Femininities in the Field

Tourism and Transdisciplinary Research

Edited by
Brooke A. Porter and Heike A. Schänzel

CHANNEL VIEW PUBLICATIONS
Bristol • Blue Ridge Summit
1 Safety First: The Biases of Gender and Precaution in Fieldwork

Jill Hamilton and Russell Fielding

Jill Hamilton is a Master of Environmental Management candidate at Duke University, focusing on coastal fisheries and marine conservation. From her earliest experiences travelling and conducting qualitative research in the Caribbean, she has felt the often-conflicting desire to learn and explore fearlessly, while also keeping her personal safety in mind. More recently, she has begun to consider how being young and female can both help and hinder one’s ability to build trust, access information and balance opportunity and risk while in the field. As an undergraduate at the University of Denver, she examined the environmental and cultural aspects of marine management and tourism in the Caribbean islands of Nevis and Bonaire, and recently worked with Environmental Defense Fund to help develop conservation and management strategies for Cuban fisheries. At Duke, she explores community- and ecosystem-based approaches to marine management, and contributes to small-scale fisheries research at the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions.

Russell Fielding is an assistant professor in the Department of Earth and Environmental Systems at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. He conducts research on the sustainability of – and interactions between – food and energy systems in the Caribbean. He earned a PhD in geography at Louisiana State University in 2010. In the context of a small, undergraduate-only, liberal arts college, Fielding emphasises the value of providing research experiences for students through collaboration with Sewanee faculty as well as local NGOs, universities, and government institutions. His spouse and two small children often accompany him to field sites which allows for both the joy and challenge of combining fieldwork and family time.
When conducting fieldwork as a young woman, especially internationally or in an unfamiliar location, safety is often a concern. As a female, one is taught gendered lessons of personal safety, awareness and precaution from a young age (Superle, 2013), teachings which may subconsciously contribute to research bias, such as selecting interview and data collection sites based on personal safety, or choosing study participants based on perceived reputation or personality. A researcher's gender may also contribute to gaining varied levels of trust and openness from interviewees. This reflective case study explores the experiences of a young female student on the Caribbean island of Nevis, contrasts these experiences to that of a male researcher, and considers the biases that may stem from gender and precaution in the field.

In the summer of 2014, I found myself in the back of a colourful taxi van, flying down the winding roads of St. Kitts on my way to Nevis (Figure 1.1), the island where another student and I would be conducting research for our undergraduate thesis projects. She had come to look at the island's hydroponic farms, and I to study the area's marine tourism industry and marine conservation efforts, searching for ways that Nevis, and other small Caribbean islands, could sustainably manage their coasts and waters.

The driver, speaking in a strong Caribbean accent, was giving us a crash course in the islands' local dialect, a type of creole spoken in a small area of the Lesser Antilles.

‘Wa gwaan?’ he had us repeat, a huge smile spread across his face, failing to contain his laughter at our struggled attempts to copy the simple phrase. 'It means, “What's going on, what's up!”'

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 1.1** The winding roads of St. Kitts with Nevis in the background, its summit covered in clouds (Photo: Hamilton)
He dropped us off on a secluded sandy beach, and a speedboat soon arrived at the small wooden dock. ‘You are Jill and Dam!’ the two men aboard waved and called, wide smiles similarly spread across their faces. We smiled back as they pulled us aboard, handed us two local beers and sped off towards the lush, green island in the distance. ‘Welcome to Nevis.’

**Oualie: Land of Beautiful Waters**

Nevis, like numerous other islands in the Caribbean, is experiencing a decline in the health of its coral reefs (Bruckner & Williams, 2011), a phenomenon that could threaten not only the area’s tourism industry, but the livelihoods of local residents as well, many of whom depend on reef fishing for sustenance and income (Whittingham *et al.*, 2013). During my time on Nevis, I conducted formal and field-based interviews with stakeholders in the marine tourism, fishing and conservation sectors, gathering stories of Nevisians’ relationship with the marine environment and seeking insight into culturally feasible ways in which the island’s coasts and waters could be sustainably managed.

