

1 Research and Exchange Grant – Post mobility period output 2

A brief and engaging summary about the exchange period for RPLC Website (e.g. contribution on RPLC blog and RPLC webinars). Some questions should be addressed:

- ✓ Who is doing the research/exchange?
- ✓ Where is the exchange period taking place?
- ✓ What is the research about?
- ✓ Why is the exchange important?
- ✓ Which lessons have you learned by this experience (scientific and/or personal ones)?
- ✓ After conducting your research, what recommendations can you provide to help guide rural policy in your topic area?

Arriving in rain, leaving on fire

The picture on the right shows me, Sarah, a PhD student based at the University of the Highlands and Islands, Inverness, Scotland. This is my first trip to the woods with my fellow students from the School of Public Policy at Oregon State University, Corvallis, US. Interested in finding out why I am hugging a huge Douglas fir? Let me tell you a wee story.



“I need to see the trees”, I told my fellow students at OSU.

“Why trees?”

“Well, my PhD deals with education and recruitment issues the British forestry sector is experiencing and I’ve been interviewing foresters on the matter.”

“Ah, forestry, yes you’re right to come to Oregon then.”



Aye, Oregon and forestry - the sector had such a deep cultural, environmental and economic impact on the state like no other land use. I was soon to find out about the issues the public forestry sector experienced. A historical fight on the 60 percent federally owned forest land, subjected to management approaches suppressing the natural fire regime. This legacy sparked tensions between community, conservation and industry groups. No comparison to Scottish issues of low woodland cover (18 percent), an ancient landownership pattern resulting in the general public’s detachment from woodland culture and a red deer population high enough to render natural regeneration impossible.

“So what are you going to do here? How long are you staying?”

“I’ll be here for three months, interviewing more foresters to understand how conceptual and cultural differences influence career choice making.”

“Ah, I know where to take you. It’s raining right now ‘cause it’s May but it’s getting real hot in summer”. (She kindly took the picture of me hugging the Douglas fir, thank you Stuty).

She was right, it got hot. In fact, by the time I left in the middle of August, wildfires covered the Pacific North West, it hadn’t rained in 6 weeks and I couldn’t see further than 200 metres due to the rising smoke. I conducted eight interviews in total which I will compare to the interview data I collected in Great Britain. As I left Oregon, I had to think about the interviews and the conflicts responsible for the wildfires.



My interviewees shared their personal stories about their passion for forestry and how many of them are combating the conflict that started with a suppression of natural processes and an endangered owl in a deteriorating habitat. I remembered their frustration, trying to mediate, trying to soften the stances of divided fronts, trying to reach out where courts had to rule. I was told not trying to solve the underlying conflicts would be ‘a policy of despair’. So what is policy to do? However, more than asking for policy implications, I would like to turn that question around and ask: What impacts does policy development have on professionals? On their day-to-day working realities? On the way they think about forests and their own work? Terms such as ‘conceptualisation’ and ‘policy implications’ mask the magnitude of professionals’ changing lived experience. Therefore, how could professionals’ experiences help reconnect policy design and policy application?

Indeed, I first saw Oregon in rain and I had to leave as it was on fire.