

# HOW MY FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR EXPERIENCES IN THAILAND AND GERMANY PRODUCED BILATERAL BENEFITS

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## ABSTRACT

Fulbright Scholar Awards offer diverse experiences, but this can also apply to individual Fulbright Scholars as well. This article explores a career trajectory that spans early development, an initial early career Fulbright, an intervening 15 years of development, and a subsequent Fulbright on a separate continent and culture compared to the first. In both projects I was able to impart a unique analytical set of tools that enabled me to promote collaborations.

**Keywords:** Fulbright Scholar • water resources • Thailand • Germany



## OVERVIEW OF FULBRIGHT APPOINTMENTS

My Fulbright appointments in two continents over 15 years (2006 and 2021) have compounded other international experiences, which pay dividends in teaching and other interactions. I've had 'in place' international collaborations in five countries to date, all water-focused. International collaborations are tricky and require creativity in assessing costs and benefits in often complex and unfamiliar research environments. It's almost like you walk into a catering kitchen, and you're asked to make a meal, yet you've never been in that kitchen before. You've got to try to figure out what kind of dinner to make out of the ingredients at hand. These Fulbright experiences have helped to reinforce my foundation for a generalized model of administrative and research networking; Engage, Listen, Lead, Act (ELLA). The 'Engage' portion must start with enthusiasm for your work (*it's not work if it's fun*) which typically triggers the same in others, and I figure out the mutually supportive plans from there.

## CONDITIONING FOR FULBRIGHT

I really didn't have much early conditioning to international experiences such as family trips, study abroad, or hosting foreign students. One influence was that my father worked internationally quite a bit, including Europe and Indonesia. This idea of 'work' fostering such adventures apparently did take hold.

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My PhD and Postdoctoral positions introduced some international contacts. A month-long Food Web Workshop (at Cornell) included about 50% international people among 25 participants, with a similar composition at a shorter one-week workshop in Bermuda. Both experiences required collaborations on small projects in multi-national groups.

During my first year as a faculty member, a funding opportunity arose to promote engagement with any Middle Eastern country in the following summer. Mentors related that these funds were typically used for tours or visits. But I desired research-based interactions, which in hindsight was very influential and great training for my later Fulbright proposals. I found a well-known American counterpart who was then an ex-pat researcher in a national institute (of lake studies) in Israel. We quickly found a niche in his research program and off I went on my first independent international experience. During my month in Israel I was able to make a weekend trip to Athens to visit a colleague that I met during the Bermuda workshop. Although similarly ‘Mediterranean’, Athens and northern Israel were markedly different in many interesting ways. Overall, this productive one-month trip allowed for brief experiences in three cities/countries, resulted in two published papers, several conference presentations, a case study used in several courses, and certainly fostered the blossoming of future international experiences.

## INTRODUCTION TO THAILAND

Shortly after my Israel experience, my wife Nadine and I made grand plans to visit one of her friends and her partner as they were sailing around the world on a 43’ sailboat. Plans targeted the nearshore islands of Thailand as a rendezvous point during the winter of 2001-2002. We also had time to ourselves off the boat to discover Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. That destination was influenced by my mother who previously resided in Chiang Mai. While there I discovered Chiang Mai University by happenstance, which inspired plans for more time in this part of the world.

I subsequently accessed a new international research travel fund that my Dean created (and charged me with managing) to foster a discovery of research opportunities in Thailand. My project with like-minded faculty at Chiang Mai was an examination of water quality and aquatic life in the *Mae Ping River* (‘River’ in Thai (แม่น้ำ; Mae Nam), translates to ‘Mother Water’). I also used this time to foster student exchange agreements with other Thai universities. This was the perfect opportunity to scope the landscape for larger and longer opportunities in Thailand. The Fulbright Scholar program was the golden ticket. I narrowed my options for a Fulbright during my campus visits, and ultimately decided that Chulalongkorn University (‘Chula’) in Bangkok would be the best fit. Chula is the oldest and most prestigious and research-active

university in Thailand, and is named after the revered King Rama V, who ensured independence of Thailand. The Fulbright opportunity was exciting for our young family because the Thailand Fulbright included support for family members.

### **FIRST FULBRIGHT: THAILAND (2006)**

I was pleasantly surprised that the Fulbright Scholar Award proposal was funded. This was not expected given that I was in the 4th year of my faculty position and this was my first Fulbright application. I was walking on air with elation and a new-found recognition on an important international front.

