

# GEOG



# UBC



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA - DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY

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## Sabbatical Stories: Karen Bakker

How quickly a year passes! We left in August 2008 for a research sabbatical in France. One of my main goals was to renew links with research collaborators in Europe. Based at one of France's prestigious Grandes Ecoles (Ecole Nationale des Ponts et Chaussees), located just outside of Paris, the denizens of my research "laboratory" were a diverse mix: urban planners, geographers, architects, economists, and even a stray engineer or two. This base allowed me to delve into research, while attending conferences that would otherwise be prohibitively far from Vancouver. One highlight was the World Water Forum, a global gathering held every three years, this time in Istanbul. I also enjoyed presenting a paper at the Antipode Summer Institute hosted by the Department of Geography at the University of Manchester (where another UBC Geographer, Dr. Gerry Pratt, was a featured speaker). Perhaps the most inspiring conference occurred in Geneva: an intensive three-day meeting with researchers from around the world debating the issue of water as a human right. This led to another invitation as one of only two academic participants in the UN's Expert Consultation on the same topic, which brought together private water companies, activists, and water managers from around the world in heated discussion about the legitimacy and role of private companies in supplying water to the world's poor. All of this was immensely helpful as I completed a manuscript on water privatization and the world's urban water supply crisis (to be published later this year by Cornell University Press).

The year also taught me a great deal about the French university system. Many researchers in France debate the globalization of academia and the dominance of English-language journals. This debate was fuelled soon after our arrival by the French President Sarkozy, who promised a series of reforms to French universities, modelled after his view (perhaps not entirely accurate) of the North American university system. Protests and university shutdowns ensued, with one unfortunate university President being doused with ice water and garbage by student protestors. The debate made national television, and the issues were discussed with a fair degree of sophistication in the popular press. As an introduction to French civil society, and the French art of protest, all of this was fascinating (albeit distracting).

Soon after I arrived, I was asked to lead a seminar on "Publishing in Anglo-Saxon Academic Journals". Somewhat bemused, I launched an investigation into the politics of language and publishing culture of French versus English academic journals. I began to understand the reasons for the differences in writing styles: the deductive, fact-based nature of French prose versus the inductive, argument-based nature of English prose; the aversion of the French to the first person singular; the absence of an explicit argument and



*Istanbul during 5th World Water Forum March 2009 (<http://www.treehugger.com/files/2009/03/is-water-a-right-or-a->*

research justification (so often central to academic articles in English) in French journals. All of this led to interesting discussion with colleagues and, eventually, to one of my articles being published in a French journal (*Espaces et Societes*). The enormous effort it took to translate not only words but also writing and argumentation style made me very appreciative of the tremendous complexity (and sheer effort) of the cross-cultural communication in which "non-Anglo-Saxon" academics engage on a daily basis. I read and re-read Edward Said's "Representations of the Intellectual"--in which he talks about the experience of intellectuals being troubled by "exile" and enriched by a shared community of the "diaspora". The experience has reaffirmed my hope that UBC, and the Department of Geography, will continue fostering diversity within the graduate student body and the faculty, as a means of enriching our own dialogues abroad and at home.

## Terrific Tree Rings: A Lab Feature

By Katie Kinsley, photos by Albert Teng

Did you know that the Department of Geography owns an ATV? Or that every year UBC Geography releases untold numbers of grad students, post docs and field assistants armed with chainsaws, straws, saran wrap and duct tape into the wilds of BC and Alberta? Well it is all part of being a Physical Geographer or at least part of being a Dendrochronologist. Dendrochronology, a branch of Geography, is the study of trees (dendro) and time (chrono). It includes several sub disciplines such as dendroecology, dendroclimatology, dendroarchaeology. The study of trees and time is conducted through collecting tree samples and analyzing the tree-rings in those samples, which explains all those geographers AT-Ving about in the woods!