I had first learned about Nevis from my professor at the University of Denver, Russell Fielding, who had conducted research on the island several years prior. He had told us of the local Nevisian norms and the welcoming, hospitable culture we would experience, having us jot down the ‘must see’ restaurants and bars on the island and introducing us electronically to the few people he knew there. Through our professor’s connections, we contacted a local SCUBA instructor, who kindly offered to let us stay with her free of charge during our time on the island – an accommodation that allowed us to afford travelling to Nevis on our tight research stipend, and to stay with an individual that our connections trusted.

Stepping off the boat onto Nevis’ Oualie Beach, we were welcomed by a group of smiling strangers, all of whom already knew our names. ‘The island is small, and you’ll make connections quickly’, I remembered our professor saying, similarly assuring me that my planned method of conducting interviews, a combination of snowball sampling and intercept interviews in the field, would be an easy feat in the small island community.

During my first few days on the island, I focused on meeting locals and learning who I should talk to about reef health, the islands fisheries and the history of marine management efforts. Many of these conversations happened organically, and people were willing and eager to share their knowledge and point me in the right direction. A list of repeated names began to emerge, and I was able to set up a first round of interviews from the suggestions I received.

Along with these beneficial connections and recommendations, however, came a different type of knowledge as well. A group of American scientists were conducting an annual assessment of the area’s coral reefs,
and having conducted research on Nevis in the past, had a good understanding of the island’s local geography, culture and people. A few times after having conversations with various local men, I was pulled aside by female scientists and told to ‘Watch out for him’, or ‘Stay away from him’. From conversations with these scientists, I inferred that I needed to be somewhat cautious of who I interviewed and where I travelled while on the island, and concluded that most of my interviews would be more safely conducted with Dani present, rather than by myself.

As a young woman travelling with another young female, both of us having limited knowledge about the community we were temporarily a part of, I viewed any precautionary information provided to me as a form of valuable knowledge meant to keep us safe. I took note of the good-natured advice I received, using it as an extra reminder that even among the welcoming, hospitable culture and the beautiful island views, I still needed to be aware of my personal safety.

A Gendered View of Safety and Precaution

The type of thoughts and interactions I had during my first few days on Nevis – casual conversations regarding safety and precaution – were not new or unusual to me. Starting at a young age, women, myself included, are continually encouraged to think about personal safety and employ precautionary techniques to reduce risk in public spaces (Superle, 2013). Frequent reminders from family, friends, universities and the media for women to be aware of their surroundings, take precautionary actions whenever possible and to avoid situations that may put themselves at increased risk result in daily, often subconscious, strategies that are used to stay safe (Silva & Wright, 2009).

Perceived risk, and the subconscious or conscious actions that women take to mitigate these risks, is a gendered phenomenon that may contribute to bias in fieldwork. From selecting interview and data collection sites to choosing study participants, female researchers may be more aware of possible safety concerns than their male counterparts, resulting in possibly biased approaches to data collection. Furthermore, as experienced through the aforementioned conversations with female scientists on the island, ‘Women are more likely to be protected by their host communities, which in some cases ... can result in less rather than more access to information’ (Warren, 1988: 45). Being more aware of possible risks may influence the level of precaution that a female takes in the field, compared to men.

Searching for a Local View of the Sea

Keeping the advice I had received in mind about safety on the island, I began my research. According to Warren (1988), ‘Living within a society,
or visiting one as a fieldworker, presupposes a gendered interaction, a gendered conversation, and a gendered interpretation (1988: 10) – ideas that rang particularly true while conducting interviews on Nevis.

My mornings on Nevis were spent down at local docks and beaches, conducting intercept interviews with fishers as they prepared their boats for the day (Figure 1.2). In areas I knew well, or that had restaurants, hotels or SCUBA shops nearby, such as Oualie Beach, I conducted interviews alone, armed with a small notepad, a recording device and a stack of business cards showing my affiliation with my university. In more secluded areas, Dani joined me, helping to take notes or ask a few simple questions.

Approaching and talking to fishers, all of whom were male, never proved to be a significant challenge. I was often greeted with a smile and a wave, and a simple ‘hello’ was all it took to initiate a conversation. While flirtation from interviewees was something I experienced on several occasions, I found that as soon as I turned on my recorder and began the formal interview process, nearly all participants adopted a more serious tone, their view of me seeming to shift towards the task at hand and away from my gender, age or perhaps my whiteness – traits that may have influenced their initial willingness to participate.

