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Field Access: A Growing Problem

A foreign policy of science has emerged that sweeps into its domain many nonscientific practices. A particularly troubling instance is the use of a political-bureaucratic process to control access to field sites. Restrictions on field access can seriously impede disciplines in which progress is made through observing conditions that are not present in any single nation or world area. Anthropology, archeology, botany, entomology, geology, primatology, and linguistics are such disciplines.

The criteria invoked in granting clearances to investigators vary from one discipline to the next and from one country to the next. Seldom, however, are the criteria exclusively scientific. Issues raised include: Could the foreign researcher exhaust a site or topic that should be preserved for local scholars? Could foreign-sponsored research put the host country at a commercial or military disadvantage? Could it prove politically embarrassing? Is it disrespectful to the local culture?

In the majority of cases, such questions are satisfactorily answered, visas granted, and field research proceeds. But often enough to cause concern, research today is impeded, redirected, postponed, or, if a scholar expects bureaucratic hassle, never proposed.

The requirement for formal procedures to obtain clearance for research projects is largely a post–World War II development. It is somewhat explicable when one takes into account the rhetoric, now widespread, which attaches each nation's investment in science to its security and its welfare. Science, not least of all international science, is in practice and rhetoric now tightly linked with sovereignty and national security.

If it is too late in the history of world politics to detach science from national sovereignty, and all the protective impulses this promotes, it is not too late to minimize damage to those disciplines whose work depends on field observation. Four things would help.

First, the obligations of individual field researchers must be clarified. These include affirming the universality of scientific standards as well as insisting on full reporting of research findings. But the foreign scholar also has obligations to the host country and should take up residence only if willing to comply with indigenous moral and legal codes. Irresponsible personal behavior that insults or places in jeopardy segments of the local community invites restrictions on research even when the offending behavior is unrelated to the conduct of research.

Second, overseas centers that have experience in negotiating clearances for researchers need to be strengthened and their responsibilities extended. These centers have accumulated goodwill with the local officials who administer the increasingly complex set of rules governing access and can help guide the inexperienced field researcher.

Third, a collaborative effort is needed by the various academies of the world, especially the newer ones being established in Third World countries. The academies can advise those who write and implement the rules restricting field access and help negotiate arrangements for visiting investigators.

Fourth, there should be increased sponsorship of cross-national research projects. Because cross-national collaboration does not always or everywhere make scientific sense, it should be resisted as the necessary entry price for field access. But when scientifically appropriate, such collaboration can greatly ease problems of access, as the international program of the National Science Foundation has successfully demonstrated.

These are modest actions, but if they replace the present inattention to what is a steadily worsening situation, we may yet avoid a world in which large numbers of scholars and research topics are subjected to the political veto power of host nations.—KENNETH PREWITT, *President, Social Science Research Council,* and *Fellow, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California 94305*