Recently I realized that I had no idea what goes on behind the doors of the Tree-Ring Lab at UBC. So I decided to find out. Eileen Jones MSc, Technician and RA agreed to give Albert and I the grand tour. The Tree-Ring Lab is Lori Daniels' project. Lori established her research programme in 2001 and named her research group the "Tree-Ring Lab at UBC". The research group grew quickly and in 2007 moved to their current home in room 109. In the 9 years since the Tree-Ring lab has been established it has included 5 Post Docs, 4 PhD students, 5 MSc Students, 4 MSc students (co-supervised by other departments at UBC or UVic), another 10 graduate students who have worked in the lab to complete components of their theses, not to mention numerous undergraduate students, field and lab assistants!



Wood samples, RA filling cracks with glue in background



Wood samples in process in the sanding room.



A core sample mounted and ready for analysis.



Wood samples held together and labeled with duct tape.

Every summer these hardworking geographers pack up their chainsaws and hiking boots and scatter through the west to collect wood samples. The 2009 field season saw UBC geographers undertaking field work on the climate's role in forest decline on Haida Gwaii, studying fire dynamics in the Kootenays and investigating riparian stand dynamics near Hinton, Alberta. Often geographers spend months collecting samples in remote locations reachable only by helicopter or boat. On top of the remoteness they face challenges ranging from parasites to falling trees and wildlife encounters. Although it can be challenging and intense, Eileen exclaims "field work is fun," saying many researchers "live for the field season." But what exactly are they collecting out in the field? The tree samples generally take the form of either core samples or cross sections. Core samples are collected from live trees by inserting a tool called an increment borer that pierces the tree and removes a long, slender, cylindrical sample. Once removed from the trees the core samples are carefully inserted into plastic straws, labeled and frozen (to prevent rotting). Cross sections are cut either from fallen logs or freshly cut trees (this is where the chainsaws come in!). Once cut the cross section samples are reinforced with duct tape, labeled, saran wrapped and frozen. At the end of the field season these samples, often numbering in the hundreds, are shipped to UBC and the lab work begins!

UBC Dendrochronologists jokingly refer to their work as "arts and crafts." Many hours of preparation go into every tree sample. Core samples must be mounted and sanded before they can be analyzed. Similarly, any gaps or cracks in cross se-

## Terrific Tree Rings (*Continued*)

ction samples must be gently filled with glue to ensure the sample stays in one complete piece. Most of the “arts and crafts” take place at a big table in room 109. Once the samples are well glued they are moved to “The Sanding Room.” Just a closet of a room, 148 is equipped with several different sanders to deal with tree samples of varied size and quality. When we walk in RA Raphael Chavardes is hard at work and the air is full with the scent of fresh sawdust.

Although sanding samples might not sound like a big job, it can be time consuming as each sample must be carefully sanded with gradually finer and finer paper until it reaches 600 grit, sandpaper so fine that it has to be specially ordered. The resulting samples shine softly and are so smooth to touch that it’s hard to believe they are wood, but more importantly the details of each tree ring become strikingly clear. At this point the sample is ready for analysis. Back in room 109 we check out the microscopes and measuring stations. This is where most of the work takes place. Researchers spend countless hours, eyes to the microscope, measuring the



*A fresh sample of semi rotted wood. This sample must be glued and sanded before it can be used for analysis.*

distances between tree-rings, counting the number of tree-rings on a particular sample, recording data and cross referencing it with historical information. The Tree-Ring Lab has also just acquired a new high resolution scanner that can distinguish ring boundaries, which will not only save geographers significant time in measurements but will also allow them to store archived images of their samples. Once all of the data from the tree samples is meticulously collected, after hours of preparation, counting, measuring and documenting, the data is ready for interpretation.

Tree-ring research has incredibly wide ranging applications. It can be used to

reconstruct insect outbreaks, landslides, avalanches and forest fires; to track animal population trends (e.g. by studying marks scarring on tree roots we can track migration patterns and population sizes). It can even be used to distinguish historical human environment relationships (e.g. tree-rings provide evidence of scarring where First Nations populations removed bark from trees for use). Tree-ring research is also playing a vital role in

climate change studies where it is used to track historic climate trends, investigate climate impact on forests and to predict future scenarios. The Tree-Ring lab at UBC has been involved in research in most of these areas!

