Dr Roderick Duncan says he is an economist who doesn’t care about money!

What this Bathurst researcher is interested in is the environment, politics, demography and biology. “I’m as broad-minded an economist as you can get,” says Rod, an economics lecturer with the School of Marketing and Management and associate leader of the Institute’s Economics and Regional Development group. “I do research on Papua New Guinea; on women and education and marriage; on global climate modelling; on environmental and resource economics….I think as an economist you have a bag of tricks that you apply to different problems.”

Rod, 39, and his wife Colette Keen (who tutors in the School of Communications at CSU and teaches at Western TAFE) came back to Australia after living in America four years ago to raise their two sons, aged four and six years. With ‘three and a half degrees’ under his belt (one in law, one in economics, a PhD from Stanford University and a professional certificate as a solicitor in NSW) Rod taught at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, Georgia, for four years before accepting a position at CSU. Because of his interest in trade development in developing countries, Rod’s PhD involved looking at big contracts between first world country companies and developing countries where a large company would put millions of dollars into a third world country essentially on trust and goodwill, and then the developing country would dishonour or negate the contract.

“There were two reasons why this could happen,” says Rod. “One was politics i.e. a change in government or a revolution, or, two, there was good money in it. My research found it was the latter reason, that they grabbed ‘the goose that laid the golden egg’ as it were. No one ever seized a mine that was worthless or an industry that was losing money.” Rod further researched what happened afterwards and found that they “grabbed the goose that golden that laid the golden egg and promptly killed it.” “You have countries like what is now the Congo and Zambia who used to be the world’s largest copper producers,” says Rod. “But in the 1960s they seized their copper mines and are now no longer on the map. Basically they ran the industry into the ground and didn’t reinvest or continue to explore.”

Rod, who wants to help developing countries design institutions that work better, does a lot of work in the Pacific Island countries. His interests include in civil conflict and strife and how that is related to mineral resources. “In a lot of cases you can trace civil wars back to resource wealth,” he says. “This leads to a bigger question. Why is it that countries that are blessed with heaps of natural resources are such disasters? You would think that being given huge amounts of money is a good thing (like Nigeria) but in fact it has done no good at all.”

In September he presented a paper at a conference in Vanuatu, on political problems in the Pacific, about the political system in PNG and how it could be reformed to work better. “In the Pacific politics doesn’t work very well,” explains Rod. “There is what you call the ‘big man’ politics and his job is to reward or give jobs to all his relatives. He is very independent because there are no political parties as such. I think the cure is to strengthen political parties.” Another conference paper he presented in July in PNG was on agricultural productivity and politics in PNG. “What I found was that, in recent years at least, the election cycle has cycled with El Nino and have been bad years for agricultural output,” says Rod. “It may not be the politics, it might just be the weather.”

Rod is also currently re-writing a paper on climate modelling and global warming and the idea that by of actually subsidising the development of alternative energy we could in fact accelerate global warming. “If we created a car that ran on water, for example, we could actually worsen the problem because there would be a flood of cheap oil on the market,” he said. “We have to be careful on our policies on alternative fuels….inadvertently we could worsen the problem. It sounds perverse but that happens a lot in economics, good intentions but bad results.”

Rod is part of a research team (with Dr Jennifer Sappey and Dr Zelma Bone) working on an ERD funded project looking at aging and the provision of services in the central west. Rod, who will be looking at transport planning, says the group hope to put the project up as an ARC Linkage proposal. “The problem is that a lot of volunteer providers who do the services…here don’t do a lot of long term planning,” he says. What happens in 10 years time when a lot of the baby boomers come to the country and there is this burst in the
He and Assoc Prof Mark Morrison are working on a paper for the Australian Agricultural and Resource Economics Society conference next year on environmental offsets, where environmental offsets are being used to manage wetlands. "I'm hoping to get teaching buyout next year so I can have time to talk to ecologists and write another paper that includes both ecologists' ideas about equivalents, and the economists' ideas about how to set systems up," says Rod. However Rod is well aware that that may not be as simple as it sounds. "Interdisciplinary work is hard," he says. "It is easy to talk to another economist, you speak the same language and have a lot of the same assumptions, but if you talk to an ecologist, at some point, you don't even understand what the other person is saying so it is harder, and takes longer. I think we underestimate the difficulty." Nonetheless Rod is keen to work with ecologists and ILWS members from other disciplines and invites them to contact him to share ideas.