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Justice for Islands that Suffer Most: Stacy-ann Robinson

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Justice for Islands that Suffer Most

Stacy-ann Robinson

By Gerry Boyle '78

For Stacy-ann Robinson, it's personal.

Robinson grew up in Jamaica and has seen the destruction levied on the island by extreme storms. A human geographer and assistant professor of environmental studies at Colby, Robinson has also seen firsthand the challenges faced by Jamaica and places like it as they try to obtain resources needed to cope with the brunt of climate change.

The result is a body of global research that explores the bureaucratic and institutionalized obstacles faced by Small Island Developing States (SIDS) as they try to work with the biggest funders of climate change mitigation, adaptation, and research.

"One of the themes that underpin my work is justice," Robinson said. "Sometimes it's not explicit. But when I'm thinking about my work, I'm thinking, how can I connect these dots?"

She connects those dots in a continuous stream of scholarly papers and takes pride in bringing what she describes as "an authentic voice" to her research.

That voice was honed by experience working in Jamaica's Foreign Affairs Ministry. "It became very obvious to me that there was a need for more research, that many of the Small Island Developing States needed that support from academic research, from policy research that could strengthen their negotiating positions," she said.

She emerged as a scholar in what she calls a niche area, but one that is taking on increased importance as the climate changes. "While climate science is improving in terms of modeling and just how much information is out there on climate impacts, generally the focus on small islands has not kept pace," Robinson said. She is sharpening that focus with interdisciplinary research that centers on the human, social, and policy dimensions of climate change adaptation in SIDS.

And with her roots in foreign service, she wants answers, not research for the sake of research alone. She converts complex papers into three or four bullet-pointed policy recommendations, which she circulates. Her papers have been carefully considered by agencies like the Green Climate Fund and the World Bank, among others.

She was also invited to be a contributing author for a (Small Islands) working group's contribution to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Robinson continues to work to bring broad attention to the injustices that are rampant in the ways SIDS bear the brunt of a problem that is not of their own making. "Maybe we're not at the stage to correct it," Robinson said, "but we should shed light on it. ... Like, hey, there is a problem over here. This house is on fire."

For more on Stacy-ann Robinson's work go to colby.edu/climate.

In Africa, Using Nature to Protect Nature

Matt Brown '92

By Christina Nunez



Fresh out of Colby in 1992, Matt Brown joined the Peace Corps. His assignment—tending a tree nursery in Ghana—set him on a lifelong path. After two and a half years of volunteer service growing trees, Brown spent another nine months biking 3,000 miles across the African continent. He loved the diversity, the wonder of its massive ecosystems, the warm and resilient people.

“I just got Africa deeply in my blood,” Brown said. Today, he leads The Nature Conservancy’s conservation efforts across nine countries on the continent, with a focus on helping local communities protect and restore natural resources, including forests, rivers, and grasslands.

His work centers on the idea that we must nurture the green “infrastructure” we already have, such as storm-buffering coral reefs and forests that store carbon. The impact could be sizable: these natural climate solutions could deliver about a third of the carbon emissions cuts needed by 2030 to avoid warming beyond the internationally agreed 2°C target, according to The Nature Conservancy’s research.

Africa is a land of opportunity when it comes to this approach. Home to a fifth of the world’s tropical forests and one of the world’s largest freshwater lakes, Lake Tanganyika, its resources are invaluable and under increasing pressure from a growing population of more than one billion—and also from climate change.

In northern Tanzania, for example, the Maasai people and their livestock depend on grassland increasingly sought for conversion to farms and settlements. In dry years, which

are becoming more frequent as the planet warms, precious grazing land becomes a source of conflict and tension. “In the Western world, everybody has some financial savings,” Brown said. “If you’re a pastoralist living on the landscape in Tanzania, you’ve got your cattle—that’s your savings account.”

Working with partner organizations on the ground, The Nature Conservancy is helping various communities create grass banks where no farming, fencing, or settlement is allowed, keeping the land open for both livestock and wildlife.

Last year, the effort in northern Tanzania secured 370,000 acres across 51 easements. “We’re creating an ecological system that maintains its integrity by solving the immediate need of local people,” Brown said.

Other efforts in Africa include supporting better fisheries management and conserving forests. With every project, the challenge is to ensure the benefits can be scaled up and maintained with stable financing. “The international conservation field is littered with projects that have stopped the minute the funding stops,” Brown said. “We’re very focused on being able to walk away while sustaining tangible, lasting outcomes.

“I believe in a future that is prosperous for Africa,” he said. “My four years on Mayflower Hill really prepared me to do this job that I love, and to feel like I’m having a big impact on Earth.”

For more on Matt Brown’s work go to colby.edu/climate.