



Go Pirates! Report on study leave in East Carolina University

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On 14 March, I arrived for a month of study and research at East Carolina University (ECU) in Greenville, North Carolina. The main purposes of my visit were to gain a better understanding of the USA planning system and planning education, develop case material for a book, and extend my networks and knowledge of coastal hazard management, especially in relation to tourism, fisheries and aquaculture. I was appointed as an adjunct professor in the Department of Geography, Planning and the Environment at ECU, which is chaired by geographer and planner Burrell Montz, a name very familiar to anyone researching in the hazards and disaster risk reduction fields.

I chose ECU after searching for 'coastal' expertise in the list of accredited planning programmes in the online directory of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (the USA's equivalent of ANZAPS (Association of New Zealand and Australian Planning Schools)). ECU's coastal expertise and professional planning programme made it my first choice, reinforced by the discovery that there were three fisheries geographers on staff. Burrell's presence as chair with her expertise in hazards, was the clincher. I had met Burrell during her trips to New Zealand, where she spent sabbatical in the 1990s at Waikato University, but had not realised she had relocated from Binghamton, New Jersey, to ECU.

ECU as a whole has two main strengths; its medical school and all things coastal. Every Thursday late afternoon there is a "Go - Coastal" social session at a nearby downtown bar with coastal researchers (including students) of all persuasions (disaster, economics, archaeology, history, GIS, biology, geology, tourism, etc). The coastal connection is furthered by ECU's branding association with 'Pirates', the infamous Edward

Teach (Blackbeard) having been frequently based in the islands and sounds on the 'nearby' (90 minute drive!) coast. Every sports team, the wifi network and the major local festival is tagged 'Pirates'.

I spent one week travelling, meeting and interviewing local and state government officials, private sector and university folk. My journey took me to Kittyhawk (Wright Brothers Memorial), Hatteras (cape and village), Ocracoke, Beaufort (NC), Wilmington, Myrtle Beach, Charleston, Clemson, Chapel Hill and Kinston. The tourism opportunities are significant and varied, the heritage of the outer banks is fascinating and well worth a visit (after checking weather forecasts for hurricanes). Despite travelling more than the length of New Zealand I saw no sheep and only two very small herds of cattle; this was pig, crop and chicken country. The lack of an Asian presence was noticeable and the food really is predominantly fried in the south (imagine that!).

I was ill for the last eight days of my time at ECU, which meant that some of my objectives were not advanced as far as I had intended. However, ECU's hospitality throughout and the relationships forged have left me with very positive feelings about the study leave. The reputations of southern hospitality and crab cakes are well-deserved, and the extensive craft-beer available on tap is surprising (and validates the development of brewing courses at Lincoln).

All in all, I can highly recommend ECU and a visit 'Down East'. The following are some reflections on 'planning' aspects of the visit.

Planning Education

The way planning is taught at ECU (in its accredited BSc in Urban and Regional Planning) is very similar to the way we teach it at Lincoln, although they have more specialist planning staff and do not offer a masters in planning. The degree is four years, as are all of the bachelor degrees at ECU, and includes significant group planning and individual projects. The major group project usually involves working with a disadvantaged community to develop planning documents of some sort and some of these, after additional work by staff to bring them to a professional standard, have been adopted by the communities. These are non-statutory plans, but are quite influential. These projects were very similar to the SOCI 314 and ERST 635 projects that our students do. Student numbers are about the same as ours and a coastal management and planning field trip that I went on was very similar to the fieldtrips we run on water planning topics.

The process of accreditation of planning programmes, in terms of criteria required to be met and who makes the accreditation decision, is quite different, but the basic programme content requirements are the same. I am working on an article with Jerry Weitz, Director of Planning at ECU, comparing the different systems.

