

naturejobs

**THE CAREERS
MAGAZINE FOR
SCIENTISTS**

Getting away from science is next to impossible. Regardless of whether you labour in the lab or, like me, you slave over a keyboard writing about research, the next story or experiment sticks with you even when you're away from your place of work. But sometimes, a little distance, a change of scenery — and freedom from phone calls and e-mail — can help to sharpen your focus.

A group of friends and I achieved both distance and clarity during a recent trek through the Grand Canyon. Hiking 80 kilometres through the desert, while carrying 15-kilogram packs and seeing more animals than people, has a way of paring life down to its essentials. Even so, getting away from science still proved to be extraordinarily difficult — especially as everyone in our party had some kind of connection to research. My wife Polina is a social scientist and policy analyst, Matt trained as a forester, Kate originally qualified as an entomologist, and Renee and Eric worked for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

To our credit, we didn't talk about work — much. We were too busy locating the next water source, dodging rattlesnakes and gazing at bighorn sheep. But our respective professional perspectives still came into play. Matt and Eric's experience with maps, compasses and the global positioning system kept us heading in the right direction. Renee and Kate's skills at plant and insect identification made us more aware of the flora and fauna we encountered. And Polina's knack for getting on with people scored us some extra food from other hikers who wanted to leave their excess weight behind for their ascent.

So I couldn't help thinking how our group's skills and professional paths reflect a microcosm of scientific careers. Only one of the six is even considering a traditional career in research. But we all still draw on our scientific backgrounds in our work and daily life. And using our soft skills in communication, planning and management made our trip both safe and memorable — and left us more focused on our jobs when we returned.

Paul Smaglik, *Naturejobs* editor

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