

Ancient history with Geoff Oldham (and an update)

It all began in the early 1970s, when we were all young and slightly crazier than we are now. A conference in Lima and Cusco —with an unforgettable side trip to Macchu Picchu— gave me the opportunity to meet Geoff.

Geoff had been involved in the creation of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada, and was the head of its science and technology program. The meeting in Lima and Cusco, organized by Maximo Halty of the Organization of American States (OAS), helped him to identify potential projects to support.

The journey into Cusco was quite eventful, including an interesting stopover of a few hours at the “Hotel de Turistas” (where, together with Geoff and Chris Freeman, we interrupted a honeymoon couple more than once); a train journey stopped twice by landslides (which led to a lot of singing and drinking, including the future rector of the United Nations University, while waiting for the earth removal crew); and a wonderful visit to the ruins an overnight stay at the hotel next to the Macchu Picchu ruins.

On the way back from Cusco the plane was delayed several hours, and we had an impromptu meeting at the hotel to talk about what would eventually become the Science and Technology Policy Instruments (STPI) project supported by IDRC and the OAS. When we flew back to Lima, several senior Peruvian and international officials refused to board the plane: it was overloaded, a storm was moving into the area and it was most dangerous to take off.

Geoff and I were foolish enough to board the flight and —if we survived— we promised to buy each other a pint of Guinness every time we met. By and large we kept our promise, although we later migrated to wine from stout. So, our friendship began with a combination of academic interests, a commitment to development, a passion for travel, and a shared obsession with good drinking.

In subsequent years we would meet in many different places, first in meetings of the STPI Project, then during the dissemination of STPI results, and after that in the Vienna Conference on Science and Technology for Development, as members of the United Nations Advisory Committee on Science and Technology for Development, and in many other capacities, including the time both of us spent advising the (in)famous Dr. Keith Bezanson when he was President of IDRC in the early 1990s.

The best way of remembering these thirty years is through some pictures of Geoff, as he grows and matures over time, so I suggest you take a look at the PowerPoint presentation I did in honour of Geoff fifteen years ago, when we went back to Macchu Picchu for another meeting, by accessing:

http://franciscosagasti.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Geoff-Oldham-30YEAR-red_96ppi.pdf

After the return to Macchu Picchu in 2002, during the last fifteen years, we kept on working together and meeting in various places. The most recent gathering was a reunion of the STPI gang in Lima in 2014 —40 years after the start of the project— to review what had happened since then. Here is the link to the report of the event, which contains a chapter by Geoff, and a picture of the STPI coordinators: <http://franciscosagasti.com/forty-years-of-the-stpi-project-looking-back-to-move-forward/>

Last July, Keith Bezanson and I visited Geoff for the last time before his death on October 1, 2017. It was a bittersweet moment for all of us, but it was also great to spend time with him before he passed away just a few weeks later.

We are most grateful for having had the chance to be close to such a great person, and his memory will be with us forever.

Francisco Sagasti
Lima, October 2017