



Tim Martin, a teacher, tags along with palaeoclimatologist Julie Brigham-Grette in Siberia.

distractions once the trip is under way — in the field, it is sometimes hard for scientists to explain the big picture of the research effort because they are so caught up in the mechanical details of data collection. “When teachers are going out in the field, they’re seeing only one piece of the process,” says Warburton. “The team is usually very stressed collecting data and may not have the energy to explain the big picture in the moment.”

For teacher trips, pre-planning should entail some thought about how the experience will benefit the classroom. Before his own expedition to Siberia with Brigham-Grette, Tim Martin, a teacher at Greensboro Day School in North Carolina, discussed with her how his web design and photography skills could help to translate her science into useful lessons for his students. He also improved his understanding of her work.

Since their expedition together, Brigham-Grette and Goldner have stayed in touch so that she can share her group’s analyses of the data that they collected. “The whole goal of PolarTREC shouldn’t be about me, or my trip to the Arctic, it’s really about my students and the outreach that I can do,” says Goldner. “That ongoing collaboration is really important.”

ON THE RECORD

Allowing guests, especially journalists, to participate in expeditions may not be the best choice for every expedition. Anything from precarious logistics to bad weather or sensitive politics might cause scientists to postpone, says Olsen. Krajick adds, “If you’re not prepared to go on the record all the time, I don’t think you should take someone along.” Most fieldwork takes place in too intimate a setting to expect much control over gossip or frayed nerves.

Sharing the experience doesn’t have to

mean relinquishing all control. Olsen has experimented with one way of dealing with the time demanded by television crews: he has decided to not bother trying to conduct real science for the cameras. Mock observations are enough for television journalists, and not having to worry about botching precise measurements makes answering questions easier.

Indeed, hosting often requires flexibility. “You can’t plan which days are for discovery and which are photo days,” says McGee. He acknowledges that Fox’s visit was rather long at four days, but McGee liked the result — a nuanced depiction of his work.

Field guests can be an asset, even beyond outreach: scientists may be able to put visitors to work and make use of their skills. When Brigham-Grette first offered him a place on her trip, Martin was “ready to mop floors”. But the team found more useful things for him to do: he had once worked building houses in needy communities, and had construction skills. On one occasion, Brigham-Grette assigned Martin to work on a drill. He didn’t falter when the sub-freezing temperatures chilled the drill’s fluids and shut it down. Instead, he assumed the role of foreman. “We brought it inside for warmth,” he recalls. “But the exhaust was poisonous, so I built an enclosure to channel the exhaust outside.”

Goldner happened to know how to drive boats, so Brigham-Grette asked him to ferry scientists and equipment around. And on a remote field site in Morocco, Olsen once asked a television crew with a large budget to transport some of his team members between sites. When it comes to field-trip guests, he says, “their needs and your needs can overlap.” ■

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JOB SECURITY

British prospects grim

Recruitment and job security for early-career faculty members in the United Kingdom will become more uncertain as government funding for higher education declines, says a trade union. The University and College Union (UCU) in London released a study of higher-education revenues on 5 January. The report says that the proportion of university income accounted for by government funding, estimated to be 31.6% for 2010–11, will fall to 15% by 2014–15. That will probably lead to a reduction in long-term, renewable contracts for junior faculty members, says Stephen Court, the UCU’s senior research officer. “The shifting pattern of income from the government will make university employment more precarious,” he says.

BIOMEDICAL SCIENCE

Jackson Lab to expand

The Jackson Laboratory has completed plans to open a branch in Connecticut. On 5 January, state governor Dannel Malloy finalized an agreement with Jackson, a biomedical research centre based in Bar Harbor, Maine. The lab will initially lease space from the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington. Next year, construction will begin on a permanent facility in Farmington that is set to employ 300 scientists and support staff by 2017. Recruitment is already under way in computational biology and systems genomics for the temporary lab, which will have 27 employees, including scientists, by the end of 2012, says Michael Hyde, Jackson’s vice-president for advancement.

UNITED STATES

Scientists miss their peak

US biomedical scientists rarely earn their first major grants during their optimum innovative years, concludes a study (K. R. W. Matthews *et al.* *PLoS ONE* 6, e29738; 2011). In 2008, the average age of a scientist getting a first grant from the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) was 42, the authors found. But researchers who won Nobel prizes in medicine or chemistry between 1980 and 2010 did their pioneering work at an average of 41 years; 78% did so before 51, the average age of NIH investigators now. Part of the problem is that the NIH is risk-averse and unwilling to fund nascent work, argues Kirstin Matthews, lead author of the study and a science and technology policy fellow at Rice University in Houston, Texas.