



SMITHSONIAN TROPICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE  
INSTITUTO SMITHSONIAN DE INVESTIGACIONES TROPICALES

***Frequently Asked Questions***

***What is STRI?***

The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) is a unit of the Smithsonian Institution based in Panama. Building on more than 100 years of research, STRI is dedicated to understanding the past, present and future of biological diversity in the tropics. STRI has a scientific staff of 30 scientists and hosts 1500 visitors each year. Please see [http://www.stri.si.edu/english/about\\_stri/index.php](http://www.stri.si.edu/english/about_stri/index.php) for more information about the history and mission of STRI.

***What does a staff scientist do? How does a staff scientist spend his/her time?***

Staff scientist positions are 100% research, with modest requirements for service to the Smithsonian; e.g., reviewing proposals for internal fellowships and occasionally hosting official visitors. Scientists have complete freedom to develop independent research programs and have extensive opportunities for collaborative research to pursue their goals.

***Where do staff scientists do research?***

Staff scientists are based in the Republic of Panama, and are free to develop research programs anywhere in the tropics. Staff scientists also have leeway to do comparative studies between tropical and temperate regions, and to complete pre-existing studies outside the tropics, although the bulk of their research is expected to be focused in the tropics.

***What technician and administrative support is available to staff scientists?***

Support varies with area of research and is negotiated with the Director. Generally staff scientists receive a full-time technician, and STRI provides institutional support for other administrative functions (accounting, procurement, etc.).

***What facilities, vehicles, boats, etc. are available to staff scientists?***

STRI has 14 research facilities in Panama, including the Tupper Research and Conference Center, Naos Molecular labs, Gamboa lab, Barro Colorado Island (BCI), Agua Salud, Galeta, Bocas del Toro, Rancheria Island, and Fortuna. Staff scientists receive office and laboratory space. We have a fleet of vehicles which are available to staff scientists for field expeditions. Small boats are also available from the Naos, Galeta, Bocas del Toro, and BCI facilities for research use. Daily boat transportation to BCI is provided from Gamboa. Staff scientists have access to multi-user molecular labs, chemistry labs, microscopes, and a multitude of other scientific equipment.

***What laboratory startup funds and other internal research funds are offered to staff scientists?***

Laboratory startup funds vary with area of research, but in general are far lower than most Research I universities. However, unlike at universities, staff scientists also receive an annual research allowance, research technician support, and an annual travel allowance, which continues throughout their careers at STRI. Staff scientists may also apply for a variety of internal Smithsonian or STRI research grants, including an annual call for research instrumentation.

***Where can staff scientists apply for external funding? Can they apply to NSF? NASA? DOE? NASA? NOAA? NIH? USDA?***

All staff scientists may apply to the US National Science Foundation (NSF) as co-Principal Investigators, in collaboration with PIs from other institutions. Staff scientists whose salary lines are not directly funded by the federal government (e.g., the forest microbial ecology position, which is funded by a grant from the Simons foundation) are eligible to apply to NSF as lead Principal Investigators, and NSF also allows federal scientists to apply as PIs for certain programs. All staff scientists are eligible to apply for grants from the US Department of Energy (DOE), NASA, NOAA, NIH, USDA, and USAID as lead PIs. Staff scientists are also eligible to apply for a grants from many private foundations.

***What funds are available to support postdocs working with staff scientists?***

The Smithsonian Institution has a number of competitive Postdoctoral Fellowship opportunities, including one to two year Smithsonian Fellowships and the STRI three-year Tupper fellowship. These fellowships are awarded at our annual fellowship meeting in which all staff scientists participate and vote. Other Smithsonian postdoctoral fellowships include ForestGeo, MarineGeo, and Biogenomics. For more information on Smithsonian fellowships see <https://www.smithsonianofi.com/fellowship-opportunities/>. Individual scientists can also obtain grants to support postdoctoral fellows, and postdoctoral fellows can bring their own grants or fellowship funding to STRI (e.g., Fulbright, Marie Curie).

***Can staff scientists advise graduate students?***

Yes, staff scientists can advise graduate students and regularly serve on Ph.D and Masters committees. However, STRI is not a degree-granting institution, so typically students' major advisors are at other institutions. Staff scientists can hold adjunct positions at universities.

***What salaries and benefits are offered to staff scientists?***

Salaries are commensurate with experience, and are aligned with the General Schedule scale of US federal government positions, which aims to recognize merit, equity, and earned achievement. Staff scientists who are at career stages roughly equivalent to assistant professor, associate professor, and full professor at US universities, are associated with GS grades 13, 14, 15, and senior scale, respectively. Senior scientists who have been promoted beyond these scales – similar to prestigious endowed chairs at universities – have individualized compensation packages. Base GS salaries can be viewed on the website of the Office of Personnel and Management (<https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/pay-systems/general-schedule/>); these are supplemented by allowances adjusting for the cost of living in Panama, which can be as high as 30% of base salary. Staff scientists also receive a comprehensive set of benefits, including an educational allowance for the cost of private schools for dependent children, in accordance with policies of the US Department of State.

***How are staff scientists evaluated, and promoted?***

All Smithsonian employees prepare annual performance plans for the coming year, and receive evaluations of their accomplishments and professional service to STRI, the Smithsonian and the broader professional community. Categories under which all staff scientists are evaluated include research accomplishments, publications, service to STRI, and fund raising efforts, including helping to host visiting donors to STRI. Within-grade step increases are awarded based on satisfactory reviews and a prescribed schedule of minimum waiting times. Salary levels at any given grade and step are periodically adjusted for cost of living increases. Staff scientists are also

reviewed every three, five or seven years (depending on their grade) by a committee of external scientists, who can recommend staff scientists for promotion to the next grade.

***Do staff scientists pay income taxes in Panama?***

Acknowledging the importance of its research mission, the Panamanian government declared STRI to be an International Mission in 1985. Hence, internationally recruited STRI staff scientists do not pay income taxes in Panama due to their visa status.

***What language(s) do staff scientists need to be able to speak to do their jobs and to live in Panama?***

Staff scientists are expected to be able to communicate in English (including publishing in English). The national language of Panama is Spanish, and most STRI support staff are Panamanian. STRI is a bilingual community with most staff able to communicate in both English and Spanish. STRI provides assistance with Spanish classes for incoming staff scientists who wish to acquire or improve Spanish communication skills.

***Can my spouse or legal partner work in Panama?***

Depending on occupation, spouses / partners may or may not be able to work in Panama. Teachers will find abundant opportunities at local private schools, albeit at salaries that are considerably lower than in the US or Europe. Fields such as medicine and law are open only to Panamanians.

***What are schooling options for the dependent children of STRI staff scientists?***

STRI staff scientists are eligible for educational allowances to pay private school fees for dependent children from kindergarten through the end of high school. There are multiple international schools in Panama including schools offering curricula aligned with US, British, French, German, Japanese, or Chinese standards, and/or with International Baccalaureate standards.

***What are the options for health insurance for staff scientists?***

STRI staff scientists receive health benefits under the Blue Cross Blue Shield Federal Employee Program of the US government or a comparable benefit (depending on their nationality and the source of funds for their salary).

***Please email us at [striearch@si.edu](mailto:striearch@si.edu) if you have additional questions!***