Mel Moreno

Field Fails Story

I consider a true “fail” to be an error or series of unfortunate events that is reoccurring in a short period. Meaning a bunch of bad things happening all at once, usually with some instances that could have been preventable and some not so preventable. With that said, I think it would constitute a great deal of misfortune for something to be diagnosed as a fail. Here is my field work fail.

It started one humid morning at 10 AM. This is the usual time to meet and depart UF on sampling/survey days. It is me, the research coordinator for the Oyster Restoration project, Steve, and the projects P.I, Peter. We met and loaded the airboat with our sampling gear. Some of the gear includes proper attire for the field. I suppose I was to reliant on others to double check that my water boots were on board aka error #1. My water boots were not loaded and I had only brought sandals aka error #2. This is already getting off to a bad start, but lets continue with the sampling and the story.

Nothing crazy happened in the car, and we were able to test and double check the operations of the airboat at the gas station. The trip to Cedar Key is only about an hour west of Gainesville. During this sampling trip, we were using the RTK equipment, elevation sampling along the areas of the proposed restoration. This equipment requires an antenna set up, and an elevation rod, that will communicate the elevation to the antenna. Now someone has to watch this antenna, this is me, the antenna baby sitter.

The antenna set up was easy, even though it was difficult to navigate around the shore with flimsy sandals, but it was ok, since I was just going to watch the antenna, and check on it’s status from time to time, while Peter and Steve were collecting elevation points. I brought a decent amount of food, in case I was bored, but since I would be sitting and watching an antenna for 4 plus hours, I only brought my phone for entertainment aka error #3. The signal is extremely bad, thus causing battery life to die faster since it is constantly trying to get a decent signal. That’s alright, they’ll be done with the sampling in a few hours, what’s a few hours on a beautiful shore with an almost dead phone? Nothing to it.

Around 8 PM, I received a call from Steve saying the airboat broke down and it is unable to start aka error #4. I’m thinking this is a joke, since we are constantly pulling jokes on each other in the field. Well, it definitely wasn’t a joke and an expensive newly purchased airboat has now broken down, for the second time at this point. Today I believe it has broken down 4 times in total, but who’s really counting?

Oh boy. Stranded on a shore, with no cellphone, with daylight fleeting away from me. What did I get myself into? Did I mention that I had my dog at the time, at home, with a dog walker scheduled to come only once? This is error # 5. I think this circles back to error # 1, where I am to reliant on others, and I guess in this case, airboat functionality.

Ten minutes later, my phone is dead, and a faint site of the airboat could be seen from my shore line around 2 miles south. There is no way I can reach the boat, and no way they can reach me. They call for help, and now we wait. Just waiting. Waiting for the darkness to fall on me and my little camp. Before the sun went out, however, I packed the antenna, so maybe that can be considered an anti-error.

With no phone, and complete darkness it has become very clear to me, that I will be here a while. I panic at the thought of being rescued the next morning, or even later than that. I panic that my dog is alone, and no one knows. I panic that I will run out of water, and be very thirsty. I hate being thirsty. Things are not looking the best for me, and the panic is starting to creep up.

No phone, no one to talk to, no proper shoes. This is a nightmare. I have my camp supplies, a flash light, a head lamp, a lighter. I recently had gone on a Wal-mart run to be more prepared for the field so I rummaged through my pack to figure out my next steps. The only thing I really could do at this point try and let Steve and Peter I was ok, in case they did not see my little flash light in the distance, by using a signal.

I created and started a fire, with my knife, with the grass, using water proof empty data sheets, as tinder. Luckily for me, I love starting and maintain fires, so this was going to be a good challenge. This took me about an hour to do, and in that hour, I tried to scream and get the attention of my team. Very useless, as I was in an area with no people, lights, buildings, or existence of humans ever being there, expect for the antenna hook up spot. I had to continually keep cutting grass to keep the fire going, but this kept my mind off of the possibility of sleeping overnight on a deserted shore with hundreds of fiddler crabs trying to pinch my bare feet.

I grabbed palm fauns and lit them on fire, to try and relay a signal to my team. This was kind of entertaining, and I thought they definitely could spot me with a palm faun on fire! Later they told me, they didn’t see it, but it did feel very cool at the time. I felt like a bad ass, setting my own fire, lighting things on fire!

I would say that I could hear and spot rescue around midnight. I didn’t know the time, but it had felt like a very long night already. Since it is complete darkness, it had taken our rescue 3x the amount of driving time to come to our location. We were all rescued, and are airboat was towed out of the water, lets say around 2 hours later. No real fails here.

We arrived at Gainesville after a long night around 3 AM, and I arrived home at 4 AM. Dog was ok, as I was able to get an emergency dog walker using Steves phone at midnight.

After the series of errors, were a series of anti-errors, so it kind of balances itself out. But just to make sure to declare this situation a true fail, some how RTK equipment was lost on the airboat, and not found again aka error #6. Where did it go? Not on the shore. Why wasn’t it on the boat with Steve and Peter? We still don’t know.

Maybe I’m being overly dramatic. Maybe all of you would have been more mentally equipped. Maybe all of you would have felt comfort knowing your team was trying to get rescue.

Now, I am overly paranoid and cautious with sampling trips. Never trust your team with packing gear and never trust the boat, especially an airboat, especially an expensive new airboat.