

# Education in Ethiopia

In the fifth in a series of articles, **Dr Jenny Search** reports on her continuing two-year voluntary service overseas placement at Debub University in Ethiopia



**T**HE END OF a busy academic year is approaching and I'm surprised to find myself looking forward to the summer break when I can devote more time to my research.

Our department (Applied Biology) offers a general microbiology course which is taught to third year students in our department and also to second year students in the faculty of agriculture. Last semester this course was not taught at all, but at the beginning of this semester I found out that with one other colleague we were expected to teach the course to three other departments as well as

our own students. Mr Mintesinot Ashebir and I are teaching microbiology to approximately 350 students from the departments of Animal Science, Plant Science and Horticulture. We work in two campuses 5 km apart connected by an hourly bus service, or a 20 minute bike ride. The lectures are not a problem as we can lecture two departments together. The big headache is the labs, as we only have two laboratories in the department to teach all the practicals for all the courses being offered. This logistical nightmare has been somewhat helped by the fact that, for reasons I won't go into here, the third year students started

their semester about 6 weeks before the second year students which allowed us to finish most of the third year labs before the second year labs started.

The only way we could manage the large number of agricultural students was to halve the lab time from 3 hours to 1½ hours and teach two groups each afternoon. Each lab class contains about 60 students managed by the instructor and one lab technician. There is a shortage of media and chemicals which means that many of the experiments have to be carried out in large groups of up to 15 students. However, the students can individually

try simple staining procedures such as Gram's and spore staining. This brought about a whole new set of difficulties as the students had forgotten how to use a microscope and insisted on using oil for all the lenses and became very excited about seeing air bubbles and the like. Slowly they are improving but it is hard to give individual attention to all the students, and when I give instructions it seems that only a tenth of the class understands (or listens to?) what I am saying!

Over the summer Mintesinot and I plan to revise the lab manual to include experiments that can be carried out by small groups of

**Far left:** 3rd year biology students on their field trip to the Rift Valley Lakes

**Left:** Mintesinot Ashebir teaching a microbiology lab to some of the 2nd year animal science students

**Right:** We had to stock up on bananas!

**Below right:** One of the enclosures at Arba Minch crocodile farm



students with the equipment that is available. Mintesinot is also the colleague who I am carrying out research with into the microbiological quality of the water. We are in the process of starting the research but find it difficult to meet each other as our timetables seem to be such that we spend most of the week at opposite ends of the city in the different campuses!

Recently the third year biology students went on an educational field trip to the rift valley lakes as part of their course on Fisheries Biology. I was lucky enough to be invited to join the trip. First the students went to the lakes north of Awassa and visited a fish processing plant at Lake Zwei. The methods used are very traditional and not mechanised but there is still a huge problem in the country as a whole with over-fishing and the introduction of alien species to the lakes. After a swim in Lake Langano, one of the few “safe” lakes in Ethiopia i.e. free from crocodiles, hippos and schistosomiasis (due to a high mineral content) the students returned to Awassa for the night. The next morning I joined them to the town of Arba Minch which overlooks two lakes; Abaya and Chamo. Lake Abaya is the largest of the Rift Valley lakes measuring 1,160 km<sup>2</sup> are both are surrounded by mountains making the scenery spectacularly beautiful.

Arba Minch lies about 270 km south of Awassa on a fairly decent road and we set off at 6am to arrive with plenty of time to visit the lakes. Unfortunately we had a flat tyre 60 km north of Arba Minch and the driver had to return back to the closest town to get the spare repaired lest we had another before reaching our destination. The bus dropped us off at a pleasant spot where the cooks unloaded the pots and sacks of food and began to prepare lunch. One of the students wandered off and found a plantation which we went to visit. It was started ten years ago by World Vision but was handed over to local

management three years ago. It is a cooperative scheme run by about 40 people who grow fruit and vegetables including bananas, mangoes, coffee, sugar cane and lettuce for export to Addis Ababa and further afield. They also grew a species of plant as feed for silk worms which produce silk for export.

We finally arrived at Arba Minch as the sun set and after negotiating accommodation for 54 students we retired for the night. The next morning we visited the shores of Lake Chamo. There, some locals (including a graduate from the Awassa College of Agriculture) talked to the students about the fish found in the lake. The

talk was enhanced with the use of visual aids consisting of specimens of the fish found in the lake including tilapia, catfish and Nile perch.

After a few hours waiting for another tyre to be fixed, we visited a crocodile farm on the edge of Lake Abaya. Here the crocodiles are farmed, later to be turned into handbags and other products for export. In the 1960’s the population of crocodiles in the lake were hunted almost to extinction so the farm was set up as a conservation measure to prevent illegal hunting of the crocs in the lake. We saw hundreds of crocs of different sizes, in rather small enclosures but we also saw some enormous specimens in their natural habitat from the edge of the lake. After a late lunch we stocked up on bananas, mangoes and limes and headed back to Awassa. The area seems so fertile it is difficult to imagine this area suffers from famines. In fact they are known as “green famines” as the countryside is so lush.

The trip provided me a great opportunity to see some more of this beautiful country in the company of my students and colleagues. It was good to get to know the students better. They quizzed me about everything from the view of Ethiopia in the “West” and how the education system and students compare in Ethiopia and the UK to whether I could eat a whole injera (staple grain product) in one go!

## Further Information

- [www.neal-jenny.info](http://www.neal-jenny.info)
- [www.vso.org.uk](http://www.vso.org.uk).
- The Faculty of Natural Sciences at Debub University: <http://home.no/dufns>

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