

Fall 2013

Tom Safford Associate Professor of Sociology travels to Brazil

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Recommended Citation

Safford, Thomas G., "Tom Safford Associate Professor of Sociology travels to Brazil" (2013). *Faculty Travel Reports*. 83.
https://scholars.unh.edu/international_travel/83

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Tom Safford Associate Professor of Sociology travels to Brazil



Tom Safford

Associate Professor of Sociology -- Brazil

With support from a CIE development grant, I traveled to Brazil for two weeks in June and July to initiate a new line of research examining social and environmental issues facing Brazilian coastal communities. My investigation will examine how scientific and economic data shapes the way stakeholders from the oil and gas, tourism, and fishing sectors, along with public sector actors, assess different coastal development options as well as potential environmental risks. A critical part of this trip was to make contact with Brazilian scholars and graduate students with whom I might conduct collaborative research in the future. During my trip, I visited coastal areas in three Brazilian states, Santa Catarina, Rio de Janeiro, and Espírito Santo.

In Santa Catarina, I met with Dr. Paulo Vieira and a number of graduate students and post-doctoral scholars at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC) and Dr. Marcus Polette from the Universidade do Vale do Itajaí (UNIVALI). The Catarinense coast has experienced a housing boom, largely driven by tourism. Beach towns such as Balneário Camboriú have had exponential growth and now have high rise towers 80 stories tall (the highest in Brazil) looming over a once remote beach community. This transformation of the coast has marginalized traditional artisanal fishers and is threatening unique environmental areas such as the calving grounds for endangered Right Whales. Santa Catarina produces 3/4 of all of Brazil's processed fish and has one of the country's largest commercial fishing fleets. It is also home to major port and industrial areas in Itajaí and São Francisco do Sul, which have benefited from the boom in offshore oil development and services.



Fisherman in Santa Catarina



Dr. Marcus Polette and Prof. Tom Safford



Safford (second from l.) with UFF faculty and students

I toured both developed and undeveloped areas of the coast with my hosts – seeing firsthand the social and environmental challenges facing Catarinense coastal communities. Faculty members and students at the two universities have numerous on-going projects investigating social and environmental issues linked to coastal and ocean management. Together we identified a number of areas of shared interest and began outlining potential collaborative research for the future. The wide-ranging issues on the Catarinense coast provide an opportunity to develop applied research that can support communities and policy makers confronting social and environmental challenges.

On the second leg of the trip, I visited the northern part of Rio de Janeiro state – the Norte Fluminense – that is the focal area of Brazil's oil industry. I met with Dr. Antenora Siqueira, Dr. Denise Terra, and other professors and students from the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF) and the Universidade Estadual Norte Fluminense (UENF) in the regional center of Campos dos Goytacazes. Similar to Santa Catarina, the rapid progress of development in the Norte Fluminense region is creating social and environmental challenges. I visited coastal communities surrounding a massive new port development aimed at supporting the oil and mining industries – Porto Açu. Açu was due to be the largest port in the Americas, but Brazil's economic downturn and falling oil prices have impacted its construction leaving thousands out of work and creating uncertainty about the port's future. Both oil and port development have caused massive social upheaval and the modification of the fragile coastal areas leading to increased flood risks and beach erosion. Fishing communities have been particularly hard hit and many unique mangrove and estuary areas have been damaged. Researchers from UFF and UENF are key purveyors of information about social, economic, and environmental changes linked to the industrialization of the Norte Fluminense coast. As a part of my effort to provide a cross regional analysis of the role science and risk analysis in coastal development planning, I see great opportunities for research collaboration with my colleagues at UENF and UFF.



Port of Vitória



Fishing boat in Vitória



Safford (fourth from l.) with UFES faculty and students

I finished my trip in Vitória the capital of the state of Espírito Santo. I was invited by Dr. Aline Trigueiro from the Universidade Federal de Espírito Santo (UFES) to present findings from some of my past research on the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. This provided a platform for linking my existing research in the U.S. to that of my colleagues in Brazil. Like the neighboring Norte Fluminense region, Espírito Santo has large offshore oil reserves and the state's economy has benefited from mining and oil-related development. Like their counterparts in Santa Catarina and the Norte Fluminense, small fishing communities in Espírito Santo are grappling with the implications and impacts from the industrialization of the coast. Dr. Trigueiro and others at UFES are engaged in important research focused on social and environmental changes and their effects on coastal communities. There are many parallels between the on-going research of professors at UFES and my own research interests. Following my talk on the Gulf of Mexico spill, students and faculty asked great questions that opened up a discussion of the distinct ways ocean oil development has preceded in the U.S. and Brazil, and in particular the way public policies in both countries have failed to address important social dimensions inherent to these activities.

Overall, my trip was extremely productive and I developed important contacts that will be critical for the development of my new research in Brazil. During all three stops during my travels, I had the opportunity to share information about UNH and the broader activities of CIE, the Carsey Institute, and the Coastal Response Research Center. It is my hope that this trip will serve a first step in developing broader collaborations where Brazilian faculty and students might also come here to UNH. I am extremely grateful to the CIE for its support and I look forward to integrating my work in Brazil with the broader internationalization efforts occurring at UNH.



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