

CAREER DEVELOPMENT: ARTICLES

"Whether it's how we treat the environment or each other, it's all connected," says Martina Hoft, conservation botanist and real estate broker.

A Botanist Becomes a Broker

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Sometimes choices are hard, and Martina Hoft has had to make more than her share. As a conservation botanist and human-rights volunteer, Hoft has traveled the world to remote and hostile places, saving plants from extinction and promoting women's rights.

But much like some of the threatened flora and fauna she has studied, Hoft has had to adapt in order to thrive in a changing environment. Hoft now resides in the quiet suburbs of Montreal, Canada, in a job she wouldn't have imagined herself doing a few years ago, as she explored remote forests, dodging elephants and other threats: Hoft is a real estate broker. "When you go into science you have different goals, and making money is not the most important," says Hoft. "Everything that I studied and strived for my whole professional career--this is what I wanted to avoid.

Hoft, a native of Germany, began pursuing her passion for plants in her home country in the early 1990's, working on a Masters degree. Studying growth disturbances in temperate European forests, she came to realize that she loved the outdoors and wanted her research to have an impact. "I slowly recognized that it was not just the plants I wanted to study, but the context in which plants grow--the ecosystem as a whole," says Hoft, "I knew that I wanted to do something applied, something that could have real bearing on day-to-day decisions in conservation management."



Credit: Michael Jefferies

Into Africa

These elements began to come together for her Ph.D. research. Meeting colleagues working in tropical forests in South America and Africa, she recalls, got her thinking about specializing in threatened tropical ecosystems. It was about this time that she married a fellow conservation botanist who was just finishing his own Ph.D. in Kenya.

Hoft landed a grant from a German research foundation and went to Kenya herself, for field work. She spent more than a year there, researching medicinal plants in the Shimba Hills National Reserve. Located between Mombasa and the Tanzanian border, this 220-square-kilometer wilderness park includes one of the last remaining coastal rain forests in East Africa. The rainforest, one of the last patches left in Kenya, is disappearing due to climate change and wood harvesting. "These kinds of forests used to cover the Kenyan coastline, but its getting dryer, and a lot of logging has been going on," says Hoft. "As a result, these forests are very fragmented." They are, she adds, among "the last hot spots for biodiversity" remaining in Africa.

But just as she was just getting under way with her studies, her husband's research on plant communities took him to the other side of the world, Papua New Guinea. The first 3 years of their marriage were spent apart; they saw each other only about once every 6 months. They didn't have phones, so they stayed in touch via marathon writing campaigns--letter writing, with paper and pencil. "You can't get a longer long-distance relationship than this," Hoft says. It was a hard time, but it allowed both of them to stay focused on research.

Close encounters

Among her most influential experiences were encounters with elephants. "Many times you can't see or feel their presence, and when you smell them it's almost too late," she says. Once, while walking through the forest, she practically bumped into a herd of elephants. Both parties were surprised; Hoft dropped her equipment and ran. Luckily, a platform she used to study tree canopies was only a few steps away. "It was really frightening because they are really huge," she says, "I [had] just made it there when they started examining my books and backpack,"

Sitting up in the tree stand and waiting for her visitors to finish rifling her things and leave, Hoft had a chance to observe the elephants' behavior. That experience got her started studying how elephants interact with and alter the forest environment. "Through de-barking or knocking over trees, feeding selectively on plants, they alter whole plant communities and exacerbate human effects," she says.

Despite being apart from her husband, she was living her dream. She rented a hut on a bush campsite and lived there by herself, with no running water and none of the other customary amenities. It was a long way from the suburbs.

One similarity between the bush and the suburb: meddlesome neighbors. A woman living alone in the bush raises eyebrows, she says, and she irritated some of the locals. "Many were asking me why I don't just go home to my husband," she says. Hoft believes that women field researchers have to be tougher than men, especially when they work alone in foreign countries where there are different cultural traditions and attitudes toward women. Her advice: "be firm and focused, and really know the country you are going to."



Papua New Guinea, credit: Nick Mahaffey

Papua New Guinea

As soon as she finished her field work and analyzed the data, she joined her husband in Papua New Guinea, wrote up her thesis, and collaborated with her husband. During their 3-month stay, they had many harrowing adventures. Papua New Guinea is, she learned, a rugged and dangerous place for women. "I saw how people behaved and in many societies over there, women have no status," she says. "In some of the tribes pigs appear to rank higher than women."

But it's not just women; her husband, too, had some close calls. Once, while he was working in the forest, he met a warring gang armed with spears, guns, and booze, which demanded transportation to a neighboring village where they intended to wreak tribal revenge. They let him go unharmed, although the neighboring village probably didn't fare as well. "We take all the precautions that we can, but you never know what's behind the next corner," Hoft adds. "It's definitely not the country of choice."

Returning to Germany in one piece, the couple agreed that they wanted to continue work together in remote locales. But having spent so much time apart, they now were determined to stay together. They struck a deal: whoever landed a good job first would take it; the other would follow and try to work something out. Hoft's husband got a posting in Paris, working for the United Nations, so they moved to France. But in 2 years of trying, Hoft was unable to secure a position, so she began to look for alternatives. For a while she worked as an independent consultant, helping foreign graduate students with their theses.



Credit: Steve Calcott

Out of the wild

With her husband's livelihood tied to Paris and a baby on the way, Hoft's options were limited. She decided to focus on issues that had become important to her during her travels. She volunteered with Amnesty International, working on women's rights. Living in Kenya and Papua New Guinea, she says, shaped her thoughts on the subject and radicalized her. "Whether it's how we treat the environment or each other, it's all connected," she says. "It was important for me to create awareness of the situations in these countries." Still pregnant, she traveled by train to Beijing, China, to participate in a United Nations conference. She worked within the organization, supporting women's rights in countries like Afghanistan and Iran. She picked up some computer skills and adjusted to the office environment.

In 1997, Hoft's husband was reassigned to Kenya and the couple returned to Africa. Hoft was happy. "I could go back to my field work," Hoft says, "and get involved with conservation again." She got a job overseeing technical and administrative aspects of the African Elephant Specialist Group of the World Conservation Union.

Switching gears

After five years of professional bliss, more changes ensued. Hoft followed her husband again, this time to Montreal, Canada, leaving behind her job, her contacts, and her networking group--and starting over again.

Hoft is trying to take the latest changes in stride. Her son is now 10 years old and being with him is now her highest priority. She is adapting to human environments--including the Western suburban lifestyle she avoided for so many years--and in a way, she is helping others do something similar. "I wanted to get to know more about the country and the people, so I thought real estate may be a good way to get an idea of how capitalism works in Canada," she says. She is aware of the irony and the compromise. "My style of living is totally detrimental to the environment, producing incredible amount of waste that just contributes to global warming,"



Montreal skyline, credit: Christophe Roudet

Still, Hoft is excited about the fast-paced, unpredictable work that real estate offers. She is learning to pace herself and remain flexible. Computer skills are a current focus; she is learning to design Web sites so that she can leverage the Internet for her business. It's a different kind of jungle. "If you do it right, you can reach a wide audience in a targeted manner," she adds.

Hoft still works as a consultant to conservation organizations in Canada and abroad every chance she gets, and she hopes to expand her international consultancy business some day. Since arriving in Canada, she has worked with Greenpeace advocating conservation and sustainable forest management putting her computer skills to use, doing graphic design work for the British conservation group Plantlife International.

Hoft has found that the key to happiness--for now at least--is balance and compromise. "It's important to keep your focus and be passionate about your career," she says, "but always try and stay adaptive."