Our final stop on the tour is the basement of the Math building. A veritable library of wood samples, this is where cross sections and core samples are sent to retire. Although to my untrained eye it looks like shelves upon shelves of tree pieces, this room holds the raw material that formed the basis of many a thesis and if the enthusiasm of the Tree-Ring team is any indication it will soon hold more!



*Raphael Chavardes sanding down a wood sample.*



*Eileen Jones points out where historic fires scarred this sample.*



*Xanthe Walker uses the microscope to measure core samples.*

## Featured Geographer: Juanita Sundberg



**Hails from:** The child of missionaries, I was fortunate to grow up in Panama and Guatemala. My family lived with many communities, including Ngöbe forest dwellers, peasant farmers, coffee plantation workers, and city residents. The year I turned 13, my family moved to San Antonio, Texas. I now consider the United States-Mexico borderlands my home.

**Why Geography:** If truth be told, I had always wanted to be an anthropologist because of my profound respect for indigenous societies in Central America. As a grad student at the New School for Social Research, I loved reading classic ethnographies about herding societies and the intricate relations people had with animals. However, when I discovered geography at the University of Texas through cultural ecologist Barbara Brower, I found my true love. The interdisciplinarity of geography gives me the inspiration and freedom to study human-land relations from many perspectives. My recent work in post-humanist geographies has brought me back to the world of animals.

**Years at UBC:** I have been at UBC for ten years. It feels like a lifetime and a brief interlude all at the same time.

**Greatest success:** I considered finishing my dissertation an enormous success. In 2009, I was awarded the Killam Teaching Prize. It was a great honor to be recognized for the passion and effort I put into my teaching.

**Strangest Geography experience:**

As a graduate student in the Geography Department at the University of Texas, I learned about the concept of wilderness. The concept was completely new, but also foreign to me. My childhood was spent with people whose cosmologies (ontologies) do not separate nature from culture. I had been taught to see tropical forests as homes, orchards, and gardens, places inhabited and created by people.

**Current research:** My current research focuses on the environmental dimensions of U.S. border security measures. I am especially intrigued by the ways in which nonhumans constitute the borderlands and border security.

**Favorite research destination:** Although I do not have a research project in Panama, I am absolutely captivated by the variety of cultural formations and the proliferation of diverse flora and fauna.

**Little known fact:** I am fascinated by birds. I was fortunate to grow up around parrots and I love their inquisitive and perceptive character.

**Favorite book:** *The Long Night of White Chickens* by Francisco Goldman perfectly captures the quiet brutality of social relations in Guatemala during the years of civil war. Reading it feels like being in an uncomfortable yet familiar place.

## Congratulations Gerry!

Gerry Pratt is this year's winner of the Sam Black Award. Established in 1999 this award recognizes UBC faculty members who have made an extraordinary contribution to the fields of Art, Music, Creative Writing, Theatre and Film. Gerry is the first Geographer to win this award. Over the years Gerry has demonstrated a strong commitment to linking her research to the arts. Within the department, Gerry created Geography 456 Film and the City, encouraging students to consider the intersections between urban theories, film techniques and viewing practices. In 2008 Gerry along with members of the Philippine Women Centre coproduced a collaborative performance for the WACK! Art and Feminist Revolution exhibit at VAG.

In the many letters written to support Gerry's nomination her latest production NANAY: A Testimonial Play was repeatedly emphasized as a success and an inspiration. First performed February 2009 as part of PuSH International Performing Arts Festival, NANAY ran 13 sold out performances in Vancouver before heading to Berlin. One supporter wrote that NANAY might be called "a research project, a play, or a multimedia event... its strength is in the connections between these areas." Based on verbal testimonies given by Filipino workers in the Live in Caregiver Program, co-written by Gerry Pratt and Caleb Johnston, NANAY invited viewers to interact with this research in a new and arguably more flexible setting.

Clearly, Gerry is well deserving of this award. She is in the words of her supporters a "unique and inspiring academic whose scholarly work resonates seamlessly with a range of other social and artistic concerns."

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The University of British Columbia  
The Department of Geography

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