No one is an island

My supervisor waved goodbye and boarded a plane. I had just started my Ph.D. studying invasive species on a remote oceanic island, where I would be spending most of the next 3 years bashing through rainforest to count invertebrates. My supervisor had done his own Ph.D. here on Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean 2 decades earlier. He had found me a place to stay and introduced me to the handful of other ecologists who were managing the national park or conducting their own research, but I wasn’t working directly with them. Everyone else attached to my project was more than 5000 kilometers away—and so were my friends, family, and entire support network. I told myself I could manage on my own.

Despite my enthusiasm about my research, it wasn’t long before I began to feel lonely. At times, I struggled to find the motivation to get out into the field. I was suffering from a sense of isolation that is not uncommon for Ph.D. students, which in my case was amplified by literal isolation.

I hesitated to reach out to the locals—a small community that developed after the island was first settled at the end of the 19th century. I was worried that socializing would distract from my work, and I was nervous that the locals might not welcome an “outsider.” But I eventually realized that the only way I would get through my remote Ph.D. was to reach out and create a new support network.

My first move was to visit the epicenter of any small remote community: the local pub. One afternoon, after a long day in the field, I finally dropped in for a beer. Almost immediately, someone asked how long I had been working at the power station. I was confused, but then I realized I was wearing a work shirt bearing the company logo, which I had gotten at the secondhand shop. We both had a laugh after I explained who I was and what I was doing. This shirt confusion turned out to be a great conversation starter: I ended up having that same introductory chat with a bunch of people over the next few weeks. Soon, each visit to the pub involved catching up with friends and talking about different aspects of my research, which helped keep me motivated about my work.

Connecting with the community helped with more than just my emotional well-being. When I asked a new friend to help me assemble some fences I needed for my experiments, for example, he said he was more than happy to— but not if he needed to do it the way I had planned. My friend, who was a builder, suggested a bunch of practical improvements to the design, and together we were able to get the fences up with much less trouble. I don’t think I would have been able to get the experiment done without him.

My final step in becoming a full member of the Christmas Island community was to give something back. Quite a few people on the island played music, and afternoon acoustic guitar shows were not uncommon, but rock ‘n’ roll gigs at the pub were unacceptably rare. So along with some friends, I sniffed out equipment scattered around the island; helped organize musicians into bands; and headlined the show with a raucous set of White Stripes songs, complete with my own blues guitar stylings (although attendees were far more impressed by the drummer’s skills). It felt like everyone on the island attended the show, and some were still talking about it years later.

Since finishing my Ph.D., I have moved twice for research positions, and each time I have found myself in new communities. The surroundings haven’t been as extreme, but again, in the beginning, I was tempted to ignore any feelings of isolation and focus solely on work. But I knew better. I remembered how reaching out to the welcoming and supportive local community during my Ph.D. not only helped me get through the isolation, but also improved the quality of my work. And whenever I felt like a stranger, I made a point of visiting the pub.

Luke O’Loughlin is a postdoctoral fellow at the Australian National University in Canberra. Do you have an interesting career story? Send it to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.