

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training  
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program  
Fulbright Stories Project

**CATHERINE TINKER**

*Interviewed by: Fran Leskovar  
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**INTERVIEW**

*Q: Today is October 25, 2025 and this is a Fulbright interview. Can you say your name and just spell it for me, please?*

TINKER: Yes, I'm Catherine Tinker, C, A, T, H, E, R, I, N, E T, I, N, K, E, R.

*Q: Perfect, Can you tell me a little bit about it yourself? Where did you grow up? Can you talk a little bit about your college experience? What did you study?*

TINKER: I grew up in Iowa. I was born in Des Moines, educated in public schools, and graduated from St. Olaf College in Minnesota as a history major. Later on I earned a masters' degree in comparative literature at Occidental College in Los Angeles, a law degree at George Washington University, and a masters and doctoral degree in international law (LL.M. and J.S.D.) at New York University.

My family took long car trips to visit national parks, state capitals and historic sites across America, but it was not until college that I left the U.S. to study abroad. In the late 1960s during the Vietnam War, I was part of a student exchange semester at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand, followed a year later by a semester in Aix-en-Provence, France. This began a life-long interest in other cultures and languages and many trips abroad for research and travel during graduate and law school.

*Q: So did that experience, study abroad experience, international experience, you know, influence you to consider applying for Fulbright?*

TINKER: Oh, absolutely. My first Fulbright U.S. Scholar appointment was at the Universidad Nacional de San Martin (UNSAM) in Buenos Aires, Argentina in early 2020. Shortly after arriving, however, the world shut down for the COVID pandemic and we were sent home but continued my research project. Later I applied again for a Fulbright, this time to Brazil, and arrived there in 2024 as a Fulbright U.S. Scholar at UFRGS in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

*Q: So what was your project?*

TINKER: I taught a semester course for masters and doctoral candidates in law on trends in public international law, with a focus at the time on climate change law and policy. This was a year before Brazil hosted the Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement climate treaties. I also proposed expanded research based on earlier work on the Guarani Aquifer Accord, a regional treaty. I wanted to write a book about this treaty governing a transboundary aquifer and the groundwater in it that is shared by four countries: Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay. This treaty is based on the UN International Law Commission Draft Articles on Transboundary Aquifers, and it is the first regional treaty to use that model proposal. The Guarani Aquifer System is unique, a transboundary confined aquifer, which means in international law one that is not connected to surface waters and cannot be replenished when it rains. Thus legal principles of precaution, no-harm and cooperation are key to preserving the aquifer and future supplies of water. The treaty's objective is to protect the groundwater for use by present and future generations, share joint scientific research and data, and avoid environmental harm and conflicts over water. The basic water laws in the four countries inform their interpretations of the treaty language, as well as relevant international law principles. I wanted to develop a special research focus on the southernmost state of Brazil, Rio Grande do Sul, and UFRGS law school, where I taught during my Fulbright visit, and a comparative approach with the other three Guarani Aquifer countries.

*Q: So what does Fulbright mean to you? How would you define Fulbright? And I know we've referenced a lot of the sort of importance of Fulbright. But I'm curious what the Fulbright program means to you?*

TINKER: It was not until my Fulbright U.S. Scholar awards in Argentina in 2020 and in Brazil in 2024 that I felt fully integrated into the academic and cultural life of my host countries, with friendships and professional collaborations that continue to today. In major part thanks to the Fulbright program, I was able to conduct field research in South America for the book I am now writing with the encouragement and support of Seton Hall University.

At the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) Law School in Porto Alegre, Brazil, I had some initial collaboration with professors and students in a study group on the Guarani Aquifer. However, upon my arrival at UFRGS law school as a Fulbright U.S. Scholar for teaching and research, many more doors opened to me. I was able to arrange visits to locations using the water from the Guarani Aquifer and interview other academics, national government officials, diplomats, state and municipal water managers and other people who use and manage the groundwater from Guarani, a deep transboundary confined aquifer on which cities and rural areas in Brazil and the other three countries depend. My research included some travel within the state of Rio Grande do Sul outside the capital city to border areas with Uruguay, Argentina and Paraguay to understand how rural areas use the Guarani Aquifer System for irrigation of crops as well as municipal drinking water. The access as a Fulbrighter and the extended time spent in the region made all the difference.