While my concern for safety and the precautionary advice I had received may have limited my site selection and choice of interviewees, I found that the role of my gender shifted once I began actually interviewing individuals. When speaking with fishers, I felt that my gender and appearance – a friendly-faced, young female – was advantageous. I was

Figure 1.2 Fishing boats line Nevis’ Oualie Beach, ready to be taken to the island’s nearby reefs (Photo: Hamilton)
not perceived as a threat, nuisance or figure of authority, but merely an interested individual, passionate about conservation and coral reefs. As argued by Warren (1988), women fieldworkers are often viewed as ‘more accessible and less threatening’ (1988: 45) than men, resulting in increased access to the information sought. The information I was able to obtain from the interviewees was plentiful and easily accessible. Nearly all fishers were willing to share their personal stories of how the reef and the number of fish they caught had changed over time. We discussed the challenges facing Nevisian fishers, the knowledge they had surrounding fish population cycles and the biology of the ecosystem, and solutions that they believed could help the reef stay healthy and resilient.

As I had learned from background research and my initial interviews with individuals on the island, illegal fishing was widespread and problematic off Nevisian coasts, and posed one of the biggest threats to the area’s reef health. Identified as a problem associated not only with the lack of enforcement of local fishing laws, but with cultural traditions, economic barriers and a general lack of education surrounding the consequences of overfishing, illegal fishing was a subject I knew I had to cover in my conversations with fishers. Transitioning from the flowing, easy conversations that defined the start of each of my interviews, I would eventually breach the topic of illegal fishing.

‘What are the local fishing laws? Do most people follow them?’ I would ask interviewees. The friendly, helpful answers that had previously been given to me would often stop abruptly. As interviews shifted towards more controversial subjects, any perceived advantages gained through my gender, age or appearance became less noticeable. Questions regarding laws and the legality of fishing practices on the island were almost always followed by a glance over the shoulder, an exchanged look of worry with a crewmate and a sharp change in the interviewee’s stance and tone. On some occasions, interviewees spoke openly and candidly about how few people followed these laws, sometimes even admitting that they themselves rarely followed regulations. But on most occasions, these questions marked a turning point in the interview.

‘Turn off your recorder’, I was sometimes told, followed quickly by another inquiry to confirm that the interviews would be kept completely anonymous. Many interviewees glanced down at the business card I had handed them, ensuring that I was ‘just a student’, as opposed to a local authority or enforcement figure from the area’s Department of Marine Resources. Many fishers stopped the interview completely, walking away before I had the chance to remind them that their answers were optional, and would be kept anonymous and non-identifiable. During one interview with a group of young Nevisian men diving for conch, interview questions were met with such aggressive verbal attacks that Dani and I, startled by the abrupt reactions from the interviewees, quickly left the beach, unwilling to put ourselves in danger by trying to diffuse the situation.
I often left interviews in the field, whether controversial topics such as illegal fishing were touched upon or not, feeling shaken and unsettled, wishing that I had been ‘tougher’ or ‘more resilient’ in the face of my male interviewees. While the openness and willingness to talk that marked the start of my interviews seemed likely a result of my gender or age, I often wondered how my interviewees would have reacted if I were male. If I had appeared less vulnerable and more able to defend myself against possible verbal or physical altercations, would they have answered questions differently, reacted less suddenly, or been less likely to end interviews early? Being female, should I have avoided controversial topics completely in order to avoid any confrontation? If I had not grown up with constant reminders of the need for personal safety, messages implying female vulnerability and the need to employ precautionary safety techniques, would I have been more willing to put myself at possible risk?

In his paper exploring illegal fishing in the Philippines, Fabinyi (2007) discussed the conversations he had with fishers during tagay sessions – casual drinking nights during which individuals would often openly discuss their illegal fishing behaviours. While I am unsure if equivalent gatherings exist on Nevis, it is hard to imagine a situation where a female researcher would be welcome at this sort of event. Twice on Nevis, when informally interviewing male restaurant owners or SCUBA operators over a beer at night, the conversation quickly became uncomfortable; the interviewee’s comments and physical actions – touching my arm, back or winking – heightening my awareness of my personal safety and taking away from the focus of the interview. While I often wished to gain the type of insightful knowledge defined by the casual settings that Fabinyi (2007) described, I often chose to avoid situations of this nature, due to my gender and my awareness of increased risk.

