

GCE Field Safety

Field work is an essential component of GCE-LTER research, but can come with risks that are not necessarily covered in university safety training. Being aware of risks inherent in field work and taking simple precautions can reduce the chances of injury or illness, whether you are on Sapelo Island or elsewhere on the GA coast. This is particularly important if you are not used to vigorous outdoor activity.

Everyone: We encourage everyone to receive training in First Aid/CPR/AED and in Bystander Intervention before you go. Both are useful life skills.

Supervisors: you have an additional level of responsibility for ensuring the safety of your group. Please review this material with them and take appropriate steps to ensure their safety.

Physical and Biological risks

Know the risks. The most significant risks of coastal fieldwork are heat and humidity, lightning, swift currents, diseases carried by ticks and insects, and wildlife (alligators, snakes, oysters). You can twist your knee, or get stuck in the mud. Your vehicle or boat can break down and strand you in the field. Talk with your supervisor and co-workers about specific risks related to your particular field site and activities.

Take sensible precautions. Talk with your supervisor and co-workers about what type of precautions are appropriate for the specifics of your field site and activities. Make sure the numbers for your co-workers and the UGAMI office are entered into your phone. Check the weather before you go (there are lots of apps for this). Avoid boat work if there is a risk of lightning or high waves. Avoid physical labor outside at times that are excessively hot (in the summer you can work early and late in the day to avoid the hottest temperatures). Wear clothing that will protect you from sun and vegetation, and use sunscreen. Wear a personal flotation device when working in a boat. Always take plenty of water and a fully charged cell phone with you into the field. If you are allergic to insect stings, carry Benadryl with you. Use insect repellent and scan yourself for ticks daily if ticks are common at your field site. Avoid working alone if you are uncomfortable at a particular field site. Take a first aid kit with you if you are going to a particularly remote location. If you're on Sapelo Island, ask the office staff for a wallet card with phone numbers for first responders.

Trained medical care is a long way away. Even when you are at the UGAMI laboratory, trained medical care is at least an hour away. Reduce your risks: 1) Tell your coworkers if you have a medical condition and what they should do if you have trouble. 2) Pack a first aid kit, especially if you are allergic to insect stings or have other conditions that can be treated on site. 3) Learn first aid and CPR/AED. Although it's not required, this training is good to have any situation, especially field work. Be the person who knows what to do when something goes wrong. Courses are offered regularly through the Red Cross and other organizations.

Have a “float plan”. Whether you are going into the field by truck or boat, someone should always know where you are going and when you expect to return from the field. This person will be responsible for starting a search if you do not return on time and cannot be reached by phone.

Be aware of hunting season. Certain areas may be off limits during hunting season (September to January in Georgia). Specific information about hunting on Sapelo Island is available from DNR. At a minimum, you should wear a red vest (available from GCE technicians) when in areas where people might be hunting.

Don’t go if you don’t feel safe. Do not go into the field if you think weather conditions are unsafe, or if you are uncomfortable with the planned activities or field crew. Your supervisor is required to respect your concerns about safety.

What to do if someone is sick or injured. If you or someone with you has a serious injury or illness, call 911, whether on the mainland or Sapelo Island. If you have a poor phone signal, send a text with complete information (names, location, nature of problem) to a colleague and ask them to call 911 (you can often send a text when the phone signal is too weak for a call).

If you are on Sapelo Island, you can also call first responders (look for a phone list in housing or office). UGAMI has an automated external defibrillator (AED) on the first floor of the lab next to the restrooms.

If the injury or illness is not life threatening, you can seek advice from your supervisor or co-workers about how to proceed. If you are a paid employee, treatment may be covered by workers’ compensation, but you will need to report the injury (usually within 24 h) to ensure coverage.

Facilities. Most of our field sites lack access to restrooms or potable water. Assume that you won’t have access and plan accordingly.

Harassment

The remote nature of field work and field stations leaves participants vulnerable to harassment, either from colleagues or from members of the public. The risks are higher for women and BIPOC researchers.

Interactions with colleagues. The GCE code of conduct describes our expectations for inclusive conduct, and how to address violations. You do not have to tolerate harassment of any kind, and you should not ignore it if you see it happening to others—read the code of conduct for more information. In addition, you should take reasonable steps to reduce your risk. 1) Encourage your work group to review the code of conduct and have a discussion about appropriate behavior before going to the field site. 2) Avoid isolation with someone you don’t feel comfortable with. Your supervisor can adjust work tasks and housing assignments to support you. 3) Avoid alcohol and drugs. It is the nature of field stations that social interaction occurs on site after hours, but you are both more vulnerable and more likely to commit an offense if inebriated.

Interactions with the public. The best way to minimize risks from members of the public is to do field work in groups rather than alone. Interactions with the public are most likely when working on or near private property, or when working during hunting season. You can reduce your risks of negative interactions. 1) Dress like a researcher—wear clothing or carry gear with your university’s name on it. 2) Introduce yourself and your purpose to anyone who might be suspicious. 3) Be prepared to share study information or credentials, including a photo ID from your university. If you are collecting any organisms, you must carry a copy of your DNR collecting permit. Have an ‘elevator speech’ prepared about you and your research. Have written documentation of permission if you are on private property. 4) If you’re working in the same area repeatedly, spend some time getting to know key community members to build relationships. 5) Leave if you are afraid or asked to leave. The work can be rescheduled later under safer conditions.

Respect goes both ways. GCE researchers should also be aware that Sapelo Island is home to a historic Gullah-Geechee community in Hog Hammock. Be respectful of the local culture and the people who call Sapelo Island their home.

Protect each other. Bystanders have an important role to play in protecting victims of harassment and in discouraging perpetrators from engaging in inappropriate behavior. You can take a course in Bystander Intervention through your university. At a minimum, learn about the five D’s of bystander intervention (<https://www.ihollaback.org/bystander-resources/>): distract, delegate, document, delay, direct.

Distract: interrupt the interaction with a random question or action, spill your drink, whatever will derail the negative interaction.

Delegate: get help from someone who can intervene. This can be a supervisor, or peers.

Document: if someone is helping the victim, and you are safe in doing so, record the incident. Always ask the victim what they want to do with the recording.

Delay: if the incident is already over, ask the victim if they are OK and if you can help them.

Direct: if you feel safe doing so, directly confront the perpetrator by telling them that their behavior is inappropriate.

In addition, if you observe any inappropriate behavior, please report it as described in the GCE code of conduct. Note that employees of most universities are required by law to report some types of harassment.

Updated 4/4/2022