



## APROPOS OF

**W**ELCOME TO INTERNATIONAL EDUCATOR'S FORUM, "Apropos of..." where readers have the opportunity to continue the dialogue of a given forum topic by submitting their own essays. Each essay will be considered but not all submissions will be published. In this issue, Wayne Parrott follows up to Jacqueline McLaughlin's article, "Classrooms Without Walls: A Banana Plantation, a Random Fallen Tree, and a Turtle Nest," which appeared in this column in the January/February 2005 issue of *IE*. Parrott offers additional perspectives on the benefits of experiential education combined with study abroad. In his experience as a science professor and director of a study abroad program, students learn the most valuable of lessons when their "nice theories and philosophies about 'the way things should be' confront reality." To contribute to the forum, contact *IE*'s managing editor, Eric Kronenwetter, by e-mail ([erick@nafsa.org](mailto:erick@nafsa.org)) or telephone (202.737.3699, ext. 237). Readers may also access all of the "Apropos of..." articles on the Web at [www.nafsa.org/IE](http://www.nafsa.org/IE).

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## Classroom in the Clouds: Connecting People and Biology

By Wayne Parrott

**T**HE UNMISTAKABLE CALL OF THE RUFIOUS-AND-WHITE WREN reminds students that they are no longer on a conventional campus, assuming that the mist falling from the continental divide or the lush vegetation of a tropical cloud forest had not done so already. Such are the surroundings of Ecologde San Luis and Research Station (ESLRS) in northwestern Costa Rica. The Ecologde represents a bold and daring attempt by the University of Georgia (UGA) to provide a learning environment that would otherwise be impossible to achieve for its students. This melding of study abroad and targeted experiential education offers many valuable lessons, but perhaps one of the most important lessons that the students take away with them is that you cannot protect biodiversity by building a wall around it as long as people are also around.

For the past six years, I have taken a group of students every summer to the Ecologde, and watched them live, learn, and react. Located in the San Luis Valley, the ESLRS is strikingly beautiful, but since it is off the beaten path, also a place where tourists seldom venture. Instead villagers go about their daily lives, as cows cling to their mountainside pastures and farmers eke out a living by growing coffee next to the cloud forest. All about the vegetation is luxuriant and the wildlife abundant.

Welcome to the real Costa Rica, where age-old traditions from Spain survive, where humankind and nature have struck an uneasy alliance, never sure of which will get the upper hand.

Though owned and operated by UGA, the ESLRS is available for other



groups as well, thus permitting the ESLRS to serve the educational needs of Costa Rican, North American, European, and other international students like no campus in the United States could ever hope to do. At first glance, it is a paradise for any student interested in biology or ecology, or, for that matter, related subjects such as agriculture. As one of my students explained, she felt she was living inside the Discovery Channel! So, while biology is enough of a reason to go to the Ecolodge, the opportunities at ESLRS transcend just biology, since ESLRS is ideal for any student interested in Hispanic culture or the Spanish language. Homestays with local families are available, as are Spanish classes.

My particular experience has been through my course, agroecology of the new world tropics, which uses the Ecolodge as one of its study sites in Costa Rica. Having student dormitories, classrooms, and laboratory facilities available makes the ESLSR campus self sufficient. The facilities were built with environmental friendly design and the architecture of the campus has an affinity with rural and local costume. However, it is the interactions with the local villagers and farmers that sets ESLRS apart and makes it an unparalleled teaching resource. The families of San Luis are happy to interact with scientists, students, and ecotourists alike who find themselves engaged in this new educational north-south dialogue through the valley's school, nursery, store, chapel, and its communal efforts, such as road maintenance or water catchments monitoring.

The Ecolodge represents the human-nature interface, and my agroecology course makes full use of it. On site, students learn about the taxonomy of tropical plant and insect families. They are assigned projects evaluating species numbers in the cloud forest. They get to compare biodiversity between the cloud forest and the farm fields that have been carved out from it. They get to read on the virtues of organic low yielding systems of agriculture, then get to estimate the number of organisms destroyed to make room for each low-yielding plot.

The students get to read about benign agricultural practices—such as multicropping and mulching—then talk to farm families who work from sunrise to sunset, and never quite have the necessary time to implement these principles.

The San Luis valley, like so many other places in Latin America, is where the rubber meets the road—nice theories and philosophies about “the way things should be” confront reality. It is easy to decry the destruction of tropical forests from the comfort of our U.S. homes. It is not so easy to do when the students meet the culprits—real people desperate to feed their families, and with precious little other options. It is here where students have come face to face with the fragility of nature, and with the fragility of people. For many students, the moment is disconcerting. It is a real wake-up call that they are citizens of a much larger world, and they do not have the luxury of remaining detached and oblivious.

The Ecolodge has become an ideal backdrop for the tropical agroecology course. Students get to take all their book knowledge on ecology and agriculture, and measure it against the reality that confronts their eyes. More importantly, as part of their class as-

signment, they get to propose solutions that meet the needs of the local citizenry while protecting the invaluable and irreplaceable cloud forest. It is here where students start to leave their preconceived notions behind, and start conceiving of solutions that are both compassionate and creative.

I long ago noticed that the ESLRS experience continues even after the students return home to the main campus in Athens, Georgia, as students tend to reanalyze and reinterpret their study abroad experience within their local reality back in the United States. They have acquired an insight into the amazing biodiversity of the tropics and the need to protect and preserve it. They have a new awareness that real people are, and will continue to be, part of the picture, and know any solution that focuses on the needs of one without the other is doomed to failure. **IE**

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