcoun.org
Commonwealth Youth Exchange Council: www.cyec.org.uk
Foreign and Commonwealth Office: www.fco.gov.uk/travel
The Commonwealth Secretariat: www.thecommonwealth.org
Windows on the World – schools linking: www.wotw.org.uk