*Q: So that leads me to a question, what is the value of Fulbright program for American diplomacy, American national security, American businesses. What is the contribution that Fulbright scholars like you contribute in that sphere?*

TINKER: I see the added benefit of the Fulbright program in so many ways that I have experienced directly in building strong relationships, understanding and peace between our country and others around the world. I support the continuation and growth of the Fulbright program as important for U.S. national interests and security and for the educational, cultural and linguistic benefits of international cooperation.

The book I am writing on fresh water resources and international law with the focus on the Guarani Aquifer Accord will provide insight into a good model of regional cooperation and the relationship of national, subnational and international law on transboundary groundwater in this unique aquifer system in South America. What happens there could be helpful elsewhere. Also I see a benefit for the United States in the stability and prosperity of the region, countries long allies and active in international affairs, with support for continuing partnerships in the future.

Thanks to the Fulbright Commission Brazil's in-country travel grant, I presented the keynote address at a symposium on international environmental law at the Federal University law school in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. I also travelled to a groundwater conference in São Paulo and to Brasilia, where I was received both at the U.S. Embassy and at the Foreign Ministry of Brazil to discuss my research.

Thanks also to the Fulbright regional travel grant program administered by the Fulbright Commission in Uruguay, I was able to visit Argentina and Uruguay in 2024 for more research and interviews with leading law professors and diplomats. For example, I met the Chief Judge of the Supreme Court of Argentina, the head of water issues in the Federal agency in Buenos Aires, and a senior international law professor at University of Buenos Aires who was also in the Foreign Ministry of Argentina. I also met a senior law professor at UDELAR who is in the Foreign Ministry of Uruguay and chaired a regional conference on the Escazu Agreement on public access to information and participation, and individuals representing UNESCO-IHP for Latin America and the Caribbean and a groundwater scientific research and think tank organization in Montevideo. Time ran out before I could make a similar visit to Paraguay, but I was able to meet a representative of this country who is involved in the Guarani Aquifer Accord and technical research on groundwater at the Brazilian Groundwater Association conference in São Paulo. This is in addition to all the many others I met and interviewed connected in different ways to the Guarani Aquifer.

Some resilience was necessary during my Fulbright visit due to a natural disaster. Vital assistance and support was provided by the Fulbright Commission Brazil when I had to evacuate during the massive floods in Rio Grande do Sul that devastated over 90% of the state and closed the international airport for over 6 months. During the disaster and displacement, my graduate students at UFRGS law school and I collected their final research papers and policy suggestions from our seminar as an open access Kindle book

contribution to the UN climate conference hosted by Brazil in December, 2025.\* [photo of book cover; title and link below]. In this way we extended our work together online while the university remained closed due to the floods, creating a positive and on-going connection among the group. With the continued help of the Fulbright Commission Brazil, I was able to complete my project conducting research and interviews with Federal government officials and academics in Brasilia and collaborating with a Brazilian scholar on a poster presentation for a meeting of the Brazilian Groundwater Association in August 2024.

*Q: And so what are some of the lessons learned for anyone who's considering Fulbright program?*

TINKER: First, do your homework and research what different countries are prioritizing for Fulbright applicants. Be open to new experiences and try something beyond what you have done before to learn more about the world and yourself! Then read widely and study some language skills to help you when you arrive and meet your host.

Think about our country's history and diplomacy and brush up on civics. People outside the U.S. want to know more about us, and will ask, so be prepared and open to discussion. Listen! Reach out and do not be afraid to ask questions. Be interested in the answers and make friends. Explain your interests and ask for help.