Exploring Fishing and Tourism in a Formal Setting

As the tourism sector on Nevis continues to grow, an increasing number of hotels and restaurants are providing a greater market for local fishers to sell their catch (Nevis Statistics and Economic Planning, 2008). When interviewing hotel and restaurant owners, study participants reported that local restaurants do not enforce fishing regulations when buying from local fishers. Rather, they buy undersized lobster and immature conch, strengthening the market for illegally caught fish and contributing to an increasing decline in vital stocks.

In contrast to the challenges that interviews with fishers posed, the interviews I conducted with people in a pre-arranged, formal setting, such as offices, restaurants, hotels or departmental headquarters, lacked the safety concerns that were often prevalent in the field. Similar to my perceived experiences during interviews with fishers, I found that my age and gender put people at ease when I showed up to their offices. My status as
a student gave me an ‘in’ on many occasions, and most people, including present and former directors of the Department of Marine Resources, the major of the St. Kitts and Nevis Coast Guard, and the directors of environmental non-profits, were extremely willing to share their knowledge in return for my eagerness and interest on the subjects at hand.

My interviewees from the tourism and conservation sectors opened up to me easily and without hesitation, several of whom divulged their somewhat controversial opinions to me. A former director of an agency confided in me his negative opinions of how laws and regulations were currently being enforced; another non-profit leader chastised the government and political climate on the island. ‘If you share this, just don’t include my name’, most would add after the fact, quickly jumping back to wherever they had left off in the interview, willing and eager to continue sharing their honest thoughts on anything I wished to discuss.

A Male Perspective of Nevisian Hospitality and Fieldwork

Russell Fielding, Assistant Professor at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, shares his experiences conducting fieldwork on Nevis as a graduate student in 2008.

‘Drive on the left, this is British territory!’ I remind myself as I steer the rented Suzuki 4x4 along the narrow, potholed road of Nevis’ northern shore. Out one window I catch views of the Caribbean Sea — so blue it doesn’t look real. On the other side, the land slopes upward and disappears into the clouds. About 3,000 feet up, through the thick jungle, past the abandoned sugar plantations and boutique resorts, is the top of Nevis Peak, the highest point on this tiny island.

I slow down and pull off the main road into the Oualie Beach resort area. The door to the SCUBA shop is open, as is the large shutter window, and I can hear laughter and a conversation spoken in that sweet Caribbean lilt coming from within. I walk inside and shake hands with Ellis A. Chaderton, owner of Scuba Safaris, the oldest and most respected SCUBA outfitter on the island. ‘Everyting good, mon?’ he asks, ‘what you want to know?’ I’ve come to interview Ellis.

‘You’ve been diving here for a long time?’ I ask Ellis, a large man with a shaved head and wide smile.

Ellis tells me that he was born on Nevis and that he has been diving these waters since his teens. I ask him if he has seen a lot of changes in that time. I ask about the fish, about the lobster and conch, about the water quality. I ask about environmental protection and government policy. Ellis answers all of my questions while simultaneously handing out rental masks and wetsuits to the tourists who have signed up for his afternoon dive charter. Then I ask a question that
really gets his attention: ‘What about coral bleaching? Do you see any of that around here?’

‘Coral bleaching? Yes, mon’, Ellis says, ‘we got plenty bleaching here.’ I start asking him specific questions about the bleaching—which I learned in class can be related to climate change and is an indicator of the general state of the ocean’s health. Ellis cuts me off: ‘Mon, we can talk about the coral but why don’t you just go see it for yourself?’ He tosses a mask and snorkel my way and introduces me to Elvan, the dive master for the afternoon charter.

I protest: ‘I’m not here on vacation, Ellis. I’m just a grad student. I can’t afford to go diving.’

‘No problem, mon. It’s on the house. You need to see this’, Ellis answers, and with that I join Elvan on the dive boat, along with a group of about eight tourists.

