I arrived at the School of Field Studies Center for Rainforest Studies in Yungaburra Queensland, Australia on a hot day in the beginning of February. The field center was located off a remote highway, which connected the city of Cairns to the Atherton Tableland’s a major agricultural area. Although the weather was much warmer in Cairns where I landed earlier in the day, my body was still adjusting to the tropical climate. We traveled by van to the field station but our rainforest ecology professor met us to walk the last two miles up the access road to the center. Walking on the access road with my newfound peers and professor, I avoided all vegetation on either side of the path in fear of being stung by a stinging tree. In Far North Queensland, there are plenty of things that can hurt or kill you, but for some reason I had chosen to become fixated on the stinging tree. The leaves and the stems of stinging trees are covered with thick hairs, which can penetrate skin and release a poison. There is no cure or remedy known to alleviate the pain of being stung and some degree of pain can last up to several years. Nonetheless I walked jet lagged down the access road through the beautiful dense new growth rainforest to the field station and was greeted by a delicious dinner.

Australia is home to the world’s most poisonous snakes as well as the paralysis tick. It took a couple days of walking through the rainforest to lose all fear of running into a poisonous snake or another unpleasant encounter unique to the rainforests of Far North Queensland. For the next two months, we attended class
five days a week and participated in some form of community service once a week. One of the organizations we participated in was Trees for the Evelyn and Atherton Tablelands (TREAT). This non-profit organization replanted rainforest on land donated to ecological restoration. This often took place on abandoned agricultural land in the Atherton Tablelands. Always having loved forests, I enjoyed taking part in planting trees for rainforest restoration and became very interested in the carbon sequestration ecosystem service rainforests provide. We were shown many examples of past plantings TREAT had conducted, which could now be classified as new growth rainforest. We were even shown examples of native animals beginning to recolonize the older plantings such as the Tree Kangaroo. I had been taught many of the doomsday scenarios of climate change in my Intro into Environmental Studies course at my previous college, so it was refreshing to be able to take part in an activity that helped to combat climate change.

Traveling around Far North Queensland was an amazing experience because of the quick changes in the landscape and environment, which can occur within a relatively short car ride. The first place we traveled to was Chillagoe, an old former mining town turned tourist attraction, a few hours inland from our field station in the rainforest. Our professors referred to Chillagoe as the “almost outback”, and the climate and environment there was very different than that of the rainforest. There we saw caves, kangaroos and the remains of a former mine. On our second trip, we visited the Daintree Rainforest, the oldest continuous rainforest in the world. In the Daintree Rainforest, we slept in beds wrapped in mosquito nets at an eco-resort. There we saw plants that had changed very little since the days of the dinosaurs,
and we were also lucky enough to run into a number of different animals. One of these animals was the cassowary, a big flightless bird related to the ostrich and emu. Famous throughout Far North Queensland, Cassowaries are a keystone species in the Australian rainforest due to their role in rainforest seed dispersal. They are also very endangered, and there are likely less than 2,000 left in the wild in Far North Queensland. On the last day of our trip in the Daintree Rainforest, we went on a sightseeing boat ride along the Daintree River. There we saw a saltwater crocodile, which was approximately five meters long. At the field center we saw many other kinds of animals to such as Snakes, Geckos, Amestine Pythons, Lance Monitors, Cockatoos and Padamelon, which resemble small kangaroos. The Australian rainforest possesses the wildest and most unique array of animal species out of any other place I have ever visited.

During the last month of my trip, I conducted research on the economics behind Australia’s Carbon Farming Initiative. The Carbon Farming Initiative in Australia works to give farmers and landowners financial incentive to sequester carbon on their property. One of the ways to sequester carbon is to replant forests by planting a mix of local tree species. Therefore, my research sought to compare the profitability of the least profitable types of agriculture prevalent among the Atherton Tablelands to carbon farming in replanted rainforests. This research was very exciting, but by this point of the trip I was disappointed with some of the program’s organizational flaws. Such as exams being scheduled right after field trips, and a lack of time allocated to study. I found the director and the professors to also be very controlling over their student’s research topics, which was unfortunate
for those students who were not able to conduct research in the subject of their choice. However, despite these difficulties the research was an extremely rewarding experience.

   It is very difficult to fit all of my experiences into one paper. There are plenty of amazing cultural experiences and encounters with animals that I have forgot to mention. My advice for anyone planning to embark on such an adventure is to find the time and money to travel around Australia before or after attending the program. I also recommend visiting the Great Barrier Reef another spectacular and unique ecosystem in Far North Queensland. Although the program had plenty of flaws organizationally, it is a great fit for any student interested in Biology and Environmental Studies that are curious about this corner of the world.