



ALUMNI PROFILE

Greg Mountain, PhD '81

Gregory Mountain is a marine geologist and geophysicist at Rutgers University, where, after a long research career at Lamont, he was appointed a professor in the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences since 2003. Mountain is also an adjunct senior research scientist at Lamont; he became the president of the Alumni Board in 2012.

How would you describe your research? What does it tell us about the planet?

I'm interested in how sediment reaches the seafloor, how it moves downslope due to avalanching or along slope due to deep-sea currents and what the distribution of this sediment reveals about past changes in climate and sea level. To do this I use acoustic profiles at various scales of penetration into the seabed linked to sediment samples recovered by piston coring or by various types of drilling. Like much of what is done in the oceans, this research involves many different skills, few of which I possess to any great degree. Consequently, I try to stay on good terms with the many talented people I've had the good fortune to work with over the years.

What are some fond memories of the time you spent at Lamont?

One of the marvelous things about Lamont is the sense of community among its students, researchers and support staff, and the productivity that comes from this intersection of creative minds. While classroom experience provided some of what I learned as a student, equal parts came from people and ideas that I sought out, or that ambushed me with little active seeking on my part. A fond set of memories stems from freewheeling discussions in the car while commuting daily between Lamont and Manhattan with Walter Pitman, John LaBrecque, Steve Cande and John Ladd. Perhaps the only other place I learned more about science and life in those years was sitting around the lunch table in the Lamont cafeteria.

Pictured top left: Greg Mountain, PhD '81 and Alumni Association president

One event I'll never forget came when working through a special night in the Vax computer room. Bill Haxby was there as well, tweaking his recently developed algorithms to produce maps of sea surface height based on Seasat altimetry. This technique ultimately came to reveal seafloor topography even in places where ships and soundings have never been. I stopped what I was doing to help him pin to the wall a dozen tiled images as they rolled out of the plotter, and in a few minutes we stepped back in silence to view a panorama of the planet's seafloor shown one 3' x 4' sheet at a time. It was a private viewing, just Bill and me, with the flickers of dawn beginning to show outside. At the time I didn't realize that a new window into how Earth works had just been thrown wide open.

You've remained involved with Lamont since receiving your PhD. Why has this connection been important to you?

You don't have to search far at Lamont to find cutting-edge ideas in the Earth sciences. Staying in touch with the people doing this research, pursuing collaborative projects with them or simply attending seminars keeps my knowledge fresh and my interests moving forward. All of this stimulates my own research and helps keep my classroom lectures from getting stale and out of date. This doesn't mean I don't have similar opportunities at Rutgers. The difference is that during such a long association with Lamont, beginning as a student, I've gotten to know a wide range of like-minded people whom I can approach on a familiar, first-name basis.

You've recently stepped into the role of president of the Alumni Board; what excites you about this position?

I feel privileged to have come from an institution that continues to have such an enormous impact on Earth science. This influence is a result of research done by its current staff as well as by those it has trained and sent out across the globe. I'm excited by the prospect of helping to maintain the links formed during each of our respective times at Lamont—both intellectual and emotional—that now bind us across distance and time.

What do you hope to accomplish in your time as Alumni Board president?

I'll work hard to impress upon our current students, recent graduates and postdocs, that remaining connected to Lamont is a smart career activity. Research directions, job opportunities and personal growth usually advance in unpredictable ways; staying in touch with where you came from and with those traveling parallel paths to yours is a good way of remaining prepared for opportunities when they arise. I will also work hard with the Development Office serving alumni interests and reconnecting with more senior members who, in getting reacquainted with the Palisades campus and its people, may choose to give back in whatever way they see fit.