

## Keeping pace in the race to the field



Field research is a complex undertaking these days. In addition to worrying about details of the research itself, there is an ever-increasing mountain of red tape to wade through before even starting the journey.

The hurdles include University of Alberta and Transport Canada vehicle policies, provincial government “working alone” and occupational health legislation, proper training, waivers and emergency procedures.

It can be daunting, to say the least. But since 2007, the U of A’s Field Research Office (FRO) has been helping remove bumps on the road to the field.

“We define field research quite broadly, from the classic view of a biologist out in the High Arctic or the rainforests of Brazil, to searching library science archives, to investigating archeological sites,” says director Jeff Kavanaugh. “We’re looking to support all aspects of off-campus research.”

Much of what Kavanaugh’s office does links directly to risk management, providing procedures to make field research as safe as possible. Last spring, with help from Risk Management Services (RMS), the FRO acquired 10 satellite phones. It was a timely purchase, since all 10 of them were rented out to researchers last summer. The office is now looking to purchase first-aid kits with automated electronic defibrillators. “Without that additional tool,” says Kavanaugh, “CPR is rather ineffective.”

In addition to the safety measures, the office promotes research activity on its website, featuring prominent researchers and tracking items on projects that appear in the media. There are tips and planning tools for successful field research, all the policy documents you’ll need to be up to speed, and a link that aims to put interested students in touch with field opportunities.

“If you involve students in research, you really give them a leg up in their own research careers,” says Kavanaugh. “If a student has a particular interest, we can link them up with a researcher in that area.”

The FRO is run by Kavanaugh and his administrative assistant, Kim Schaerer, but also takes direction from the Field Research Activities Committee made up of academics, field assistants, safety officers and personnel from RMS. It also organizes training as requested by various departments on campus. Examples include standard first aid (with a remote component), wilderness first aid, chainsaw safety, truck and trailer workshops, fall protection and firearm safety certification.

More varieties of training are added to the list all the time. “Last year, for example, Kim found a training course for electro-fishing, a sampling technique that shocks fish so researchers can examine them.”

Part of FRO’s job, of course, is to deal with the unexpected. Last year, for instance, U of A researchers tried to carry some gear into Cuba for a field project. Problem was, some of it was manufactured in the United States and contravened trade regulations, so that field trip had to be postponed.

Given the growing complexity of field research, FRO now holds information sessions in the late winter or early spring to explore how the office can assist with field research or to invite outside speakers to discuss field research topics.

The first information session of the year is Feb. 10 at 2:30 p.m. Check the FRO website for more details:  
<http://www.fieldoffice.ualberta.ca/>.