The Aquatic Resources Research Institute at Chula hosted me during July-Dec 2006 for a project to conduct data analysis of water quality and plankton in the Bangpakong River. This river drains part of the huge Bangkok metropolitan area and flows into the Gulf of Thailand, a system of concern due to suspected impairment from watershed activities (human development, agriculture, etc). The proposed activity was centered around a project funded by the Thai Department of Marine and Coastal Resources to Chula to study the sources and consequences of degraded water quality in the Gulf of Thailand and its major tributaries.

Analysis of these patterns would help to identify where and when water quality is particularly sensitive to impairment for municipal & recreational use. Outcomes from this Fulbright experience included a published paper, Plenary Speaker at the Thailand Plankton Conference; and several other conference presentations. I was also able to participate in some rewarding service activities including Fulbright review panels, research seminars at the host university, a data management workshop, as well as serving on a PhD student committee. These wonderful and diverse experiences opened my view to a more complete sphere of research engagement and administration, which I apply on a day to day basis over 15+ years.

In November, I had the chance to visit universities in three Chinese cities to develop student and faculty exchanges with my home university. The first few days I reflexively spoke in Thai with others when I was not with my University hosts! And where were all of the street carts with the wonderful smells and food? But mainly the cultural differences between China and Thailand were stunning after ~4 months in Bangkok. This highlighted the unique aspects of Bangkok and Thailand more generally, in that there is a calmness and vibe of gentleness in interpersonal interactions and community feel.

### **FULBRIGHT REFLECTIONS IN THAILAND**

This incredible six-month stay in Bangkok had lasting impacts on our whole family, especially our home-schooled children who were 3,7, and 10 years old upon arrival in mid-2006. They are now emerging adults (18-25) who still recount the experience. We started by adjusting to big city life, taking

in as much as the heat and humidity would allow. Bangkok is characterized by its many layers of tastes, smells, and sounds. Many are wonderful and are taken in willingly; others must be tolerated. However, I think most visitors to Thailand would agree that the wonderful Thai people can have the greatest effect on us through their smiles and sincere attitudes of patience, giving, and warmth. It certainly helps to reflect on this and calm our typical busy and self-created stressful lives in the US

### **OTHER INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES BETWEEN FULBRIGHT APPOINTMENTS**

The Fulbright in Thailand kicked off additional activity and service on an increasingly broad international scope. I served on the University International Advisory Committee, and Chaired the International Research Committee in my College. I served the US Fulbright Scholar program as a regional expert reviewer for one year, and a subject matter (Environmental Science) reviewer for three years. During the latter part of my sabbatical period (spring 2007) I participated in a 10 day statistics workshop at the University of South Bohemia, České Budějovice, Czech Republic, and similar workshop over one week at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada in 2013. Later in 2015 I was invited on a group trip to Münster, Germany as part of a ‘sister city’ exploratory program. The theme was urban design and environment, so I was able to fit in fairly well and relied on prior German language courses for communication. This experience spurred me to create ways to activate my next sabbatical (and Fulbright?) experience.

### **SECOND FULBRIGHT: GERMANY (2021)**

Why Germany? The 2015 trip to Münster piqued my interest, but I had a longer-term calling to Germany. My paternal family (‘Blumenschein’ auf Deutsch ~ shining flowers) origins are in and near Stuttgart in the heart of the state of Baden-Württemberg. I’m fortunate to have a family history from this region back to the late 1500s, and a copy of a letter that my ancestor Wilhelm Blumenschein sent to relatives back in Germany after emigrating from Baden-Württemberg to Illinois in the 1830s (as did the ancestors of my paternal grandmother). By this point after the 2006 Fulbright Award as well as a number of cycles as a reviewer, I understood that Fulbright is not just about the project you’re working on, but who you are as well.

This Fulbright proposal was primarily motivated by invited opportunities created by the California State University (CSU) System Vice Chancellors for Research and International Programs to foster climate change related collaborations. I was invited to give a presentation to a visiting delegation of University Rectors from Baden-Württemberg, which has a formal partnership with the State of California and the CSU System. This delegation was led by Theresia Bauer, the Minister of Science, Research and Arts. Following

my presentation, I was asked whether my research would be applicable to the decline in whitefish production in Lake Constance, Germany. Like an epiphany, this spark provided the subject to connect my research toolkit to a Fulbright project in Baden-Württemberg. I soon discovered a large five year, €5M project known as SeeWandel (English = 'Lake Change') in Lake Constance. SeeWandel is comprised of interdisciplinary partnerships to understand and advise resource managers and politicians of the threats of climate change and invasive species in the lake's complex food web. This was a unique opportunity to join a prestigious research group addressing global-scale threats to freshwater ecosystems. Host institutions included: University of Konstanz, Hohenheim University, and the Baden-Württemberg Fisheries Research Center. Compared to the six month stay in Bangkok, Thailand, this three month excursion had me on my own and moving cities about every month. Upon reflection, this required careful navigating in both the presentation of this plan in the Fulbright proposal, but also logistically once I was in Germany. I was much better equipped to handle this with the gained experience and maturity compared to the Fulbright experience 15 years earlier in Thailand.