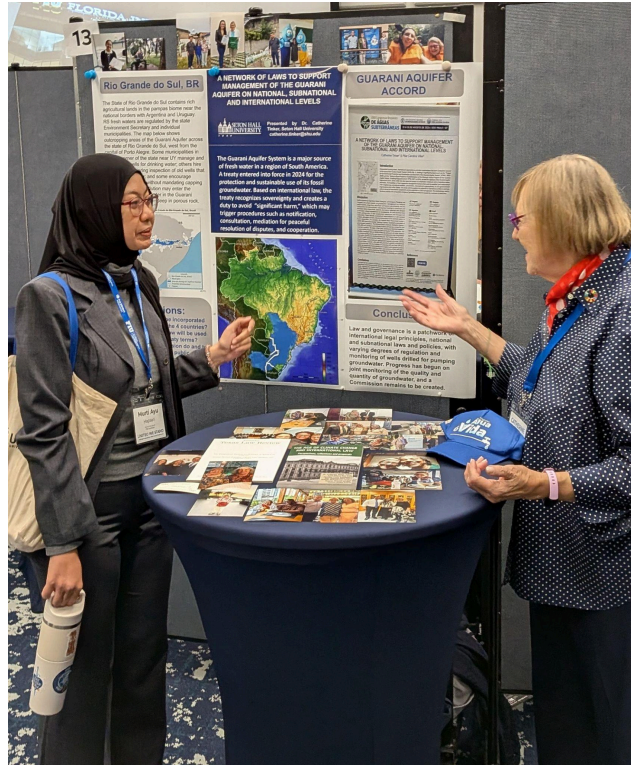
After returning from a Fulbright award, you may have learned something about yourself and your future career choices or moves, and made contacts who can help in job searches or discovering new opportunities. There are so many good consequences of completing the Fulbright program, including professional growth and invitations to speak about our research and experiences abroad. In different conferences, classes and other settings, our stories usually lead to interesting dialogues with our neighbors, friends and co-workers back home.

I have students in the U.S. who want to learn more about the Fulbright program when I tell them about mine. One of my former students in Brazil who is now a Federal university law professor has just been offered a Fulbright grant for advanced research at a U.S. law school, and I was happy to offer her support during her application process. So you too can help someone else who is interested in a Fulbright experience themselves.

Colleagues and friends from my Fulbright experiences continue to visit in the U.S. and remain in contact, with plans for future shared research, publications and guest lectures, in my case in Brazil and Argentina and elsewhere. This is no doubt true for most of us.

Another benefit is joining the local chapter of the Fulbright Association, as I have in New York City, and meeting interesting people with their own stories. Fulbright U.S. Scholars meet and talk with current graduate and law students from different countries now in the U.S. on Fulbright grants and further bonds may form that can lead to joint projects, publications, projects, and exchanges as well as friendships.

Other Fulbright events also create a sense of community. For example, during the FACON-25 conference at Florida International University in September, 2025, I presented a poster based on my Fulbright research in Brazil and will attend an international water law conference at the University of Oslo in June, 2026, with another poster presentation on the Guarani Aquifer treaty based on my Fulbright experience.



**Indonesian student discussing Guarani Aquifer poster with Catherine Tinker, FACON2025**



**Fulbright Commission directors from Brazil, Spain, Mexico at poster, FACON2025**

*Q: What are some of the lessons learning would like to share with the future generations?*

TINKER: No doubt the conversations at home and abroad and presentations at these conferences and meetings will be reflected in what I am writing, and will create greater bridges for understanding, trust and good will. In addition, learning about others, especially those who are not exactly like us, makes life more interesting and rich and can lead to lifelong learning. All of society benefits.

Through awareness of others and our shared humanity, we can make the world safer for present and future generations. In the case of aquifers and groundwater, the hope for future generations is to find a healthy planet and access to sufficient clean, safe fresh water for multiple, reasonable, equitable and sustainable use for all.

*End of interview*

\* ***The Age of Climate Change and International Law: Perspectives, Reflections and Proposals*** (September, 2024). ISBN-10 6501133572; ISBN-13 978-6501133577. In English.

[https://www.amazon.com/Age-Climate-Change-International-Law-ebook/dp/B0DFYW41ZX/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?crid=1PTVSL4XPOET3&dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.OSVeUWwxD9ycmL3bTymi6LM2zfuRwYNYDwhkBvPXlec.ZSjsWRmEkGY3SzfZ8xZfHU6yvWerUcdiwBTSVZdN-Iw&dib\\_tag=se&keywords=dr.+catherine+tinker&qid=1777743924&s=books&sprefix=dr.+catherine+tinker%2Cstripbooks%2C177&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/Age-Climate-Change-International-Law-ebook/dp/B0DFYW41ZX/ref=sr_1_1?crid=1PTVSL4XPOET3&dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.OSVeUWwxD9ycmL3bTymi6LM2zfuRwYNYDwhkBvPXlec.ZSjsWRmEkGY3SzfZ8xZfHU6yvWerUcdiwBTSVZdN-Iw&dib_tag=se&keywords=dr.+catherine+tinker&qid=1777743924&s=books&sprefix=dr.+catherine+tinker%2Cstripbooks%2C177&sr=1-1)

