Reflections

To reflect on this trip brings forth many reflections from my past, my present endeavors, and my future goals. Traveling for two weeks with our group was challenging, inspiring, frustrating, enlightening, amusing, and much more. It brought many memories of when and how I had first known Mexico, first as a young child visiting my gringo uncle, my latina aunt, and Mexican cousins for holidays on the beach. Or later, as an impulsive, idealistic teenager when I left the security of my home country for the experience of another culture, another language, other lands, and grew enormously with the (often hard) lessons each of those had to teach me. How much my Spanish has improved (from nothing), and how much more I still need to learn. Traveling with such a large group created a cultural bubble, and with it both advantages and disadvantages that I reflected on. I had become used to interacting with individuals and communities from a deeply personal level, eye to eye, equal but different (uneducated) woman to equal but different (uneducated) woman. Within such a large academic group I found it difficult to connect as an individual at the level of depth I was used to, that I have come to associate with my experience of Latin America. On the other hand, it was delightfully refreshing to be reminded of the wonder, curiosity, humility, and fear I once felt venturing into a new culture; traveling with these younger students reminded me, through their experiences, of the time when all of it was all just so new exciting and maybe more than just a little
overwhelming. And to experience people and places that I just never would have experienced had I not participated on a class trip.

Today I reflect on something that used to bother me in my work in rural communities in Nicaragua: I cannot ever truly be seen as an equal in these communities I love so much to work in, though it breaks my heart at times, because I was not born as they were born; I have not lived as they have lived (all my life); I have not known the land from the water they grew up drinking in the same way they know their lands and their water both inside and out. I will never be “from there”, though I may live a decade or more within a community and give birth to my children on their lands. I, and my children, will never be “from there”, and it is both an advantage and that which will always set me apart. And I will always leave, one day... But today I am sure that that does not mean that the relationships I forge cannot be profoundly meaningful, or that the work I do with communities is not welcome, or needed, or valuable. I can hold my difference, born innocently out of individual experience, as I hold their difference from me: as a beautiful jewel that reflects back to me all the angles of seeing and being in the world. It fascinates and delights me. I can take what I’ve learned from connecting, from living with and integrating deeply into community, and apply it to a new way of working with sustainable development and community-based natural resource management. I can connect with a community from a personal level as well as a professional level, and build friendships as well as professional networks.

To bring these reflections back into my life at Cornell continues to be a challenge, because academia is often conducted in a vacuum. How tired I am of defending the rights and
perspectives of communities within lofty theoretical discussions of development, or scientifically reductive agricultural management. How obvious such a thing should be to a place like Cornell. But these are the lessons I bring back with me: to give voice to those who are not given a place to express; to make great use of the resources available to me, and to make accessible to others the resources that so many people lack; and to never forget what it is I am doing here.