

# **SOME THOUGHTS ON LEADING A PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY FIELD TRIP**

*Steven G. Spear*  
Palomar College

**Abstract:** Fieldwork is absolutely critical for any student in the geosciences. Therefore, field trips should run as smoothly as possible for maximum educational efficacy. I offer 19 suggestions dealing primarily with logistics that will contribute to a successful field experience.

## **Introduction**

No geographic educator can dispute the benefits of the field experience to both students and teachers. Over the years I have participated in scores of field trips, some led by the most respected scientists in their respective subdisciplines. Some of these trips were fantastic, most were good and a few were not so good. No trip has been totally without merit as there is always something to learn about the geography of any area. However, no trip has ever been flawless as specific problems of logistics, materials, weather, presentations by leaders and behavior of participants always arise. I have noticed that good field trip leaders anticipate many of these concerns ahead of time and are prepared to make immediate adjustments so that the smooth flow of the field experience will only be minimally interrupted. What follows is a distillation of some of the most successful practices I have observed. While none of these is novel, putting them all into practice is remarkably difficult.

## **Suggestions for Leading a Successful Field Trip**

Drawing on many others, our department's and my own field trips, I offer the following suggestions:

**1. Be punctual.** If the trip is scheduled to leave at 8:00, you should be in your vehicle with the engine running at 7:59. Once participants see that you place a premium on time in the field, they will quickly (and with great pleasure) follow. At each stop, set a specific time of departure and stick to it. Don't say, Let's take some time to examine the site and take photos. Rather, say, We will leave at 10:30 which should give you enough time to examine the site and take photos. There will surely be some who will object to what they perceive as rigidity but the vast majority will appreciate your actions.

**2. Send or give each participant a pre-trip information packet.**

This packet should be available days or weeks ahead of the trip depending upon the length of the trip. At the minimum, the packet should include:

- a. Directions to the meeting place, including a map.
- b. Contact information including your address, phone number(s) and E-mail.
- c. Transportation details including nature of roads and/or vehicle limitations, and round trip mileage.
- d. A complete, detailed itinerary.
- e. Notes on food and drink.
- f. Details of camping/motel arrangements (if any).
- g. Description of any paperwork and/or permits and waivers that the participants must complete as well as dates these materials are due.
- h. Information on climate, environment, and degree of physical rigor involved.
- i. Any printed materials you feel they should have before the trip begins.
- j. A list of supplies/equipment to bring such as water bottle, flashlight, hat, etc.
- k. Some notice of restroom facilities should be included for those without iron kidneys.

### **3. At the meeting place, each participant must be given a packet (or guidebook) containing at the minimum:**

- a. Road map of the route.
  - b. Detailed road logs.
  - c. Maps of features to be examined (e.g.: vegetation, soils, geology, etc.)
  - d. Transects (or cross-sections) of same.
- Some of these materials may be available from other sources. If so, participants should be so informed in order that they might obtain the materials before the trip. A packet without the above data will be of little use to someone returning to the field location on his/her own.

**4. Include a variety of stops.** In any group of people there are bound to be both hand lens people and wide angle lens people. Thus one should include stops that give opportunities for detailed site examination as well as stops for broad geographic or scenic overviews. Contrary to some opinions, there is nothing inherently wrong with arm waving. The smallest detail in the most obscure place is only part of a much larger picture. A successful field trip integrates both.

**5. Don't make stops too long or too short.** Generally briefer stops are better than longer stops. Stops that allow for collecting, making measurements, drafting maps, etc., obviously require more time than stops where the leader merely points things out to the participants. If you stay long enough for everyone to have spent enough time, you've probably spent too much time for the average participant. Obviously the length of the visit to any particular site will be determined by many factors. Remember that those who are extremely interested in a particular location can always return on their own.

**6. Know your stuff and know what you don't know.** There are obvious advantages in having co-leaders, guests and specific participants who are experts at specific sites. As the leader, you are in charge of the logistics. Turn your fellow experts loose to wax eloquently but be ready to take charge when it is time to leave.

**7. Have a back-up plan for everything.** Because weather, roads, facilities and people are unpredictable, you should have alternate plans for every road, field stop, campsite, and other activity on your itinerary. For myself, this is the prime directive when leading a field trip.

**8. Use CB radios.** It is quite surprising that most geographers welcome computers and GPS into their lives but they rarely use in-field communications. I've been using CB radios for over 20 years and find them an invaluable aid for three reasons:

- 1) One can give directions for travel such as: Turn left just after the volcanic outcrop next to the big cottonwood tree.
  - 2) There are always interesting features to point out between stops.
  - 3) It offers a great way for participants to interact between stops and allows for discussions to continue during travel.
- Many CB radios come with a magnetic-mount antenna and are relatively inexpensive.

**9. Obtain permits or clearances well ahead of time.** National, state and local parks, forests and other entities are increasingly requiring permits, passes and money for visits. Make sure that you have all of the paperwork in order before setting out on the trip.

**10. When arriving at a field site, don't start talking until all participants can hear you.** A portable amplifier is useful for large groups or where there is a lot of background noise such as wind, waves or traffic.

**11. When travelling in a caravan, don't always make the people in the back walk to the front.** Instead, split the difference and meet somewhere in the middle. By the time you've walked back to the middle of the group, the people in the back will be nearly to the middle as well. You might even walk all the way to the back on occasion.

**12. Be safe.** This is obvious, but take all precautions to insure a safe trip. Set a good example by obeying all traffic and other regulations established by your institution and the owners or agencies managing the land upon which you are travelling. Make sure that you are covered by a liability policy.

**13. Mechanical breakdowns.** Unfortunately, vehicles have mechanical problems to varying degrees. The policy that we use is that if it is a minor thing such as a flat tire that can be fixed on the spot, we'll stop and perform the repairs. If it is a more significant problem that would cause significant disruption for the rest of the group, we offer the people in the disabled vehicle the choice of calling for help at the next opportunity or delivering them safely to a phone or garage. We do not bring field trip operations to a halt because of vehicle malfunction.

**14. Be knowledgeable about other aspects of the natural and cultural environment.** Most people interested in geography are tuned into the bigger picture and appreciate the relationships of the area's climate, biology, geology and human history.

**15. Make sure that you pre-run the field trip.** That is, check out the site locations no more than several weeks prior to your planned visit. If this is not directly possible, call local offices of the highway department or other agencies to learn of road closures or other problems.

**16. Make graphics large enough for every one to see.** Maps, charts, transects and photographs used as visual aids should be large enough for the entire group to see. If this is not possible, then smaller copies should be included in the information packet.

**17. Run your field trip as you would a regular class.** Many techniques other than lecture such as group discussion and hands-on discovery that work well in the classroom work even better in the field.

**18. Have someone else along to help with logistics.** Having another employee of your institution along on the trip really helps things to flow smoothly as this person can be designated to handle many of the small glitches that arise.

**19. The Can of Worms.** If for some reason you decide to host a multi-day field conference complete with field trips, evening programs and meals, get help (lots of help). Start planning at least a year in advance and talk to as many people as possible who have done it before. Make sure that all arrangements are guaranteed in writing. Be sure to incorporate suggestion #7 in your planning process.

## **Conclusions**

These suggestions are only a minimum of what is required for a successful physical geography field trip. I welcome further additions,

suggestions or changes. Since one cannot learn geography without significant field experience, it is imperative that field trips be run as efficiently as possible. Only then can they be the true joy that they should be.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Patty Deen and Al Trujillo of the Earth Sciences Department at Palomar College for their many helpful suggestions in the compilation of this list.



Angel's Wings Glacier, Jasper  
(photograph by Angela Wranic)