In the spring semester of 2011 I traveled to Nicaragua and Peru with the intent of assisting the not-for-profit Ecoagriculture Partners in expanding their Latin-American network and documenting “eco-agricultural landscapes” for their website. Prior to leaving I participated in a variety of conferences and discussions that would greatly inform the direction of my travel and help me retain an open mind throughout my explorations. Although I conducted thorough research and pre-planning, I did not end up adhering to a predetermined schedule or itinerary. I found that, once I began traveling, opportunities presented themselves, and to pursue them often required spontaneity and deviation from the original plan. To a certain extent, changes in our traveling plans are inevitable, thus it was important to be flexible. Fortunately my unpaid, volunteer position with Ecoagriculture Partners, as well as the fact that I was traveling alone, afforded me a great deal of flexibility in this regard.

Preparations for my trip began with conversations with Ecoagriculture Partner (EP) affiliates within both the Cornell working group as well those in their Washington D.C. office. Once a framework was established I began to immerse myself in some of the foundational concepts that define the goal and aspirations of EP. This entailed reading the seminal report, Common Ground, Common Future: How Ecoagriculture Can Help Feed the World and Save Wild Biodiversity, by Sarah Scherr and Jeffrey McNeely. Later I would talk to several people in California involved in the foundation of the agroecology and food sovereignty concepts. Although, they share many commonalities, there has existed some academic, ivory tower-level controversy between the proponents of these two conceptual frameworks; therefore I felt it necessary to look at both, and analyze the distinctions. I was greatly inspired by
Nature’s Matrix, a recent book by Vandermeer, Perfecto, and Wright, which attempts to draw the connections between agriculture, conservation, and food sovereignty. I had the good fortune of hearing Vandermeer and Perfecto discuss their book at a seminar at UC Berkeley organized by the Diversified Farming Systems (DFS) roundtable. This book proved a helpful guide when thinking about the socio-ecological dimensions of eco-agricultural landscapes in Peru and Nicaragua.

I began my trip in Nicaragua with my father, who had lived and worked in the country in the mid-80’s. We traveled together to many of the regions in which he had worked as well as to some that were, at the time of his experience, too dangerous, due to an ongoing civil war that was ravaging the North of the country. During this time I met many of his older friends from the revolutionary days, many of who offered advice regarding potential communities in landscapes that might fit the Eco-agricultural characteristics\(^1\), which I seek. I found such a community in the Miraflor-Moropotente Nature Reserve, which exemplifies a successful strategy of co-management of the natural resources of a unique agro-ecological zone. This particular project brought together government, NGO’s and local inhabitants in seemingly successful balance, integrating the agriculture practices of local farmers with the state-run conservation of natural resources in the park and adjacent areas.

I then traveled to the coffee producing regions in the North of the country where I was able to get some background on the history of revolutionary land reform and the formation of the agricultural cooperatives. In light of information regarding the glory days of the revolutions, it was unfortunate to see and hear of the erosion in progressive agriculture and land tenure policies since that period in the mid 80’s. While in this region I documented a

\(^1\) Rural communities with innovative strategies for conserving and sustainably using the natural resources that sustain their livelihoods.
community meeting discussing issues related to food sovereignty and seasonal insecurity. I was made very aware of the episodic periods of struggle that plague many coffee-producing communities, due to the lack of diversified income streams and the uni-modality of coffee harvests and thus payments. Some of the solutions that were discussed engaged issues of gender and responsibility as well as graduated payment schemes as opposed to a singular payday.

From the Northern regions I drifted back down to the city of Matagalpa where I met with the regional director of UNAG, the national union of agriculturists and ranchers, which was established as part of a revolution-era program to support domestic farmers and ranchers along with the rural communities in which they function. After several conversations, I was given the opportunity to attend another workshop in a nearby rural community in the Jucuapa river watershed led by a Brazilian-Japanese man who was a well-respected community organizer. We spent the day reading and discussing a training manual created for community leaders that dealt with issues of self-esteem, Jiritsu (self-empowerment), alcoholism, domestic violence, education, as well as technical agronomic and ecological concepts. In this meeting I met a farmer who invited me to stay, live, eat and work with his family so as to get a better sense of the farming life as well as to provide an opportunity to document the surrounding landscape. Working with his sons during the workday (from 7am-1pm during this season) and exploring in the late afternoons afforded me myriad opportunities to engage some of the social and ecological realities that defined this landscape and the communities therein. In that brief time I was able to better formulate some of the questions that had been emerging regarding the prospects for such rural agricultural communities as well as constraints.

