Going to Costa Rica was a surprising choice for me. While studying International Agriculture and Rural Development, I have learnt the importance of agriculture in the developing world. At first I thought I would return to Asia to learn more about the impact of agricultural development. In high school, I travelled with the East-West Center to Cambodia. There, I observed first-hand and participated in the traditional labor-intensive agricultural practices. However, when discussing my international internship options with my family, I became interested in learning more about Costa Rica and its focus on sustainable development. Costa Rica is rich in biodiversity and has had great success in balancing the country’s needs to develop while protecting its environment and ecosystems. Costa Rica’s environmental turnaround from the nation with the highest amount of deforestation to a country with many protected national parks intrigued me; I knew Costa Rica is where I wanted to study abroad.

In the CALS study abroad office I found a summer program with the School for Field Studies (SFS) which offered two four-week sessions: Sustaining Tropical Ecosystems: Biodiversity, Conservation and Development; and the second session, Applied Research Techniques and Strategies toward Sustainability in Costa Rica. The program is located at the Center for Sustainable Development Studies in Atenas, a small town an hour away from San Jose. The Center, which overlooks Costa Rica’s Central Valley, has a Rainforest Alliance ranking, and includes a large organic orange and mango orchard. Not only does the Center study and teach sustainable
environmental practices, but the Center and everyone affiliated with it lives by them as well. Good environmental practices were also shown in many ways, such as composting, limiting water usage, using only biodegradable products including soaps for dishes and clothes, and minimizing electricity usage.

During the first session of the program, there was a large focus on agroforestry and sustainable farming practices. For example, in order to prevent pests from destroying the mango and orange crops, the Center experimented with different forms of integrated pest management (IPM). Instead of using pesticides, empty juice cartons were filled with juice from the trees themselves. In addition to the various IPM experiments, the Center also used an extensive vermicompost and composting system to fertilize the organic orchards. My fellow students and I also visited several coffee farms where agroforestry is used. El Toledo, an organic coffee farm, was very proud that they did not use pesticides. Beneficial insects which would have been killed by the use of pesticides instead feed on pests which would otherwise destroy the crops. Additionally, manure and compost from the farm was used to fertilize the crops instead of alternative synthetic ones. El Toledo made a large sacrifice to crop yield in order to maintain a more sustainable and organic farming operation. By using these techniques the farm had slightly lower yields resulting in smaller profits. In an interesting example of government policies supporting the economics of organic farming, organic farmers were guaranteed a base rate of coffee per pound by the government.

Similar to the first session, the second session focused on sustainability, but also was aimed towards gathering data to be added to prior social studies. These
studies focus on social interactions related to natural resources rather than on the natural resources themselves. Fellow students and I made field trips to visit parks including Poas National Park and Arenal National Park. At these parks we distributed surveys to visitors and local residents who call themselves Ticos. The surveys asked a wide variety of questions about the park and services the park offered. The information from the surveys had been collected for the past 10 years. The goal of the survey data collection was to help the national park systems identify any issues and to promote tourism. The teams gathering data were assembled with a mind to facilitate communications with the local population and visitors. The idiomatic Spanish spoken by Ticos could have been a problem for the data gathering teams that were largely made up of North American college students. However, improvisation and pre-existing language skills amongst the team members allowed for successful data collection. It was definitely a learning experience.

During my time in Costa Rica I learned much more than I had anticipated. Every day we learned and practiced sustainability, agroforestry, and grew to understand Costa Rica’s rich history. I was surprised by how welcoming the Ticos were. On many occasions, we would join the Ticos for communal activities such as soccer games or bingo nights. I was amazed at how kind everyone was. No matter what the situation, the Ticos were always willing to help. More baffling was how a group of students from 16 different universities became so close based on a mutual interest of bettering the environment. Each student would motivate and mentor one another to do their best in both their studies and research to get the full
experience from the program. If you’re interested in an experience to learn about and experience sustainability first hand then I suggest you consider SFS Costa Rica.