Baden-Württemberg includes the shoreline of Lake Constance, the largest source of drinking water in Europe. The lake is located on the Rhine River where Germany, Switzerland, and Austria converge near the northern Alps. Lake Constance is important historically, economically, and for tourism and fish supply. The lake has undergone some drastic changes due to climate change and invasive species. This was a great opportunity to apply some of my analytical approaches to address the missing pieces to SeeWandel research puzzles. It was very rewarding to explain to and engage my German collaborators with my approaches, which seemed new and novel to them. My research background in fish and fresh water were applicable to some of the pressing SeeWandel issues. Once I integrated and gained understanding to this complex system, we found that some of the approaches that I typically fit in well to address their research gaps. This was eye-opening to us.

I even learned a valuable cultural and natural resource lesson on the importance of Lake Constance whitefish outside of the research environment and how the threat to whitefish can impact average people and the importance of this research. For example, I readily shopped at 'town-square' farmers markets. At the fish sellers', I browsed the offerings and found no whitefish; 'warum haben Sie keine Felchen' (*why don't you have any whitefish?*). The heated response was beyond my linguistic ability. One of my collaborators later explained that whitefish are now so rare that they are reserved for high-end restaurants, and not available for fish sellers at markets, and thus for common people. This is just one relatable example 'Fulbright story' that I like to tell in any setting (classes, seminars, symposia, etc.) to show how this is a valuable resource, like lobster from Maine, so people can relate to something domestic.

## **GERMANY POST-FULBRIGHT**

I left Germany by train in late May for a week with another collaborator based in Sion and Lausanne, Switzerland. This was in French-speaking western Switzerland, but overall I was keen to notice the similarities and differences of the regions. Now nearly one year post-Fulbright in Germany, I headed back to Baden-Württemberg in June 2022 as part of a CSU System trip of ~25 people to engage German colleagues in research exchange. I subsequently went to the University of Cordoba (Spain) to follow up on the development of a university exchange program. By this most recent point in my career, I've had so many valuable opportunities to visit many countries and cultures that have had major impacts on me personally and professionally. They certainly have impacted my personal and professional relationships.

## **OVERALL BENEFITS OF FULBRIGHT TO MY HOME INSTITUTION AND COMMUNITY COLLEAGUES**

It's not simple to fully address the many subtle ways that my Fulbright and other international experience have affected me personally and professionally. However, a clear and direct impact has been in student engagement through the use of Fulbright research experiences as example case studies. For example, I lead two graduate biostatistics courses which I greatly enjoy, but can be a challenge for students. I use my main project from Thailand as a case study for multivariate statistics, covering introduction, application, and interpretation. Scientific storytelling easily engages students because it includes exotic geographical and cultural components, thus providing a broader context and template for standard scientific principles and problem solving. On a broader scale at my university, I've been able to impart Fulbright lessons and knowledge to the university community in assisting our International Programs Office in Fulbright recruitment. I also provide problem solving approaches learned from foreign colleagues to research students in my lab group. This benefit was greatly expanded in the recent Fulbright experience in Germany, where I had 5-6 main collaborators across three host institutions. It was extremely fortunate that I had a skill set that could address some of their main research gaps, and I trust that I was able to impart some of this knowledge to them for lasting benefit. For example, the multivariate analysis of the Thailand project helped in river research sampling design in the collaborators' government funded work on water quality. In Germany, I applied and communicated to collaborators a number of approaches that were not in their analysis toolboxes. During the fall of 2022, I will be co-leading a Fulbright Support Symposium for faculty colleagues in the aquatic sciences in the 23 campus California State University system. I trust that this important outreach will encourage and lead many others to achieve Fulbright experiences.

## NOTES

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Author with host dog 'Riga' hiking near the Alps in southwestern Germany.

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### BIOGRAPHY

Steve Blumenshine is the Interim Executive Director of CSU-WATER for the California State University System. Prior to this he was a professor of Biology from 1999-2021, and Director of the Research and Education Division of the California Water Institute at Fresno State University (2021-2022). He received two Fulbright Scholar Awards (2006, 2021) to Thailand and Germany respectively. He can be contacted at [sblumens@csufresno.edu](mailto:sblumens@csufresno.edu)

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