The dives are amazing. Yes, some of the coral shows signs of bleaching and I’m sure that the reef is not nearly as healthy, nor the water as clear or the marine life as abundant, as when Ellis started diving here years ago. But what colours! What variety of fish! What adventure! Since SCUBA is a sport that you never do alone, I swim with Elvan, the dive master, as we are the only two who came on board without dive partners. At a depth of about twenty-five feet I am sure I can hear Elvan, swimming just behind me, laughing and whooping with joy. I turn back and see that he is holding a thin piece of sea grass, around which a tiny seahorse has curled its tail. Behind his regulator I can see the corners of Elvan’s mouth drawn up in a huge grin. Back on the boat, Elvan tells me that this was the first time he had seen a seahorse in the wild. It was mine too.

The dive trip is the most memorable of my many experiences of Nevisian hospitality that summer. The overall aim of my research on Nevis was to understand the state of local food production on the island (Fielding & Mathewson, 2012), and toward this end, in addition to viewing the reefs and the farms, my fieldwork involved talking with as many fishers and farmers as possible. Time and again I was welcomed onto porches and into courtyards, living rooms, and agricultural fields. A big problem in Nevisian agriculture is the presence of green vervet monkeys (Chlorocebus aethiops), an invasive species that the early European colonists first brought from Africa as pets. The monkeys now outnumber humans on Nevis and can easily destroy a season’s worth of produce with a short session of snacking.

Perhaps it was my inquisitiveness, my whiteness, my gender, or my official-looking Moleskine notebook that allowed the local farmers and fishers to open up to me about their livelihoods and the
challenges they experienced. In professional meetings I was, without exception, treated with equal parts hospitality and respect. Personally too. During that summer on Nevis I met and befriended many locals – some Nevisian, others American or British – and spent most evenings socializing at private homes, in beach bars, or even aboard a yacht.

But this was not always the way my fieldwork in the Caribbean went. For every day of free SCUBA diving, there was a night spent on the beach. I mean on the beach, as in, lying directly on the sand and trying to sleep there because I couldn’t afford proper lodging. This was my method on several Caribbean islands including Puerto Rico, St. Barthélemy, and Isla Mujeres off the coast of Mexico’s Yucatan peninsula. On St. Kitts I slept for free not on the beach but on the deck of a borrowed sailboat. On Cuba it was the open terrace of a train station.

A night spent outdoors naturally feels exposed. This feeling is at the root of both the lure and the vulnerability of sleeping out. To fall asleep to the sound of lapping waves, lying on a mattress of soft sand covered by a sarong is an idyllic postcard image. At the same time though, its reality requires an attitude of ‘not a target’ – or perhaps ‘nothing to lose’ – with regard to your possessions and even your own body. On St. Barts I awoke at dawn to the gradual realization that there were people standing nearby, talking softly in French. Turning slightly so as to appear still asleep I saw the black boots and long guns of the gendarmes – the military police force, which always look out of place on the beaches of France’s many tropical colonies. Worried that I would be cited – or possibly arrested – for camping, which according to the sign was interdit (not allowed), I began collecting my things quickly to move on. Glancing back at the officers I caught the eye of one young, uniformed man who laughed as he called out to me, ‘Bonjour!’ Then noticing my nervous hurry, he gestured toward my makeshift bed and added, ‘Pas de problème!’ Not a problem.

Before shifting my major research focus to the Caribbean I spent several seasons conducting research in the Faroe Islands of the North Atlantic. The back page of my Faroese field notebook is taken up with large block letters spelling, ‘Tórshavn,’ my usual first destination after arriving at the airport. Rarely having enough research funds to justify the expensive bus ride from the airport to the capital (never mind a taxi!) I got into the habit of walking straight from baggage claim to the road outside the airport and holding up the notebook and a thumb. I was always picked up quickly and once my driver even passed the bus on its way into Tórshavn. Every experience with Faroese hitchhiking ended with me being dropped off in front of the
door of the research station where I lodged with nothing more than a wish for ‘Годы едимъ,’ or good luck, from the driver.

When I reflect on the level of exposure necessitated by the simultaneous need to conduct overseas fieldwork and lack of financial resources, I’m surprised by the level of security I felt, given the situations. In locations with no prior contacts, limited language skills, tightly stretched budgets, and sometimes even a lack of lodging or transportation arrangements, I felt remarkably safe.

