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Kenya Researcher Brings New Dimension to USF St. Petersburg Program of Distinction

St. Petersburg Fla - May 2, 2003

Comming from America's breadbasket in the fertile-soiled Midwest, conducting research on the drought-plagued farmlands of Kenya was an eye-opening experience for Thomas Smucker. Smucker, who joins USF St. Petersburg's faculty in the fall, has spent his recent years studying land reform in Africa.

"My first contact with Africa was through my work with Oxfam America, a non-governmental organization based out of Boston," said Smucker. "I worked on the 1992 drought response program in southern Africa. It was one of the most devastating droughts in living memory, yet one that saw some notable successes in terms of effective response. That experience led to a research interest in understanding rural development problems, and particularly how rural communities adapt in the wake of sudden changes in their livelihood systems, be they political, economic, or environmental in origin. There are often intersections of social and environmental change that create new opportunities and constraints," said Smucker.

Having received Fulbright and National Science Foundation funding to carry out a study on Kenya's land reform program and its impact on agro-pastoral land use, Smucker had the opportunity to interact with economists, anthropologists, and ecologists whose work was driven by similar concerns, but whose approaches were quite dissimilar.

"Working in Kenya has been a wonderful experience," said Smucker who is fluent in French, Swahili and Kikuyu. He hopes to continue his research into human dimensions of land use and drought-coping strategies while also getting involved in Florida's changing geography and environmental issues. "I am particularly pleased about the prospect of contributing to the growing interest in environmental policy and the human dimensions of environmental change within geography and the new Environmental Science, Policy and Geography Program of Distinction the university has established," said Smucker.

"USF St. Petersburg is perfectly located for the development of this interdisciplinary program," said Gary A. Olson, interim associate vice president for Academic Affairs. "Dr. Smucker will be a valuable addition to our faculty. Graduates of this ground-breaking program are sure to become the movers and shakers of the environmental science, human geography, and environmental planning and policy fields."

Preparing students to effectively deal with the environmental problems caused by human political, economic, or cultural decision-making is the challenge facing the faculty members of this program. "The record of excellence of faculty in the Geography Department was a major factor in my selection of USF St. Petersburg," said Smucker. "With the growth of the university community that is expected in the coming years, there is great potential for innovation in the university's approach to research and teaching. I look forward to furthering my own research on land tenure systems and resource management in eastern Kenya while also exploring new areas of research and potential collaboration with my new colleagues."

Smucker received his bachelor's degree in international relations and French from Cornell College. He has two master's degrees, in geography and developmental studies, both from Ohio University. His doctorate is in geography from Michigan State University where he has taught various courses within the Department of Geography.

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