

## Encounters through a Museum Field School

AMY VAN ALLEN

We were 10 women, from 10 different countries, converging in Hanoi, Vietnam. The purpose: three weeks of intensive coursework in heritage management. In fact, we had more connections to each other and more in common than any of us expected. Two of us had a mutual colleague. Two had lived in England. Two had backgrounds with national parks. Together, we all were independent, dedicated professionals deeply invested in heritage—both cultural and natural—and committed to working toward sustainable management. It was this ambition that brought our paths into intersection.

### Program Outline

Vietnam would be our classroom. We were entering the International Field School in Museums and Sustainable Heritage Development, sponsored by the University of Queensland (Australia). Through three weeks of intensive hands-on coursework in December 2008, we expected to gain a practical understanding of how culture intersects with development. In the Field School, we would explore five main themes: 1) culture in development; 2) heritage tourism; 3) social ecology; 4) conservation of tangible and intangible resources; and 5) sustainable heritage development. For all but one of us, this was our first visit to Vietnam.

For several of us, it was our first visit to Asia. We would be immersed in history and culture, involved in discussions with museum directors and heritage practitioners, and presenting and learning daily from our readings, our environment, and each other.

The first night we met our professor for dinner. The Field School is the synthesis of more than a decade's work in Vietnam by Professor Amareswar Galla. With no real working models, he developed the program over the course of time, basing it on other intensive field courses that he had used previously in Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The places we were going, the people with whom we would be meeting, all were connections and acquaintances of the professor's. The strong relationships fostered from his years of heritage work implementing UNESCO and international conventions were evident with everyone we met.

The program covered north and central Vietnam, beginning in Hanoi, where we discussed museums, urban conservation, and heritage tourism. It concluded in Hoi An, where we focused on cultural mapping and community action. In those three weeks, we changed hotels six times, spent one night in a traditional one-room stilt house in Mai Chau (where we learned about museums and community engagement), and slept for three nights on a junk

*All photos in this article are courtesy of the author.*

in Ha Long Bay, where we examined museums and sustainable heritage development, and visited the world's first floating eco-museum, the Cua Van Floating Museum, built and operated by the communities of Ha Long Bay.

In between, we visited Hue, Da Nang, and My Son, to learn about World Heritage Areas, conservation and sustainable development, and how museums can work with source communities. For me, much of the discussions kept circling around the immensely difficult question of cultural authenticity, and its multiple definitions and layers. (No good answers, though). Part of the experience is that we each were concerned by different questions. We had three weeks of being with like-minded friends and colleagues with whom we could discuss ideas, present options, and debate merits. I found this an

invaluable opportunity to explore new ideas and further my own interests in the intersection of history, culture, and science, all within the international domain.

### Field School Basics

Of the 10 women in my class, I was the lone American. My classmates came, originally, from Canada, Austria, Turkey, Vietnam, Australia, Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea, and Papua New Guinea. Our backgrounds were as diverse as our countries of origin. Several of us worked in museums. Several had traveled the globe extensively. Several were currently in graduate school and just beginning their careers, while several already had made significant contributions to the field. We mixed nationalities and religions, languages and



**Photo 1.** Dragons on the stairs at Thang Long Imperial Citadel in Hanoi, ancient dynastic headquarters and a candidate for UNESCO World Heritage listing. The dragons are said to be the largest in Hanoi.

ethnicities. We argued theory and past experiences, then comforted each other when the trials of being away from home during a family crisis proved too much to hide. The very nature of our course pulled us together in ways that were both unexpected and powerful, and this diversity proved a key source of our strength. Amazingly, there were no outliers. The group of 10 remained a group of 10, and in some ways acted more like one. Half of us had a mini-reunion in Australia six months later. More than one year following, we all remain connected via Facebook, actively communicating with each other.

These types of experiences are not uncommon among people working intimately in a shared pursuit. Group behavior and group dynamics have been the study and pursuit of leading thinkers and researchers for more than a century, including such luminaries as Sigmund Freud and Wilfred Bion. In the academic world, there has been long-standing support for immersive and hands-on learning as methodologies that promote retention

and facilitate comprehension.<sup>1</sup> Learning by doing is a key component of the school curriculum, particularly in the sciences, where laboratory curriculums accompany courses in chemistry, biology, physics, and the geosciences. And it is largely in the sciences, however, where we in the United States are most comfortable with laboratory-style classes.