Whether hitchhiking to my field site, sleeping on the beach, being welcomed into a farmhouse, or SCUZA diving with strangers, academic fieldwork has overwhelmingly exposed me to the welcoming, hospitable, and altruistic side of humanity. The occasional interaction with uncooperative government officials, potential interviewees who would rather not talk, pushy teets, hopeful drug dealers and pimps, or hearsay robberies – never experienced personally – turns my otherwise naive view of ‘the field’ onto a closer path toward reality. I acknowledge the position of privilege that affords me this easy travel. My whiteness, maleness, and – at least during my years as a graduate student researcher – obvious lack of wealth must contribute to the overall sense that this person is ‘not a target.’

The Biases of Gender and Precaution in the Field

Precautionary methods to reduce personal risk, such as continually being alert and aware of one’s surroundings, avoiding isolated places and being wary of strangers – especially men – are a few of the many techniques that women use to stay safe in public (Superle, 2013). Often in the form of subconscious decisions or split-second reactions, an increased sense of fear among women and an increased focus on keeping oneself safe may stem from gendered lessons of safety taught from a young age (Superle, 2013), or perhaps the overall sense, to reflect upon Fielding’s words, that women are considered ‘a target’.

The effects of gender in the field, and the subsequent use of precaution, can be seen in many forms and in both a positive and negative light. The chance encounters often experienced in fieldwork, such as an invitation to go diving with local men or to spend time getting to know locals in their homes, may be less capitalised upon by female researchers than by men, as these opportunities may be accompanied by a greater level of risk. Additionally, informal interview settings, especially casual gatherings involving alcohol, may be less accessible to females conducting research alone. Methods to reduce the burdens of research cost, such as hitchhiking, spending a night in a stranger’s home or sleeping out on a beach, would be similarly difficult to justify for a young woman. By employing precautionary techniques, female researchers may be limited in the
breadth and depth of local knowledge they obtain, missing opportunities
to expand their local connections in favour of safety. These factors may
be heightened when the group of interest is predominantly male.
Conversely, being female may provide an increased level of access to
information while conducting research, both in formal settings and in the
field. While difficult to separate from the influence of age, student-status,
friendliness or inquisitiveness, being female may increase one’s ability to
evoke trust and openness from male interview participants. In particular,
male participants may be more willing to initially engage in conversation
if the researcher is female, due to either increased trust or the influence
of flirtation.

Although it is impossible to know if my experiences conducting
research would have differed if I were male, my decisions on Nevis, from
who to interview, where to conduct interviews and when to stop an inter-
view, were undoubtedly influenced by my gender and my awareness of my
personal safety. My heightened sense of risk, stemming from the inherent
nature of conducting research in an unfamiliar location, conversations
with female scientists in the community and the gendered lessons of per-
sonal safety I have grown up with, were sources of bias in my work.

It is important to note that the study of gender is not my area of expert-
tise, and the perspective has been used in this chapter to reflect back upon
personal experiences, raising ideas that may be relatable to others con-
ducting fieldwork. Other young, female researchers may wish to consider
the ways in which gender affects site selection, participant selection and
interactions with participants in their studies, especially when fieldwork
is being conducted in an unfamiliar location, unfamiliar culture, or alone.
Cost-reduction strategies, such as hitchhiking or camping, are often not
viable options for women, and additional funding from their universities
should be considered in instances where female researchers may be bur-
dened by the need to keep themselves safe. Universities may wish to pro-
vide additional training opportunities for young women conducting
fieldwork, including ways in which safe, unbiased practices can be incor-
porated into research design.

Finally, while I was aware of risk and my personal safety, it is impor-
tant to note that I was never hurt or harmed while conducting research on
Nevis. My time was predominantly defined by the welcoming, kind-
hearted and hospitable people I met.

Since my time on the island, St. Kitts and Nevis has created its first
marine managed area, including the designation of two marine reserves
(Nevis Historical and Conservation Society, 2017). While it’s still too
early to tell if the country’s marine management plans will be successful,
I am hopeful and excited to follow the story of the islands that welcomed
me with open arms, and left me transfixed, years before.

Qualitative research, including field-based interviews, is a powerful
approach to finding answers to questions that may be missed through
purely quantitative methods. While it is unreasonable to suggest that women put themselves at increased risk to reduce potential bias, it is important to consider the biases that gender and precaution may contribute to a study, acknowledging the positives and negatives of these biases and exploring the ways in which they could be managed in the future.

References


