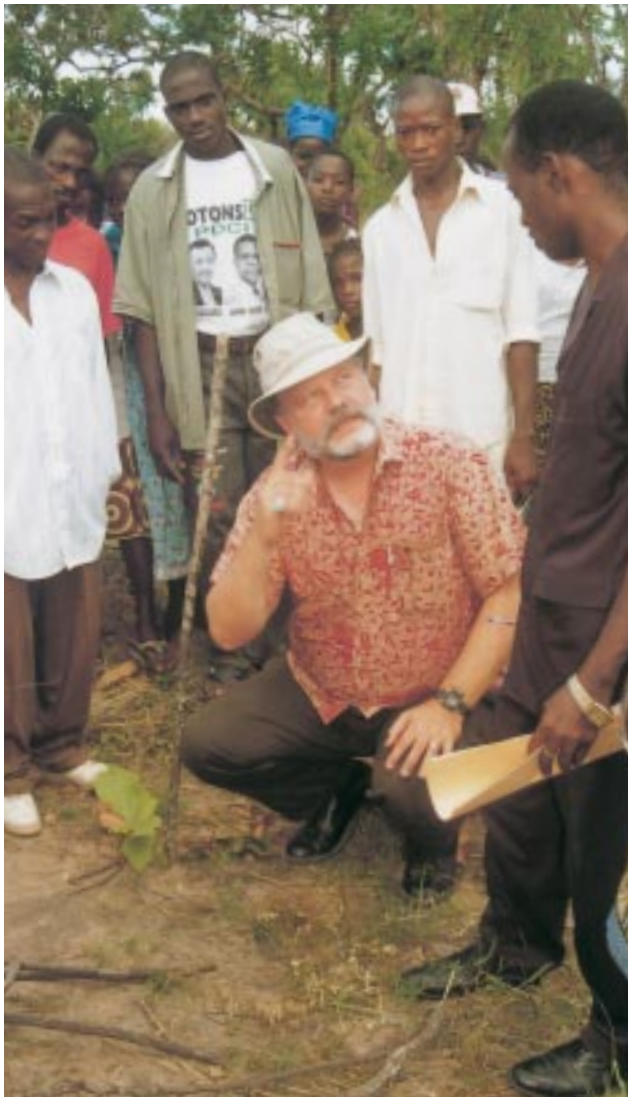
On Being a 'Hubster'

By Charles O. Cecil

"This officer is assigned to a bilateral mission, has regional responsibilities and promotes a global agenda." So stated the "special circumstances" section of the employee evaluation report of a regional environmental officer. In a nutshell it summed up the challenge and scope of each of the 12 "environmental hub" positions that exist at selected posts around the world.

Some environmental problems need regional rather than national (single-country) or global solutions. Environmental hub officers promote regional cooperation in using and managing scarce water resources, tracking illicit trade in endangered species and combating illegal fishing or logging.

The science, technology and health arenas hold other examples where coordinated regional responses are likely to be more effective than a series of bilateral actions. They include information technology systems, genetically modified organisms and regional coordination in the education, screening, treatment and prevention of AIDS/HIV.



Abidjan hub officer Richard Hawkins discusses a village reforestation project with Robert Gnande, president of an Ivorian NGO.

Hub officers also promote closer relations, stability and security among foreign governments in their regions. Their work serves broad U.S. interests while advancing the objectives of the regional bureaus that own the positions and the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs, which provides substantive support.

Currently, there are 12 hub positions based in Abidjan, Addis Ababa, Amman, Ankara, Bangkok, Brasilia, Budapest, Copenhagen, Gaborone, Kathmandu, San Jose and Tashkent.

Hub officers have a regional mandate while environment, science and technology officers work on bilateral issues, promoting cooperation between the U.S. government and the host country.

Kathmandu hub officer Michael DeTar discusses U.S. arsenic removal technology with young scientists from Jadavpur University, Calcutta.

