The research I am submitting for your review was conducted in Cambodia through the School for Field Studies, as I studied ecology and natural resource management in a post-conflict landscape. I spent the last month of the program conducting and writing up my research, but actually, I had been planning for this project for much longer – before I even came to Cambodia.

I knew from Kayla Deur that one of the SFS Cambodia end-of-semester directed research projects was on medicinal ethnobotany, and I knew, sure as anything, that I wanted it. Only one person can be assigned to each DR, so I did my research before my plane even touched the ground, hoping to convince the professors to pick me! I used the library’s database access to EBSCO and JSTOR to compile reams of articles on medicinal plants, ethnobotanical memory, geographic memory and cultural anthropology in post-conflict Cambodia… anything I thought might have the slightest chance of being useful for my project – so that when the day came that the professors sat down with us all to choose, I could say, with all seriousness, “I want the project on medicinal ethnobotany, and I have been preparing.” They were impressed, and I got it.

My DR took place on the plateau of Phnom Kulen. I wanted to understand how the people of Phnom Kulen used medicinal plants in their daily lives, the cultural value of access to wild plant resources, and factors involved in medicating illness. I used my cached database articles and interlibrary loan to prepare a very diligent and detailed literature review before I got to the field and lost internet access. But I soon found that all the paper research in the world can’t prepare you for the reality of bilingual interviews, and the political reality of the environment. If I asked “Do you use plant medicines?”, my Khmer respondents would immediately say “No”, but if I asked “What do you do when your daughter has fever?” they would say “Oh, well we crush k’doh komprok and give it to her…” I slowly began to learn that the people were accustomed to being interrogated by government officials who told them that plant medicine would hurt their children, so when anyone asked them point-blank, they shied away. In all my prior research, I had learned the science, but missed the cultural nuance! It was a learning curve, and a steep one, but I began to understand how I could ask my questions in a way that was culturally sensitive. I had read about the diseases endemic to the area, for instance, so I was able to start asking targeted questions. Instead of saying “What do you do when your husband is sick?” like I had planned, I started asking things like “What do you do to treat malaria?” My preparatory research is what enabled me to be flexible in the field. There was always something I had read that could guide me to a solution to deal with challenges.