

Name: James Ellison

Country of origin: USA

Completed SIA in Winter Semester 2015/16

PhD Studies: “Anthropogenic influences on remotely-sensed landscape and biomass changes over a 30-year period in the Republic of Benin” (OPATS, University of Kassel; field work in Benin)

Finished PhD?: No, but submitting a paper presently

Job: Development advisor for training & extension in conservation agriculture, GIZ Ghana

It was several years after I completed a Bachelor in Engineering that I decided to apply for the SIA Masters. I was in Malawi (E. Africa) at the time, trying to edge my way into the “development cooperation” world through unpaid internships and networking. I was somewhat frustrated, having applied for numerous positions in Africa-based NGOs with no success. “How could I do what I want to do *and* get paid”, I thought. The attractiveness of the SIA programme for me was the opportunity to round out my technical skills in agricultural topics while maintaining a focus on the developing world. Unlike “tropical agriculture” programmes in the US which do not focus on topics affecting developing countries – and which do not allow for master thesis research abroad – SIA offered this focus and flexibility. I was one of a diverse group of just 7 students that began the “tropical agriculture” concentration in the 2013/14 Winter Semester.

I met some of my closest friends up until now because of SIA - through the Agrar department “tandem”, the Agrar “Internationales” Arbeitsgruppe, in SIA courses and SIA-sponsored German classes and through my mini-job as a research assistant. In my free time, I always stayed busy with volunteering for environmental initiatives, our small jazz band, mountain biking, salsa dancing or trips to the Baggersee with friends.

SIA was still a young programme, and despite a few challenges which may have been sorted out since then, the programme’s unique strength is the diversity in backgrounds and opinions which it allows and encourages. Furthermore, there were a lot of chances to do something “extra.” In 2015, my colleague (Ann-Kathrin Lichtner) and I received funding from the AKB Stiftung to carry out a month-long investigation in Tanzania into a topic that had personally interested both of us - grassroots innovations in water management in wetlands.

The highlight of the programme, for me, was the flexibility regarding the master’s thesis. With the flexibility to choose any topic of my desire (so long as I could find a supporting supervisor) and the opportunity to carry out research abroad – I found myself in Ethiopia for 6 months in 2015 as a GIZ-sponsored (via the GIZ BEAF programme) research assistant at the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT). Although carrying out research abroad does tend to complicate matters, implementing an investigation into a topic of my choosing (landscape restoration planning to combat land degradation) was the most valuable part of the masters; it gave me time to teach myself GIS (a tool which will be essential in my career), to get another country “under my belt” and to network with people in the R4D (research-for-development) world.

Furthermore, the thesis opened up the possibility of doing a PhD under the same supervisor (Prof. Andreas Bürkert). Having completed the master earlier that year and having proven my skills in GIS and remote sensing, I was asked to carry out a study in Benin (W. Africa) on the influence of transhumant pastoralism on rangelands and forage availability. Benin was yet another country and culture and a new set of skills (bridging agriculture and forestry), and the experience made me aware of my eagerness to be involved with implementation; in other words, I desired to see new technologies and approaches (often the products of research) being implemented.

With the first segment of research complete, I left the doctorate pathway in January 2018 for a position in northern Ghana as a development advisor (Entwicklungshelfer). The assignment – the starting up of a private sector training and extension system to promote (mechanised) conservation agriculture – has been both arduous and exciting and the learning curve steeper than ever. Nevertheless, I finally feel secure that I am on the career path that I earlier dreamed about – and SIA was doubtlessly a key part of getting there.