Like a language immersion program, a field school provides a context for developmental instruction that is tangible and iterative. The ability to be in the place, to see the objects, to experience the topic in a multi-sensory way, provides greater context and deeper resonance of the concepts and ideas. We've all learned that people who hear information as well as see it retain it better than those who have it from one sensory point alone. (Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, is credited with a saying that I much admire: "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.") In a field school setting, people draw on a multitude of recall methods, both expected and non-traditional:



**Photo 2.** (Left) Confucian warrior in the Hue Monuments complex, a World Heritage Area. The warrior guards the Tomb of Emperor Khai Dinh. (Right) Dragon boats on the banks of the Perfume River in Hue. Nearby Thien Mu (Perfume) Pagoda is a working monastery.

lectures and readings, discussions with friends and colleagues, and location experiences in which the specific physical context of a place or situation can trigger the memory of the information. These memories are often deeper and, as a result, stronger. Because of this resonance, they can have a profound impact on thinking, altering the ways in which we approach problems.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of a field school was certainly much more familiar to my classmates, particularly those who were not enrolled in school at the time and whose English was not their first language. (My office encouraged my desire to attend and recognized there would be benefits for my professional development. I traveled on official travel papers and thus was insured for the dates of my travel. For the three weeks of class, however, I was on leave from the office, and I was required to cover all expenses myself.) If asked about field schools, most Americans are only familiar with the archaeological variety. There is an abundance of field schools run by university archaeology departments operating across the globe. Have a yearning for the Middle East? One can work in Egypt with the University of California, Los Angeles.

Care to practice your Spanish? Perhaps the University of Chapel Hill's program in Peru is a better fit. Archaeology field schools are linked to exotic locations, the excitement of discovery, and talented people. People come together for a common interest, and can make lifelong friendships in the process. (A good friend tells a lovely story of meeting her husband "in a hole"—they were both archaeology students at a field school, assigned to the same digging plot.)

New field schools are emerging. Once I filter out the preparatory schools and the archaeology programs that come from plugging "field school" into a Google search, I see that there are several heritage field schools in the Balkans, Kenya, and Belize; a photography field school in New Mexico (no longer operating); and several environmental field schools.<sup>3</sup> The preponderance, however, are archaeological or with an archaeology base, although they may touch on several topics, including heritage management and preservation. Most are geared to students.

Since completing the Vietnam Field School, I have often wondered why it takes me so long to explain what I did and why. The answer, I believe, partly derives from



**Photo 3.** (Left) Limestone karst formations line Ha Long Bay and the 12 sites comprising its "ecomuseum." (Right) Tourists ride a junk to explore Ha Long Bay which is on the World Heritage list for aesthetic and natural significance, and for geological and scientific significance.



the fact that opportunities in field schools for professionals are limited. Does this lack have its roots in American culture, where studying tends to be the domain of students only? Is it part of the limitation of what is considered acceptable professional development in the States? I'm not certain, but I think that perhaps it just is a concept that has not yet been explored.

### Enduring Thoughts

The benefits of the experience are still not all quantified. The program was both intense and intensive. It was demanding in intellectual and physical ways. It both confronted and was confrontational. It

fostered learning, exploration, and new thinking. It built connections, both personal and theoretical. It was, at its core, a field school. It gave us a life-changing three weeks of exploring the role of women and ethnic minorities in culture at the Vietnam Women's Museum; discussing conservation and restoration resulting from the destructions of war; and evaluating the role of museums in world heritage site interpretation. We discussed critical topics that we otherwise never get to address, such as balancing history, heritage, and tourism in an urban context in a sustainable manner; the role of museums in capacity building; the intersection of gender and culture with the UNESCO Millennium Development Goals; or accounting for intangible heritage and



**Photo 4.** (Left) A gate to the Temple of Literature, oldest university in Vietnam, now filled with courtyards, temples, and stele. (Right) Traditional transport in Hanoi's Old Quarter.

outstanding universal values when evaluating sites and traditions.