Secretary of State Warren Christopher announced the hub idea in a speech at Stanford University in April 1996. Though they are often called "environmental hub officers," it quickly became apparent that their main concerns would be oceans, science, technology and health issues.

"Science is needed to investigate problems, while technology is applied to mitigate them," says Andrew W. "Andy" Reynolds, deputy adviser in the Office of the Science and Technology Adviser to the Secretary of State.

"The opening of new lines of communication between governments is necessary to combat illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing—one of the most serious problems in achieving sustainable fisheries," according to Mary Beth West, OES's deputy assistant secretary for oceans and fisheries.

Similarly, the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic demands attention in U.S. foreign policy as a problem that knows no boundaries and needs to be addressed regionally.

Wherever there are U.S. interests, hub officers work with national governments, regional organizations, environmental nongovernmental organizations, donor organizations and the business community to promote, develop and support regional political dialogue and cooperation on transboundary issues.

The hub officer in Amman, Jordan, for example, brought together Palestinian, Jordanian and Israeli officials to discuss common water problems. Last year, his

Photo by Ted Osius

U.S. Ambassador Darryl N. Johnson discusses efforts to preserve Thailand's dwindling hardwood forests with officials during a visit to Kao Yai National Park in the country's northeast.

counterpart in Bangkok proposed and OES funded the first workshop in Southeast Asia for law enforcement officials to discuss common approaches to combat illegal timber operations. In Brasilia, the hub officer helped to unite Latin American countries in combatting illegal traffic in endangered species. The hub officer in Addis Ababa, meanwhile, organized a workshop on marine fisheries enforcement involving officials from 11 countries in the region, the U.S. Coast Guard and several regional and international organizations.

When surveyed recently, current and former hub officers saw their assignments as career enhancing. After their tours, Deborah Seligsohn and George Sibley completed a year of graduate work at Princeton University. Ms. Seligsohn is now in line to be an environmental, science and technology counselor in Beijing while Mr. Sibley will be principal officer in Calcutta. Larry Andre, meanwhile, is moving from Addis Ababa to Freetown as deputy chief of mission.

Richard Hawkins, Abidjan hub officer, relocated this summer to Santo Domingo as section chief in narcotics affairs with responsibility for drug and crime affairs in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Mr. Hawkins also credits his hub work for his multifunctional promotion to O-2 in 2001. "I believe the hub job showed that I could operate successfully in a loosely defined environment with many players and high stakes," Mr. Hawkins said.

Other hub officers note that the regional nature of their work causes them to travel frequently, creating opportunities for them to become known by numerous ambassadors and deputy chiefs of mission, establishing relationships that may prove useful in their careers and demonstrating their own capabilities to more than a single set of rating officers. ■

Photo courtesy of Ted Osius

Ted Osius gives his mount a grateful pat for carrying him into the forest of Burma's Bago Yoma Mountains, north of Rangoon.

The author, a retired former ambassador, helped review the regional environmental hub program for the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs.

Photo by Ted Osius

Hub officers' jobs often take them beyond the capital city to fascinating locations in a nation's interior. Bangkok hub officer Ted Osius visited this hill-tribe village in Burma while surveying a forestry project.

Getting Together

The first worldwide conference of regional environmental officers in Budapest this past June reviewed issues concerning hub officers and compared success stories and problems encountered in their work.

Mary Beth West, deputy assistant secretary for oceans and fisheries, who chaired the conference, offered a number of suggestions for making hub officers even more effective. "Hub positions demand officers who are innovative and entrepreneurial in promoting regional dialogue," she said. "We all have a stake in their success. Thus, in conjunction with the regional bureaus, we want to give them as much help as we can."

In six years, the hub officers have demonstrated their worth and promise. In a multi-polar world of rapidly increasing complexity, their responsibilities are certain to increase. The hub program is the kind of targeted instrument and approach the Department will need in order to play a leading role in solving transnational problems.