Hot Planning Issues

My visit coincided with decisions on the hottest planning issue in the City of Greenville – “how many unrelated people could live in a house?” The City has a general restriction of 3-unrelated people allowed to live in a house, but in 2012 an overlay was created for an area adjacent to the ECU main campus allowing 4-unrelated people in that area. The purpose of the restrictions on unrelated people living in a house is to encourage family home ownership, and the relaxation (from 3 to 4) was seen as having encouraged investors in rental properties to preferentially buy into this area, and effectively made it too expensive for families to buy houses. The City’s Planning and Zoning Committee, which included Dr Weitz, considered this in the first week I was there and voted to revert to a 3-unrelated people rule and also to remove the overlay altogether. In the last week I was there, the issue was considered by the full city council which accepted the recommendation to

revert to 3-unrelated people, but did not have a sufficient majority to remove the overlay. This means that it will be easier to re-introduce the 4-unrelated status at a future meeting. This meeting was preceded by a protest march led by the President of the ECU student association with several students taking the floor to speak, as well as residents, realtors and rental owners. There was standing room only and the issue featured prominently in the local media.

The other major planning issue that cropped up repeatedly, with universal derision, was the North Carolina state government’s attitude to sea level rise. It had passed legislation that effectively meant that projections of sea level rise could not be considered in planning until 2016, and then only those projections made by the State’s Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). The Department is not allowed to use computer modelling or simulations in developing projections of sea level rise, but only use historical rates (with some additional conditions). This has been brought about by the huge area of North Carolina, that because of its low-lying nature, will be vulnerable (under IPCC projections of sea level rise) and the resultant impacts on property values. DENR’s standing was already low as it had been very weak in taking enforcement actions over Duke Energy’s polluting of major waterways.

Ah Ha! Moments

I have read much about the USA planning system in the past, but this visit really brought home some aspects that I had not fully appreciated previously. My moments when I went ‘Ah Ha!’ will probably seem very naïve to others, but I doubt that I would have fully appreciated a number of aspects of the planning systems in the USA had I not been living and breathing their planning. The following may be inaccurate or only apply in North Carolina, but they were among the impressions gained:

1. There really is no “USA approach” to planning. No matter how many times I had been told this I still expected some degree of consistency. The closest they get is the planning methods where they talk the same jargon (e.g., Euclidean planning, planning unit developments, performance standards/zoning), but little

consistency in process or application or powers of different levels of authority. Of course, New Zealand is rapidly following the mess that is the USA with the ad hoc approaches in Auckland and Canterbury.

2. The concept of a town as an incorporated body rather than an instrument of government fundamentally disrupts the ability to achieve integrated planning. If an urban area in a county can suddenly decide to incorporate as a 'town' with all associated powers, many of which are not shared by or integrated with county powers, then the system is bound to be messy. The process of annexation by a town of surrounding areas is probably not quite as bad, but the disjuncture between a town and a county is quite severe and results in ridiculous outcomes.

3. Ordinances do not necessarily have to be driven by or related to a plan and the council is elected every two years, meaning that local politics really do dominate and there is little opportunity to really develop a vision. What plans do exist are largely what we would call non-statutory and are more guidance than having real force. Once the ordinances are embedded it would take a really prolonged period of political stability, or a major crisis, to get a major overhaul, which explains why they are still predominantly use driven. There is a real mixture of what we might consider by-laws and broad plan zoning that goes down to the level of dealing with billiard clubs and how many unrelated people can live in a house.

4. The American Constitution may have been appropriate to the times in which it was first developed, but the way it is used to challenge the police powers of the state and other levels of planning, and the priority placed on the value of individual property is to the detriment of the common good. I now find myself really questioning the value of a constitution.

5. The marine aquaculture industry is in a very primitive state, but the absence of a quota management system means that the marine fisheries are much more mixed-user, less industrialised and more community-oriented and driven than in New Zealand.

8. Seeing the difficulties with maintaining infrastructure on marshland and shifting sand islands, and looking at some of the hotels/houses and where they have been built, was reminiscent of visiting New Orleans the year before Hurricane Katrina. But having locals point out the many tiny, very old, graves of families who still live there and tell you their stories of surviving hurricanes and economic hardship, and their strong sense of community, made their resistance to scientists telling them to 'move out' (retreat) very understandable. How do you deal with people whose 'ancestral lands' and communities are likely to be submerged by sea level rise? This is not just an issue for developing countries, islands or indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

There is much to be learnt from the USA. I found my concepts of what is planning, and what is the public interest, especially challenged. However, we really do have considerable advantages that are not due to our small size (New Zealand is about the same size as Colorado, the eighth largest state) or our small population, but our multi-cultural, political heritage.