

# Divide and Conquer: The Peace Corps-Hesperian Relationship

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Far from modern technology, men and women in underserved communities across the United States and around the world must use creative practices in order to live healthy and productive lives. Hesperian Foundation bridges the gap between those who can provide sustainable solutions and those who need them most by presenting health-related information in understandable and usable language so that people like Peace Corps Volunteers can find realistic ways to help these communities.

## The Peace Corps-Hesperian Connection

Best known for its book [\*Where There Is No Doctor\*](#), which put community-based solutions to common health problems in the hands of aid workers, Hesperian has been providing education materials to neglected populations since 1977. Consequently, the organization's books are often considered some of the most valuable materials available to Peace Corps volunteers around the world. "There is a natural connection between Hesperian and the Peace Corps," says Elizabeth Shapiro, a former Peace Corps volunteer in El Salvador (94-96) and a writer and researcher for Hesperian's latest book, [\*A Community Guide to Environmental Health\*](#). "Hesperian writes for communities that Peace Corps volunteers serve." With similar goals of helping underserved communities help themselves, it should come as no surprise that a number of Peace Corps volunteers have worked for or with Hesperian over the years, including a country director from the Central African Republic who was an editor.

"The common thread among all of Hesperian's employees and volunteers is that most people have extensive experience overseas or with non-profit organizations," says Jen Ward, marketing and publicity coordinator for Hesperian. "One of the appealing things about Hesperian is that people who work here have walked the walk." In her training as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ghana (03-05), Zena Herman, foundations manager at Hesperian, says she received dozens of guides and books during training, but not all books are created equal. "[\*Where There Is No Doctor\*](#) is the only book I had that I really relied on," she says. Pam Fadem, co-author, project manager and senior editor of [\*A Community Guide to Environmental Health\*](#), also has a long history with Hesperian's collection of books. A public health educator and practitioner in underserved areas throughout the United States, she has used [\*Disabled Village Children\*](#) and [\*Where There Is No Doctor\*](#). "As a healthcare practitioner, you're always looking for things that don't require extensive technology and therefore lots of money," she says. "Hesperian's books give people the tools to make health-related decisions when they matter most." Hesperian's books, which provide information from women's health to helping blind and

deaf children, are filled with case studies, illustrations and activities that are culturally diverse and sensitive in a simple, timeless language. And perhaps that's what allows Hesperian to fill such a unique niche. It provides specialized and non-specialized health related information in a language that is both empowering and immediately useful to people who need tools," says Jeff Conant, co-author and project coordinator of [A Community Guide to Environmental Health](#). Hesperian publications coordinator Todd Jailer agrees. "We're able to fill the needs we do because of how we do our job. Extensive collaboration on all of our books and field testing around the world means our books don't go out of date. We talk to people who specialize in these areas of health and empower people to take control of their lives," he says.

## A New Tool for the Community

In writing [A Community Guide to Environmental Health](#)—and with all the books they produce—Hesperian tapped into groups dealing with environmental issues through extensive field testing of the activities and strategies outlined in the book. "Generally we looked for places where communities could use the information in a project they were already engaged in," Conant says. For this book, the Peace Corps agro-forestry and environmental education program and rural health and sanitation program in El Salvador took an active role in providing feedback on the forestry and watershed chapters. The environmental health guide was born from a needs assessment done in the late 1990's, and, Conant says, "looking at the needs of Hesperian's audiences, there were issues tied to the medical and community concerns that needed to be addressed. We asked allies what they needed, and they said 'we need information on potable water, erosion control and waste management.' Cancer and toxics-related issues were also a growing problem." Environmental concerns frequently lack "quick fix" solutions and are often politically charged. "This book specifically has activities that help navigate potentially controversial topics, such as gender issues and distribution of resources," Conant says. The book encourages communities to hold multinational corporations responsible for their actions, discourages the use of genetically engineered foods and provides information on how people can use laws to fight for their environmental rights. Like all of its predecessors, [A Community Guide to Environmental Health](#) is a comprehensive guide bound to find its way into the hands of Peace Corps volunteers and community-based aid workers as they navigate the many issues that bind people to the land they live on. "The problems aren't going away," Conant says, "and in many cases they are getting worse." As long as communities throughout the world need health related materials, Hesperian and its on-the-ground partners will continue to deliver. After all, notes Fadem, "building a community is the most important step in building a sustainable world."

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