Ethnographic Field Research

"Ethnographic field research involves the study of groups and people as they go about their everyday lives. Carrying out such research involves two distinct activities. First, the ethnographer enters into a social setting and gets to know the people involved in it; usually, the setting is not previously known in an intimate way. The ethnographer participates in the daily routines of this setting, develops ongoing relations with the people in it, and observes all the while what is going on. Indeed, the term "participant observation" is often used to characterize this basic research approach. But, second, the ethnographer writes down in regular, systematic ways what she observes and learns while participating in the daily rounds of life of others. Thus the researcher creates an accumulating written record of these observations and experiences. These two interconnected activities comprise the core of ethnographic research: Firsthand participation in some initially unfamiliar social world and the production of written accounts of that world by drawing upon such participation." —From R.M. Emerson, R.I. Fretz, & L.L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Dr. Tom Sheridan

Our guest speaker is Dr. Thomas E. Sheridan, a research anthropologist at the Southwest Center and Professor of Anthropology in the UA School of Anthropology. Tom has conducted ethnographic and ethnohistoric research in the Southwest and northern Mexico since 1971. He directed the Mexican Heritage Project at the Arizona Historical Society from 1982 to 1984 and was director of the Office of Ethnohistorical Research at the Arizona State Museum from 1997 to 2003. Courses taught: Southwest Land & Society (ANTH 418/518); Anthropology of Rural Mexico (ANTH 423/523); Anthropology & History (ANTH 696B); and Conservation & Community (ANTH 696B). Since 1997, he's been involved in land-use politics in Arizona and the Southwest. He served as chair of the Canoa Heritage Foundation and has been heavily involved in Pima County's visionary Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan since 1998, chairing the Ranch Conservation Technical Advisory Team. Tom was president of the Anthropology & Environment Section of the American Anthropological Association from 2003 to 2005. Selected publications include *Los Tucsonenses: The Mexican Community of Tucson, 1854-1941* (UA Press, 1986); *Where the Dove Calls: The Political Ecology of a Peasant Corporate Community in Northwestern Mexico* (UA Press, 1988); *Arizona: A History* (UA Press 1995; 2012 rev. ed.); *Landscapes of Fraud: Mission Tumacacori, the Baca Float, and the Betrayal of the O'Odham* (UA Press, 2006); and *Stitching the West Back Together: Conservation of Working Landscapes* (University of Chicago Press, 2014). Research interests include anthropology & history; conservation & community; production of space; wilderness and working landscapes; common property theory; ranching, urbanization, and environmentalism; political ecology of the American West; political ecology of northern Mexico; ethnology and ethnohistory of the Southwest.

Tom Sheridan on Participant Observation

My training as an anthropologist has been critical in my work. One of the foundations of anthropological methodology is participant observation. In essence, participant observation means sharing the daily lives of people in order to understand their values, beliefs, aspirations, and goals, and the struggles they face to put those values and beliefs into practice to achieve those goals. Collaborative conservation is a similar endeavor. In order to find common ground, ranchers, environmentalists, scientists, agency personnel, and other parties interested in the rural West need to understand where one another is coming from and the challenges and constraints one another faces. Like participant observation, collaborative conservation demands patience and an enormous investment of time. There are no shortcuts to building the bonds of trust necessary to set real differences aside and word towards common goals.

As a participant observer in the Arizona Common Ground Roundtable, Canoa Ranch, the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, and the Altar Valley Conservation Alliance, my primary purpose has been to work with other “stakeholders” to identify and achieve common goals rather than to pursue my research agenda. Nonetheless, I have distilled some of these experiences into both scholarly and popularly written publications. The most substantive of these is a co-edited volume entitled *Stitching the West Back Together: Conservation and Working Landscapes* (Charnley, Sheridan, and Nabhan 2014), which evolved out of two workshops involving ranchers and foresters as well as academics in 2005 and 2009. In the future, I plan to write a historical ethnography about how rampant real estate speculation in the late 20th and 21st centuries in southern Arizona provoked a broad coalition of environmentalists, neighborhood groups, and others to preserve open space and biodiversity through the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan and other initiatives. I also intend to write a political ecology of the Sonoran Desert drawing upon my historical and ethnographic research on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.

At this point, I need to emphasize one absolutely essential principle of collaborative conservation: there are no shortcuts to consensus, no cookie-cutter models to finding common ground. You cannot design and implement a survey, carry out a rapid rural appraisal, convene a focus group or two, or engage in the kind of superficial “trust-building” exercises too many of us have had to endure in academic or corporate retreats. Collaborative conservation depends upon building trust among people who often have profound philosophical, cultural, political, and economic differences. To build that trust requires dozens, even hundreds of hours of face-to-face dialogue that, especially in the beginning, may require professional facilitators and explicit ground rules to promote civility and the interchange of ideas, strategies, and beliefs.

I placed “stakeholders” and “interest groups” in quotes because those terms denote a positionality that often connotes confrontation and conflict. The public meetings and public input federal, state, county, and municipal agencies must hold and collect because of legal requirements mandated by legislation like the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) involve “stakeholders” and “interest groups.” Those “stakeholders” and “interest groups” rarely change their positions because of legally mandated processes. If anything, they may accentuate differences and promote a “zero-sum game,” winner-take-all attitude to land management (Sheridan, Sayre, and Seibert 1914). Collaborative conservation, in contrast, attempts to move people to recognize and respect differences, to compromise, to change their positions in some cases. Above all, it strives to create partners who find common ground and make decisions based upon those commonalities. Not all differences disappear, but those differences are set aside, at least temporarily, to concentrate on areas of agreement, to carry out common objectives, and to achieve common goals. This works best when parties share a common landscape such as a watershed like the Altar Valley. They then can begin to see themselves as long-term partners in the management of that landscape.

The primary methodology I have employed is best described as collaborative engagement informed by engaged participant observation. It takes time to understand why “stakeholders” and “interest groups” take the positions that they do. You have to understand their personal backgrounds, economic interests, political ideologies, values, and beliefs. Then you have to carefully suggest points and arenas of common interest. Above all, however, you have to listen and encourage others to do the same. In the beginning, there will be setbacks. Something will happen that causes participants to retreat back into their positions, their polemics, even their paranoia. Over time, however, the trust built up through meeting with one another and working on common projects grows strong enough to weather such setbacks. Those bonds of trust can even survive controversies when parties are on the opposite sides of important issues.