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Meghan Howey, Assistant Professor Department of Anthropology, travels to Uganda

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Meghan Howey

Meghan Howey, Assistant Professor - Department of Anthropology

Professor Howey travelled to Uganda in summer 2012 to conduct archaeological and paleoecological research in the Ndali crater lakes and swamps.



Meghan Howey in the pristine rainforests of Kibale National Park

In June 2012, with support from the Center for International Education, I furthered my involvement in a research program focused on the deep history of human-environment interaction in the Ndali crater lake landscape of western Uganda. The Ndali crater lake landscape is a beautiful and complex series of crater lakes and in-filled crater swamps east of the Rwenzori Mountains which forms a particularly distinct setting in the Albertine Rift. Exponential population growth and unchecked land conversion have made the Albertine Rift one of the world's most threatened biodiversity hotspots. Our research aims use deep history to inform present and future trajectories of landscape change in the Albertine Rift. To build towards that goal, we need to first test whether linkages can be established between local archaeological and paleoecological records.

The Ndali crater lakes and swamps are particularly excellent environments for archiving evidences (biotic and abiotic) of past landscapes and as such, they have been the focus of a fair amount of paleoecological research. These records consistently show evidence of human-driven disturbance but there has not been a comparable amount of archaeological research around these lakes to connect historical human occupation to these

findings. There is good reason to expect robust cultural activity here, as the Ndali lakes are located less than two hundred kilometers northeast of the epicenter for the development of iron smelting technology in East Africa, west of Lake Victoria, and are located in the same forest band that would have provided fuelwood and other resources to support people in industrial production. Indeed, one week of survey by senior East African archaeologist and project team member Dr. Peter Schmidt (University of Florida) seventeen years ago confirmed deep-time human occupation around the northern-most crater lakes with strong signatures from the Early and Later Iron Age. To date, however, no work has expanded these preliminary findings.



Lake Nyinambuga, one of the Ndali crater lakes, which is featured on the 200,000 Ugandan shilling bill



Working with Dr. Joel Hartter (UNH geography professor, second from left) and his research team on contemporary land use and population around Kibale National Park

In my trip this summer, I met Dr. Schmidt at the crater lakes to revisit the sites he found seventeen years ago in order to assess if they were still present and there was potential to find intact cultural remains in future excavations. We also met with a key Ugandan collaborator, paleoecologist and Dean of the Faculty at Mbarara University, Dr. Julius Lejju, to look at the best contexts for paleoecological sampling near archaeological sites. Our goal was to establish the best places to find both historical sites and environmental settings amenable to taking cores to reconstruct the past environment (this is work we will conduct next summer as it has been recommended for funding as a High Risk Archaeology Research Grant from the National Science Foundation). I then traveled with Dr. Schmidt to Tanzania to see where he has worked for years establishing the west shores of Lake Victoria as the origin of iron production in East Africa. I then returned to Uganda to travel with project team member and UNH faculty Joel Hartter on his research project focused on contemporary resource crises in the Albertine Rift and the role of National Parks in Uganda on population and environmental change. Again, the long term goal of our project is to find ways to have deep history inform current demographic and ecological crises facing the Albertine Rift and so understanding the contemporary piece of the puzzle was an important part of my travels this summer.

I was in Uganda as a researcher but in fact I found myself often more of a student, soaking in as much information as I could about the past, the present, and the future of the region. I met wonderful and generous people, tried many new (and mostly delicious) foods, and saw places of staggering beauty. After this trip and moving forward on this research program, I will continue to grow as well as bring what I learn into my teaching at UNH. I left feeling very confident that working as a team, we can offer new answers to the challenges in the region today by crossing the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, looking backwards as well as forwards, and prioritizing local historical knowledge as important to address current stresses.





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