

Back from Peru

Nov. 5, 2018

Alumni update – Ben Cooper ('16) experienced a new way of life in Peru as a Peace Corps volunteer

Ben's back.

Ben Cooper, a 2016 environmental engineering graduate, has returned from Peru and his two-year assignment as a sanitation and water engineer with the Peace Corps. He left in late April 2016 and returned to the U.S. in June grateful for his lessons shared and learned. (See [Headed to Peru](#) from 2016.)



Cooper said the favorite part of his daily experience was living a different culture.

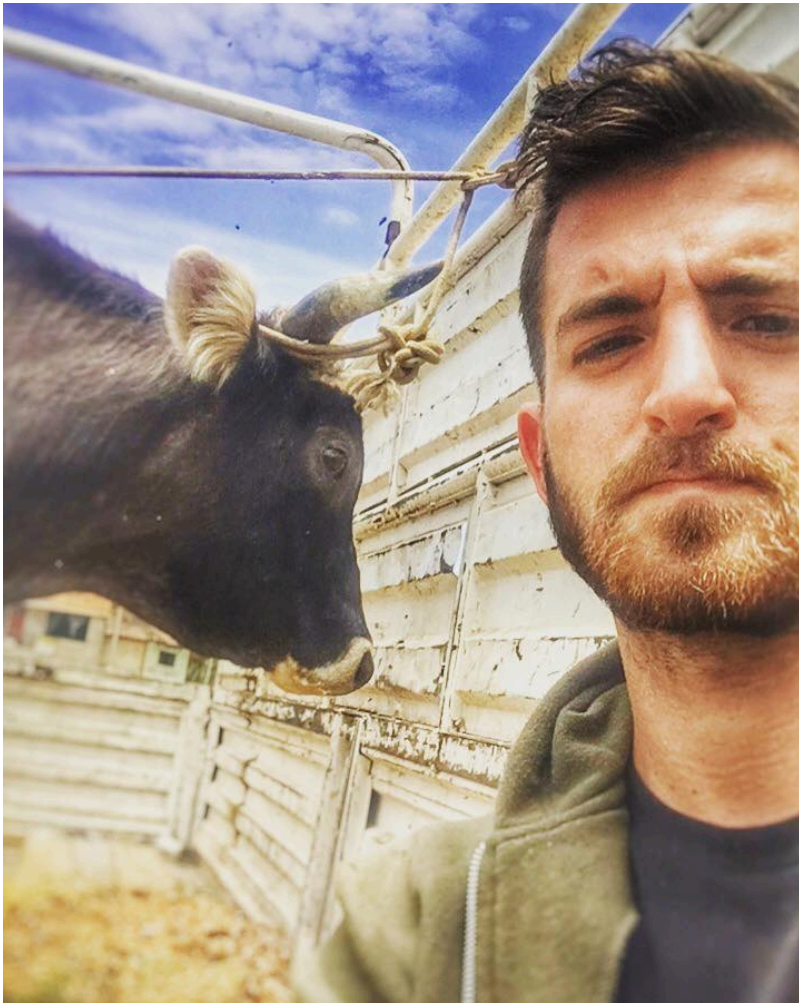
“So much of the Peace Corps' message is centered not just in the sustainable development aspect but mostly in the intercultural exchange,” Cooper said. “Being in such a small rural village for two years really gives you a chance to learn a whole new way of life, and I would say that was the best part about serving in the Peace Corps.

“From learning a new language, trying new foods -- such as guinea pig -- or celebrating local holidays, it really pushes you outside your comfort zone and teaches you a lot. Not to mention getting to share my story with locals and teach them about what life is like here in the United States.”

Cooper finished his undergraduate degree in environmental engineering in the spring of 2016 and departed for Peru immediately to train with the Peace Corps as a sanitation and water engineer. During the next three months, the focus was on intense language skills in Spanish and technical training.

“I knew next to no Spanish when I arrived in Peru,” he said, “but with the help of my host family and Peace Corps

language instructors, I was able to have a functional amount of Spanish by the end of my training. I built off of it during the next 24 months in my community.



"In the summer of 2016, I was assigned to Venecia, a small mountain village high in the Andes. Conditions were very rural. The city closest to us was a three-hour drive through a mountain pass. Communications in and out were limited.

"I spent my first three months studying my community, doing house visits, and getting to know the conditions before I decided I could best serve by helping to improve the availability of treated water, which I did by working with key community members to develop low-cost chlorination systems."

Cooper said materials and funding were minimal.

"Since we lived so rurally, I had to either use what we had or go to the city to bring in materials we were missing," he explained. "The chlorination systems we were building were made from repurposed plastics and modeled from larger systems; large buckets from hardware stores to hold the mother solution, IV tubing from our local health post to regulate the flow rate, other odds and ends that went toward keeping it simple but effective."

Cooper said once the system was installed, he spent a lot of time teaching the individuals who will be maintaining the system.

"Getting any kind of funding for a project didn't come easy," he continued. "Luckily I was able to work with my community to write a grant, which led to funding that we used to implement a water treatment system for 280 families. I would say that was my largest victory during my service."

Back from Peru

Published on College of Engineering, Michigan State University (<https://www.egr.msu.edu>)

Cooper said that outside of the technical skills he gained, learning how to live a more humble life is the most valuable lesson he took away from his time in Peru.

"The people of Venecia live simple farm lives, typically in adobe brick homes. Conditions are usually cold and/or wet. But, no matter what was happening, I was always welcomed and offered a plate of food by my neighbors. They were always interested in just talking to me and hearing my perspective on what was going on and what I was working on."



Before the Peace Corps, Cooper added, he thought the latest iPhone was a necessity – “but now I feel it can be as simple as running water in your home.”

Cooper, who is from Wyandotte, returned to the U.S. in June and spent the summer catching up with his family and friends. He recently moved to Chicago and has joined Arcadis as an environmental engineer.

MSU and the Peace Corps

MSU is ranked No. 17 among large schools on the agency’s 2018 Top Volunteer-Producing Colleges and Universities list. There are almost 50 Spartans currently volunteering worldwide. MSUToday: [MSU among top volunteer producers in 2018](#)

Related Website: [Communications contact: Patricia Mroczek](#)

Source URL: <https://www.egr.msu.edu/news/2018/11/05/back-peru>