The Field School didn't solve these issues. It didn't provide us with methods for incorporating these discussions into our daily work. It didn't require us to continue to think about them after the conclusion of the course. But we do. Each one of us does, and that's why we stay connected to each other. We are a network now. The network actually includes all those who have attended the same field school before us, as well as those who will attend it next. It is a professional circle that inscribes the work we do at our own institutions into non-traditional realms, and brings those same linkages and influences into our daily accounts.

Upon my return from the Field School, I was speaking with a colleague. After she had listened to my "summer vacation report," she asked me the question that has occupied my thoughts for several months: So what?

Her question wasn't about the validity or the importance of such programs. In fact, she had encouraged me to take the opportunity to immerse myself in another culture while maintaining my cultural-heritage-and-museum perspective. Working as we do for the Smithsonian Institution, she also understood that the experience was not dissimilar from that of the Smithsonian's annual Folklife Festival, where each summer people from across the globe can visit culture bearers from that year's three featured focus areas and have in-depth, personal, immersive cultural experiences.

As I pondered the "So what?" question, I realized there was another parallel to the Folklife Festival. By highlighting these cultures, the Smithsonian helps to legitimize them, not only by exposing the American

public to the cultures of the world, but also often within the countries themselves. Recognition by a global institution such as the Smithsonian can have far-reaching impact. The festival aims to give back to these cultures—by aiding in documentation, for example. The Field School was similar. We witnessed a number of traditional cultural practices, from loom weaving in Mai Chau to pottery throwing in Hoi An. These are economic bases for the communities. We as students were the minority visitors, and ecotourism is on the rise. Sustainable practices are critical to this endeavor. Even as students we had an impact. While in the ceramic village in Hoi An, we saw very few of the bright red children's whistles, and many of the plain clay ones. The bright red ones were popular with tourists, but are produced by dipping the whistles in red oxide, which is poisonous. A class just a year or two before ours had petitioned the local government to ban the practice, not just as a safety issue for unsuspecting tourists, but more importantly in concern for the practitioners themselves. Red oxide dip was certainly not a traditional practice, and in fact it harmed its users in a number of critical ways. The class thereby legitimized the ceramic village and its role in traditional culture, and emphasized the need for the villagers to maintain traditional cultural practices.

This very simple example shows that there are implications for how we do (or don't) train people working in museums. Our counterparts in Vietnam asked us constantly for our own ideas and experiences, as they look to improve their institutions and methodologies. Whose job is it to protect culture? With whom rests the responsibility for maintaining traditional practices? In Hoi An, the village was filled—but only with elders and children.

All the parents were in town working to support the families.

Is ecotourism enough? What roles can and should museums play in fostering a place for traditional culture? Where is the balance between sustaining cultural heritage and managing increasingly limited resources? These are the questions that occupied me during the program, and that continue to bounce around in my head. The answers to these questions are what I now seek. The Field School has helped me to crystallize my diverse background and interests into a passion for heritage management. These are experiences and thoughts that I believe benefit the work I do—which is focused on indigenous communities—every day at the Smithsonian. They are also driving me to return to graduate school, to satiate my curiosity, hopefully to answer some of these questions, and to implement this learning in positive and productive ways that can benefit both the heritage and museum fields and cultural practitioners.

The field school experience can be a rich intellectual and emotional encounter that betters us personally. Professionally, it can provide new viewpoints and inspirations, not to mention potential new partners. I have a sense of how much I have benefited from this experience, and I expect those realizations to continue for some time. I only wish that more opportunities were available in the professional museum realm, and that more of my friends and colleagues were able to take advantage of such a program. I believe that it only enhances our work, making us more sensitive to the broader issues

around us, and more aware of all that still needs to be done.

*Amy Van Allen (vanallena@si.edu)  
is outreach manager at the Smithsonian  
National Museum of the American Indian  
(NMAI).*

### Notes

1. This research is well documented for language learning especially. See, for example, Baker (2006).
2. This understanding is familiar to any who have studied development psychology. Jean Piaget's models of childhood development stated that children learn through doing, and that knowledge and experience are instrumental in the ability to problem-solve for ideas that are unknown, aiding in the development of new ideas and abilities. Urie Bronfenbrenner expanded this concept to adults in his ecological systems theory.
3. I have recently learned of a second museum/heritage field school: UNESCO's Asian Academy for Heritage Management 2009 Field School: Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums, Lamphun, Thailand.

### Reference

- Baker, C. 2006. *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. Fourth edition. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.