Later, upon returning to Berkeley I would read a Food First publication written by Frances Moore Lappe and Joseph Collins, entitled *Now We Can Speak: A Journey Through a*
New Nicaragua. This booklet contains a description of the approaches to democracy, participation, and power during the Nicaraguan revolution and the ways in which radical transformations have shaped the Nicaraguan people. It provides clear insight into an unprecedented era in Central American socio-politics and a crucial historical background against which to juxtapose my experiences. The erosion of pro-poor, pro-small farmer government policy in the last 20 years has been complex but swift and in some cases nearly complete. The authors capture revolutionary sentiments that no longer permeate the rural social sphere and have been relegated to a multifarious past, so full of promise, yet indelible marked struggles with succession. I spent the rest of my time in Nicaragua exploring a little-known natural area in the North, near the border with Honduras. I was traveling with a couple I had met, whom now live in Ithaca, and with them accessing the agro-ecotourism potential in the recently (re)discovered Somoto canyon, an area that has historical ties to the CONTRA counter-revolution.

My arrival in Lima, Peru came as my command of conversational Spanish was fullysolidifying. This was crucial as, unlike in Nicaragua, I had very few contacts in Peru and no definitive locations of possible eco-agricultural landscapes. Transitioning between two very different socio-political, cultural, and climatic environments, both in the midst of fiercely contested presidential election campaigns however, was taxing of mind and body. I sought clarity in the Cordilla Central (central Andes) staying with the family of the maid of the household within which I was sleeping in Lima. The small inter-Andean community of Vista Allegre, to which I traveled, clung to the flanks of a hillside overlooking the pre-Incan cultural center of Chavin de Huantar. While Chavin has in no way the allure of Machu Pichu, it is a relatively large tourist attraction in this remote region where the economy is otherwise limited to quasi-subistence agriculture and mining of copper and silver. While a guest in this
community I was able to observe some of the collective community works projects financed by the regional government, which mobilize community members around specific project related primarily to maintenance. It was interesting that these programs all stressed vehicular access when none of the community members themselves owned cars. Yet my, perhaps naïve conclusion, is that investments in rural infrastructure that employs local community members and provides a collaborative and participatory forum is good, despite the prevalence of explicit conditionality related to local and regional populist politicking. I traveled to the nearby regional mining and economic center of San Marcos for the seasonal payday, during which community members from the entire region converge to await payments for their community work hours. The lines were several hours long and once payments were received many members went shopping, the women purchasing household necessities, the men buying beer, and the teenagers treating significant others to big lunches.

Longer solo hikes at higher elevations imparted insights regarding the agroecological zones and their definitions and boundaries. Walking up these pre-Incan paths past the chevron-shaped potato fields (chakras in Quechua) and lupine/legume intercrops would bring me to a desolate and exposed zone sculpted by wind and heavy weather devoid of either field or forage. Yet behind the undulating folds and rocky escarpments I would happen upon primeval looking forests and still, snow-fed lakes where I might find a flock of sheep or a head of cattle, seemingly untended. The seasonal pastoralism is a critical component of both the quasi-subsistence economy and social fabric of these communities. From my understanding the pluriactivity has been the traditional way of ensuring resilience by ways of diversification. The pluriactive activities have inevitably changed since pre-Incan times, however, adaptations have by and large been made in such a way as to preserve, retain, and sustain socio-ecological functions. Discussions with the youth around the soccer field raised questions regarding the
succession of these systems, yet despite being enraptured with snippets of globalized modernity, as epitomized by F.C. Barcelona, many of these kids seemed invested in the sustenance of their community and the dynamic perpetuation of the knowledge systems that are crucial to future socio-ecological reproduction.

Upon my departure on my IARD abroad experience I was especially intent on learning more about, horizontal, farmer-to-farmer (campesino a campesino) based partnerships and the capability of these solidarity networks to address larger issues of rural livelihood. I believed these movements are scaling up sustainable agriculture methods, as the livelihoods of their participants depend on greater food sovereignty, my experience has reaffirmed this belief, while providing much needed depth of understanding of regional and local complexities. My experience defied all expectations and will be a precedence against which future travels are related.

“You only go to sea once … the rest is endlessly returning…”