International Experience – Reflections on Costa Rica

My first experience living abroad started in February 2011 when I studied in Costa Rica. I knew that I wanted to travel to a Spanish speaking country, and I had learned about how progressive the nation was in terms of environmental sustainability. When I found a program that was research-intensive based in Atenas, Alajuela, I knew I couldn’t resist the opportunity. Costa Rica surpassed my greatest expectations. The country is pacifist – they don’t even have an army! – and the people are incredibly kind. The three months I spent there have significantly changed my worldview and have informed me about how I want to pursue a career after graduation.

I studied through the School for Field Studies, known to the townspeople of Atenas as ‘La Universidad de la Presa.’ Atenas, approximately 37 kilometers west of the capital, San Jose, is a small, close-knit community. The campus was situated on a hillside that held a small research farm, including a mango and orange orchard, chickens, turkeys, a cow, and a small greenhouse operation. As a class, we each took shifts working the farm throughout the week. The farm was also utilized by professors for lessons or research preparation throughout the semester.

The way SFS conducted academic classes was very unique, and ideal for me. They divided the term into two months where students were enrolled in four classes, and the last month where students would be matched with a professor and conduct research in that field of study. During the first half of the semester, traveling across the country was heavily emphasized in the curriculum. This would be performed by attending standard classes for the first two or three days of the week and then spending the rest of the week to travel to a location in the country that represented the earlier lessons of the week. One example was a week in which we
studied how to use GPS to create maps for our Natural Resources Management course. For our Field Exercise, we traveled to Ometepe Island in Lake Nicaragua where we climbed Volcán Maderas for eight hours to make a map of the different look-out spots, the crater lake, shifts in forest types, and other landmarks so that it may be used for tourism purposes in the future.

Another reason I picked Costa Rica for my international experience was to improve my language skills. I had previously taken two Spanish courses in high school and one in college, but felt as if I couldn’t retain of the knowledge after the end of the course. I do believe now that complete immersion is the most effective way to pick up a language. By being surrounded by the language constantly, I was forced to be able to comprehend it. Admittedly, I do wish that our classes had been taught in Spanish, as I still wasn’t able to achieve fluency by taking classes two days a week.

The most beneficial experience for me in this regard was a weekend where I participated in a homestay. The Jiménez family was a standard family. The father worked for the local electric company and the mother was a homemaker. They had three children: Natalia, age 24, Ricardo, age 22, and Tania, age 16. The experience started off awkwardly, as I nervously stumbled over my Spanish and was almost incomprehensible. Luckily, Ricky was taking English courses at the time, so we both had an opportunity to practice. My favorite portion of the experience was the final day when I watched English TV shows with Natalia and then had to explain what was happening to her in Spanish. Through that, we became comfortable with each other and began to grow very close. I still keep in touch with her and Ricky.

The most poignant experience of the entire three months was the month I spent conducting directed research. After two months in classes, I already knew that Natural Resources
Management was the best fit for me. Our professor, Achim Hager, had already come up with an overarching theme for our group: evaluation of ecosystem services in different land use systems. Within this umbrella, my own research was on finding measurements of functional diversity by relating forest carbon storage to diversity. As a group, we performed data collection by working along six transects drawn in a pre-selected forest fragment adjacent to an organic coffee farm. Walking along these transects, trees within five meters on either side were accounted for if they were over five centimeters in diameter breast height (DBH). Species, approximate heights, environmental conditions, and DBHs were recorded into a large database.

For my research, the most pertinent information was the number of species and DBHs. Using this information, I gathered further qualitative and quantitative data about species through the TRY Plant Trait Database and the Chave Global Wood Density Dataset to make profiles for each species. By comparing average species number per transect in each forest fragment, there was found to be a negative correlation between species numbers and carbon storage. The Bray-Curtis index similarity showed that transects in old growth aggregates tended to have higher carbon storage than those in secondary growth or disrupted areas. In the future, this information would be pertinent for targeted conservation efforts, especially those aimed towards climate change.

In sum, spending time abroad in Costa Rica turned out to be one of the most beneficial experiences of my life. By choosing a program that was field-based, I was able to travel the country and really cultivate a deep connection to it. Furthermore, living in a small town was a great experience for building lasting relationships with a community of people. My research was the most academically challenging experience of my life, and I was able to learn so much more than I ever imagined about experimental design, set-up, implementation, and analysis. This
experience could not have been possible without the help of the International Programs Department and I could not be more grateful. One day, I hope to return to Costa Rica to live for an even longer period of time, and would encourage any other IARD major to participate in this program.
Picture 1: Meeting with farmer in El Sur and being taught how to milk a heifer

Picture 2: Panorama shot from top of Vista de la Presa
Picture 3: Spending time with my homestay brother, Ricky
Picture 4: Class shot of Spring 2013 School for Field Studies: Costa Rica