IARD 6010: Experience in Latin America

Trip Reflection

The first portion of my trip to Chiapas, Mexico (June 2 - June 17) was devoted to the Cornell IARD 6010 Field Course: Experience in Latin America. Participating in the field course gave me a much better understanding of the development issues in Southern Mexico. During the field course I was exposed to various social, ecological and economic conditions throughout Chiapas. Every day was filled with different experiences; tremendous effort from both Cornell faculty and the Mexican host organizations went into creating a wholesome and invaluable experience for all of the students including myself.

Highlighted experiences:

1. Palenque Ruins

On June 3 we visited Palenque to learn about the Mayan ruins that had been excavated from the jungle. We learned about the various rulers, attacks, and rituals among other mysteries uncovered by archaeologists from the hieroglyphs, fossils and debris. There were three things in particular that really stuck with me from this visit.
First was the presence of women in leadership roles and their respect in their depiction in the hieroglyphs. Second was learning about the Mayan Calendar. I have often heard that according to the Mayan Calendar, the world is predicted to end on December 12, 2012. When I asked about this, the archaeologist explained that termination is a Western ideal and that the Mayan Calendar is constructed as a circle and is forever evolving and seemingly never ending. I found this common misconception intriguing because it could be so easily corrected with better information and education on the subject. The misunderstanding of indigenous knowledge appeared as a recurring theme throughout my time in Chiapas. Lastly, I
found it incredibly interesting that the Mayans abandoned Palenque because they no longer had a sufficient amount of natural resources to survive in the area. The ruins are estimated to have been vacated in the eighth century. During this time period, space was seemingly unlimited whereas now we spend time trying to save the space we have and find ways to build in a more sustainable manner.

2. Catazaja Communities of Punta Arena and Agua Fria

We visited rural communities of Punta Arena and Agua Fria to gain a better understanding of community dynamic and issues such communities are working on. In these communities we learned about their sustainable projects supported by the Instituto para el Desarollo Sustenable en Mesoamerica A. C. (IDESMAC) and the University of Chiapas Maya Center for agriculture studies. What I appreciated most about these experiences was the relationship between the Masters students and the community members. All of the projects took into account the local knowledge and existing practices of farming. The students from the University collaborated with these communities as a part of their study; though their fieldwork was required they were not paid for their work. As far as I could see it was a mutually beneficial relationship headed in positive directions. A specific example that stood out was the
cover over the milking stations in the farm we toured. The community suffered from low output of dairy cows and problems with diseases spreading among cows thus producing low quality milk that was rejected by buyers. One of the first suggestions the University students brought to the farmers was to build a cover over the milking station to establish a more sanitary environment. After this suggestion, the local farmers took it upon themselves to construct a cover using available and affordable materials to construct a cover, which has proven to improve the health of the cows and produce a higher quality output.

3. Rene and Nectar de la Cruz Gonzalez’s Ejido

Prior to this trip I was unfamiliar with the terms ejido or ejidatarios. I soon learned that an ejido was a farm on government owned land and ejidatarios were the farmers who borrow such land to farm for undetermined amounts of time. The conditions of Rene Gonzalez’s farm were much different than the previous communities we visited. This community had the support of INIFAP; however as maize campesinos their problems stemmed from the unreliability of the maize market and the constant fluctuation of the price of maize. Their decrease in income was not correlated with their lack of output. The farm had developed a strong storage method for storing harvest until the price increased. Another serious issue of this ejido community was the dangerous use of fertilizer and the quality of the soil. It was difficult to understand the misuse of fertilizer until Rene Gonzalez explained the extenuating circumstances they face. To produce a competitive amount of maize they had to use fertilizer. Not all safety measures were taken because it would be physically impossible. The fertilizer they were using required protective material; the ejidos were unable to wear these plastic suits because they had to travel long distances on bicycles to the fields with the heavy fertilizer packs on their backs in scorching
temperatures. INIFAP was working with them to increase education about proper use of fertilizer. This situation was seemingly hopeless and in many cases, such farmers often use the pesticide to commit suicide. The prices of maize fluctuate, but never elevate enough to lift this community out of poverty. The soil had to be tilled without machines because of how rocky the land was, they could not afford to risk breaking expensive farm machinery like tractors. When we asked Rene why he doesn’t look for work elsewhere, he said this land is all he has and he will die with his land. The ejido community didn’t have other jobs available or the resources to enable people to leave. Rene’s daughter came with us to the maize field and helped teach us how they plant their crop. Rene seemed aware that his daughter would not succeed him in his profession. INIFAP told us about the outreach programs they are continuing to develop for such communities. I left this community feeling a bit hopeless because the problems stem from ominous issues of global consumption and trade. I was especially sad that I was unable to extend to him ideas when he asked.

**Conclusion**
This trip was incredibly well-organized and allowed me to experience many different aspects of Chiapas, Mexico. This is the second IARD trip that I have been on, both were absolutely amazing. I was able to gain much more from this experience as I was able to further engage with the area I was in and develop a working relationship with a few organizations during the weeks following the trip. This trip enables students to engage in a surprising amount of fields in a fairly short time. This experience couldn’t be replicated without the support of a wonderful institution like Cornell University and the supporting host organizations we worked with in Mexico. I am incredibly grateful for this opportunity and am even more excited for my Latin American Peace Corps endeavors in the near future.

Please don’t hesitate to contact me with questions about the experience:

Amy Couch  
International Development, MPS  
Cornell University Graduate School  
Peace Corps, Masters International  
ajc285@cornell.edu