

THE BIRDS IN MY VILLAGE TWEET—AND SO DO I

My tale as a Peace Corps Volunteer using Twitter

by Wendy Lee

For the first three months of my time at post in Cameroon, I was reluctant to get Internet that would allow 24-hour a day access to the rest of the world. I thought I wouldn't be "roughing it" enough and that the Internet would somehow take away from the experience. However, once I had access, I discovered the realm of social media as an extremely useful tool for me as a volunteer. Besides the blog that I have been keeping since before my service, I was introduced to Twitter several months ago, as another way to share my experiences with the world.

When someone described Twitter to me as "the status part of the Facebook," I thought, "Why in the world would I want that?" I do not care what people are eating for lunch nor how they hate doing laundry (with a washing machine). Especially since I have to do mine by hand without running water! However, despite the apprehension, I wanted to see firsthand what the hype was about, so I joined. I quickly learned that besides the daily happenings of individual lives, the world of Twitter contains a wealth of information. People are constantly posting articles of interest and the "Retweet" feature makes sharing that much easier.

I was hooked. Going from without Internet to being on Twitter, I faced information overload, but a very positive kind. Besides other Peace Corps Volunteers who also "tweet", I became connected literally with people from all over the world who may share my interest in international development, language, culture, etc. Similarly, people took an interest to my 140-character anecdotes of life as a Peace Corps volunteer in Cameroon. And with that, I was carrying out Goal

Three of the Peace Corps on a constant basis, and not only with Americans, but with the world.

When I began raising funds for my Books For Cameroon project, I used Twitter to gain people's attention, to direct them to my blog and Facebook for more information, and to solicit advice on how to better execute the project. Through Twitter and other social media channels, I was able to reach a broad range of people that I would not have been able to reach via traditional means.

Technology advancement has put development at an interesting crossroads. At my house in a small

village of West Cameroon, where I have to walk 30 minutes on a dirt road to just buy eggs, I am equipped with Internet from Camtel (Cameroon Telecommunication). The connection isn't fantastic; I forget what it's like to open YouTube and stream videos. However, I am able to conduct all basic functions on the Internet: e-mail, chat, surf the Web and, when I am lucky, I can Skype!

The Internet can temporarily transport me to another place, and just for a moment, I sometimes forget where I am. That is, until I need to go use the bathroom which, my friends, is quite literally, a hole in the ground.



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Wendy Lee

**Peace Corps
Volunteer Wendy Lee
at her keyboard.**

Or, when the power goes out. Or, when I am doing anything requiring water. Then, I am brought back to reality. Even all these months later, I am still constantly amazed at this dichotomy.

If there is one thing I have learned as a Peace Corps Volunteer, it's that each volunteer, even within the same country, has vastly different experiences. There isn't a rubric that lays out a single, exemplary way

to be a volunteer. For me, I found success in integrating the Internet into my village life and indulging in information sharing through tools like Twitter. It may not be for everyone and I can absolutely sympathize with volunteers who wish to remain offline—after all this may be the only two years of our lives where we can be out of reach and no one will give us a hard time. That's the beauty of Peace Corps: each

volunteer is free to shape his/her own experiences and find the balance. Having the Internet and Twitter does not necessarily add or take away from a volunteer's experience; it simply creates a different one.

Wendy Lee is a Small Business Development Peace Corps Volunteer currently serving in Cameroon. You can follow her on Twitter at www.twitter.com/WendyLee86.

BOOKS FOR CAMEROON

As a Small Enterprise Development Volunteer, I teach business classes and advise local entrepreneurs. So how did I end up with a secondary project that is bringing over 30 libraries to Cameroon? Sometimes, I am still not sure. Building libraries was never my intention, let alone over 30 of them.

Early in my service I taught English at a local school and realized the importance of books to young Cameroonians. My simple thought of, "Hmm, they should have some books" was transformed when I contacted Books For Africa, who said they could send a 40ft container of 20,000 books—but I had to take all of them. To which I responded, "sure." And voilà, I found myself building all these libraries.

Along the way, I keep thinking something will go horribly wrong and this project will not happen. But thus far, I am pleasantly surprised. The relatively non-problematic process could not have happened without the advent of new technology. Quite simply, it would have been impossible to raise \$11,500 without my incessant begging to strangers for money via email, Facebook, Twitter, Peace Corps Connect, and other social media outlets.

I want to take this opportunity to thank all the RPCVs, and many supportive individuals who contributed to this project in one way or another. To make sure your contribution is not futile, I am updating our progress each step of the way on the project's Facebook page <http://facebook.com/booksforcameroon>. Follow us and keep on sending your support!