I landed in Accra in mid-July to see the impacts of a recent oil discovery on the people of Ghana. I had read a lot in magazines and newspapers about the potentials of this discovery but I had a suspicion that what the government told the press and what was actually going on was slightly detached. On paper Ghana is noted for its strong commitment to democracy, its relative peace and lack of corruption so I was interested to see how this played in to the recent find. Other African nations, with more authoritarian regimes, saw oil and mineral wealth enter directly into government coffers with nothing but suffering following for the citizenry. How could Ghana avoid this? In order to get to the heart of this matter I decided to look at local fisherman. Oil was discovered offshore. Fishing grounds have the potential of becoming contentious territory as oil companies explore and potentially sully the environment. Yet with proper measures in place this government could use the money to help the local fisherman and use potential fishing delays to educate the locals and strengthen the community as a result.

It was with these ideas floating around my head that I began my research into the issues during last spring quarter. Upon receiving my grant I enrolled in an independent study class with Professor Rice, where he helped guide my research into the history of Ghana, the history of oil discovery in Africa and the potential social and economic effects. During this time I was able to familiarize myself with the unique culture and government of Ghana. The first sub-Saharan nation to gain independence after colonialism also has a reputation for strong democracy. Ghana also, was no stranger to mineral wealth. Gold, diamonds and cocoa fill the land and bring in billions to the nations. This intrigued me. I wondered how this has affected the people.

I delved further into the group of people I wanted to explore these issues with so I looked up traditional communities and fishing. The coast of Ghana is filled with fishing communities. They almost exclusively fish in traditional, hand build wooden canoes, with the addition of 40hp gas powered motors (for those who can afford them). These individuals live on the beach and make very little. They work in a way similar to their ancestors though, and these communities and the communities that rely on the fish to make a living are estimated begin one third to one half of the population of the nation. Upon learning more about the Ghanaian fishing community I wanted to know what they were hoping for from the oil discovery. Just as important, however, was what they feared.

During my research process I also began making contacts in Ghana; I needed places to stay, people to take me around, translators and people to talk on tape for my documentary. I met a student who called himself Wolfgang online. He said I could stay with him and that he would show me around. He knew lots of fishing areas and would help me with my project. I landed on July 13 and stayed with him. He was a gracious host who taught me more about Ghana then I could learn by reading. He was able to take me to these communities and translate for me when necessary.

The bulk of my reporting was done in local fishing villages. Wolfgang and I travelled the length of Ghana’s Atlantic Coast to find compelling subjects
to understand the issue from their perspective. One interesting place was Jamestown, a community located in the heart of the capital Accra which house one of the biggest and most famous fishing communities as well as the largest Canoe Fisherman’s Association. In Jamestown I had conversation with many people who had lived in the community and fished their whole lives, including the fishing chief. What they told me though was not the promise of a future bolstered by oil revenue, but one in doubt fueled by government corruption and failed promises. According to the community the government has offered little to no support since the first president, Kwame Nkrumah, was removed from office in the 1960s. The community was decaying, kids could not afford to be educated and the old breaker, which held water out of the scant harbor, was near the end of its line. The only government support would come and go as soon as election season was over. What was worse was the oil discovery was only hurting the community. Large boats, which come from foreign nations to bring supplies and take oil, disrupt fishing patterns and use harmful methods to catch lots of fish for themselves. In short, the community is in peril and even with new revenue they are not counting on the government for any support. They to point past resource wealth obtained from gold and diamonds as indications that nothing will change. Very little of that money, they say, goes to help the people of Ghana.

Another fascinating location was the Western Region, the home of Ghana’s oil industry and major fishing communities. The fisherman there said very similar things to those in Jamestown and throughout Ghana. The unique facet they added was direct disruption from oil activity. The rigs were located in deep water, the local’s main fishing ground. After the discovery they were forbidden from getting fish there, cutting their profits so low that the communities are struggling to survive. One man I spoke with produced documents which showed all of the boats which came through the area since 2008, the boats asked not to be disturbed and promised they would help the communities. They have no seen no benefit however.

The locals are nervous for the future of the nation if this continues. Millions of people are at risk which could throw the nation into chaos. I learned that the government in Ghana may be strong and may have laws that are written well, but the execution of these laws and the maintenance of the nation are not very strong. Many people try to avoid the government even if they do vote. Corruption is a major problem. The benefits of oil revenue are still very much in question. The people have hope, however, and they enjoy a high level of peace. Many believe the government will still be a force for good they are just not sure to what degree.

After I finished my interviews I continued to research these issues to figure out how to portray the story. Wolfgang and I translated the interviews that were recorded in local languages and I set to work editing my documentary. I still am tweaking the audio documentary and it still needs to be completed. Once that occurs I will show it to faculty and attempt to get it aired or published. I continue to speak with contacts in Ghana and I plan to return to research more topics and see what happens with the oil. What I
researched was just a small part at the beginning of a long and important process the nation is undergoing. I wish the best for the people of Ghana. They face much hardship but maintain a level of welcoming that is a pleasure to experience for any visitor.