



Stanford eCorner

Early Experience Inspires a Career

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April 06, 2011

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2690/Early-Experience-Inspires-a-Career>

Conservation International Executive VP Jennifer Morris discusses how an early teaching experience in Africa altered her career path. She initially considered going into public health, but her experiences living and working with women in the villages of Namibia inspired a new interest in exploring connections between resource management and the drivers of poverty.



Transcript

After I graduated from college, I spent a year in Japan teaching and I decided that I wanted to go into public health. And I also was very interested in Africa. So I went to the country of Namibia and was a volunteer with the program through Harvard called WorldTeach. I lived in a little community next to a clinic and spent my weeks teaching women English. Namibia just become independent from South Africa and English was now becoming very common and all the women who hadn't had access to formal education English were anxious to study the new language of freedom, really, of Namibia. So I went there thinking I was going to go into public health. So I spent my weekends... Teaching during the week and my weekends are spent in the villages with mostly women and their families. And we spent probably about 90% of our time collecting water and collecting firewood because in countries like Namibia and many others throughout the world, there's no access to electricity. There's no access to water unless you actually go out and fetch it.

And of course, wood is really critical for cooking in these communities. These people living in this area which is an increasingly arid area of the world... It's very arid already but because of deforestation, these resources are becoming harder and harder to find. So these women, instead of going to school or working, were spending most of their time actually just collecting basic natural resources for their survival. In addition to that, when they're out in these places collecting firewood and water, they're subject to malaria. There were a lot of malaria in this area but when they're out deep into the woods collecting water and firewood, they're more prevalent to disease. This whole community that I was living in had a lot of diseases which were really natural resource related. So I started thinking about my career path and said, "You know, I'm actually really interested in the drivers of poverty and the drivers of health issues which really were related to natural resource deprivation. So I decided to change my career path and instead, think about the intersections between human developments, especially related to women's issues when women are not able to take advantage of educational opportunities because they're spending all their time just trying to find fuel wood and water to support their families. So this sort of interconnection between natural resources, poverty and development became very important to me and lead me, then, to Conservation International.

After I went back to school and to Columbia and studied Business and Economics and then found my way to CI.