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## Climbing literal and figurative mountains Frontiers in Science visitor shares knowledge, advice

Mar 12, 2009

By Michael Hess

Lonnie Thompson has spent 42 months of his life at elevations above 18,000 feet. A world-renowned paleoclimatologist, he has conducted 54 expeditions to polar regions and tropical mountain ranges alike to reveal the world's climate history and document global warming. Earlier this week, he visited Ohio University to deliver a *Frontiers in Science* lecture, drop by a classroom, and interact with faculty, students and local schoolchildren. Here, journalism major Michael Hess, who covers research news for the Office of Research Communications, recaps part of the dialogue Thompson had while visiting the Athens campus.

**You have had as successful a career as any individual could hope for. Tell me about a setback that inspired you to reach higher.**

In 1974, we made our first trip to Peru on a leftover \$7,000 grant. Back then, there was funding only for exploration to the (North and South) Poles, but nowhere in between. We had a drill shipped from Antarctica and (arranged for) a Peruvian helicopter to get the equipment to our point. After several attempts, it was very clear that the helicopter couldn't get the drill anywhere near the glacier. It was our first attempt -- and we failed. We returned several years later and used photovoltaic cells carried by pack animals. Learn to expect failure. Learn to turn it into success.

**You've harvested ice cores from both polar regions and ice caps in the tropics. What do they reveal?**

Anything in the air is archived in a layer of snow each year. The years are very distinct in the tropics with a wet and dry season, a thaw and freeze. We can see when the first Soviet nuclear test occurred based on these layers.

**Why haven't other researchers rushed to the tropical glaciers as you and your team members have?**

The reason these records haven't been obtained is because of logistics. It keeps the competition down! We are packing six tons of equipment up a mountain and 10 tons, including four tons of ice, down.

**What is the most creative solution to an obstacle you've devised?**

In the Himalayas, we used a balloon to move freight in and out of the mountain range. It was made to be backpacked to the top and flown from the top of the mountain to the freezers at the bottom. With that came some inherent issues as well. Balloons are considered aircraft, and not only the balloon, but the pilot must have the proper permits. We ended up finding an Australian pilot licensed to fly in Tibet. We've used helicopters, snowmobiles, mules, donkeys, yaks and manpower. (The ice cores) eventually make it down the mountain in insulated boxes: six meters per box, 12 meters per yak, if necessary.

**You've obviously worked with people from many different cultures. Can you share your observations about interacting with such a diverse**



Lonnie Thompson shared his passion for the environment with Geography Instructor Chris Towe's meteorology class.

Photographer: Rick Fatica



A highlight of the day was Thompson's *Frontiers in Science* lecture.

Photographer: John Stoops

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**group?**

I've worked with many nationalities in the most extreme, inhospitable environments, and we are able to work together and accomplish a goal. It makes me optimistic about the future.

**Did you think when you were introduced to this field as a graduate student that you would still be involved in this research today?**

If someone had told me 33 years ago that I would still be working with ice cores today, I wouldn't have believed him. But in what other job do you get to travel the world, climb mountains and have someone else pay for it?

**If you were to advise President Barack Obama how to stem the tide of global warming, what would you tell him?**

I would tell him that in states like Ohio, we are in economic trouble because we are using the old technologies. We depend on them. If we want to thrive in the 21st century, we need to adapt and invest in solar and wind power that will create jobs and are healthy for the environment.

**What's your best advice for today's college students?**

No matter what your field, have the courage to challenge yourself and those around you. Be flexible to see things in new ways, and seize any opportunity that creates other options and opportunities. Be willing to work hard. Have a strong trust in your instincts and insights, and be persistent.

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warning: <http://www.ohio.edu/outlook/08-09/March/407.cfm>

Thompson's faculty page (following this link will take you outside Ohio

University's Web site): <http://cwc.osu.edu/contacts/bios/thompson.php>

OSU Ice Core Paleoclimatology Research Group (following this link will take you outside Ohio University's Web site): <http://bprc.osu.edu/Icecore>

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