Lisa Cliggett (left), Ruth Mwisika, a village research assistant, her husband and children, Boston University graduate student Nicole Hays (second from right), and Florence Moyo, Zambian senior research assistant on the project.

Ask Lisa Cliggett where home is and she may say, “Which one?” There’s Lexington, and then there’s Zambia, where the UK assistant professor of anthropology has conducted research, usually in four- to six-month stints, since 1992.

“I feel very much like Zambia is a second home to me,” Cliggett says. “I love Kentucky and my life here. But when I’m out in the village chatting with someone, having a very comfortable, personal exchange, I feel like there’s nowhere else I want to be.”

From March through July this year, Cliggett’s address was Southern Province, Zambia. The accommodations: a camp of tents amid the mud-bricked, thatched-roofed houses of a family’s rented homestead. Waking up on cold winter mornings to the herds of goats, pigs, chickens, and cows moving through camp, Cliggett was in her element.

This summer marked her sixth research trip to Zambia, but her first time extensively focusing on issues of migration and environmental change. In their urgency to stake out a claim on the land and a place where they can survive in the midst of economic
and ecological upheaval, Zambians have given their country one of the highest deforestation rates in the world.

With that in mind, Cliggett hopes her project can eventually help inform policy-makers and foster the development of local institutions to support tenure security, thereby reducing deforestation in the country. She has support through 2005 from a $200,000 National Science Foundation grant to study how the migration and farming practices of the Gwembe Tonga people are transforming Zambia’s landscape.

Cliggett’s work documents a migration that began in 1958, when the Kariba Dam was constructed on the Zambezi River to create a hydroelectric power station. The dam flooded the whole river valley, forcing more than 57,000 Tonga people to relocate.

“In 1958, the people were relocated to areas that couldn’t support them in the long term,” Cliggett explains. “So for the past 50 years, there have been problems caused by the dam and relocation. In that time, in an attempt to survive, many of these people have migrated out of the areas to which they were resettled by the government.”

Cliggett is studying those who voluntarily migrated from the Gwembe Valley in search of more productive, open frontier lands; she estimates that in the past 20 years, about 1,000 Gwembe Tonga people have migrated out of the valley. Living amid migrant and indigenous families in the frontier, Cliggett visited gardens and agricultural plots, and asked residents about the methods used to clear the new lands.

“A second major question we’re exploring is tenure security. Do these people feel secure in their rights to the land? We find that if they don’t feel secure, they’re more likely to clear the forest very quickly—the idea being that in doing so they show that they have a right to that land.”

Cliggett developed the basis of the project in 2001, when she led a group of UK undergraduate students to Zambia to conduct exploratory field research. This past summer, as part of a field school Cliggett was leading in Zambia, three anthropology graduate students from the United States—including UK grad student Brooke Wyssmann—assisted Cliggett in collecting data.

Though the project is just under way, Cliggett’s preliminary findings suggest that younger generations and migrants—as opposed to older, indigenous residents—are more likely to feel insecure in their land rights. So it is these more insecure groups who tend to deforest most rapidly.

Cliggett is careful to point out that, as an anthropologist, she’s not an interventionist in Zambia’s unfolding story. “I’m not there to say, ‘You need to plant differently, or you need to be marking your land,’” Cliggett explains. “But I am doing research that informs policy-makers.”

That distinction is important to Cliggett, who says she’s always wanted to help people. “Not in that naive, ‘I’m going to save the world’ way. But just by recognizing that through communication, people’s lives can be helped or better appreciated.”

Cliggett was drawn to anthropology as a sophomore at Connecticut College because it resonated with that philosophy. After college, she participated in a medical anthropology project on maternal and child health in Haiti for a year. She then went on to pursue a Ph.D. in anthropology at Indiana University.

“It was a mind-opening experience to find a discipline that looked at the world in a way that was very familiar to me, that said you need to understand other people and other places and not simply judge them by your standards.”

Since coming to UK in 1999, Cliggett has tried to share that same message with her own students. In her classes, she often points out parallels between situations in Africa and those closer to home.

“I love that I can talk about a very different place but can still say, ‘You know about this because in Eastern Kentucky there’s also a problem of absentee landowners or extraction of resources.’ And the students get it,” she says. “It makes Africa not so exotic and far away.”

Cliggett’s current work on migration and environmental change builds on her past work in Zambia, which addressed support systems for the elderly, labor, and chronic illness and migration. She next plans to examine issues of food security, growth, and nutrition in Zambia with UK anthropology colleague Deb Crooks. Cliggett says she hopes to return to Zambia summer after summer, for the remainder of her career.

After all, it is her second home. “Even when I get out of bed here in the morning, Zambia is compelling and tangible as my first cup of coffee.”