

Lending a helping hand

BY NICOLE BRANAN

IT SEEMS AS IF NOTHING could disturb the peace in the tropical paradise of San Cristóbal, the easternmost island of the Galápagos chain that rises majestically out of the Pacific Ocean about 600 miles west of Ecuador. Famed for their vast numbers of indigenous species and Charles Darwin's studies that contributed to his theory of evolution, the volcanic islands are one of the world's biodiversity hotspots. But the Galápagos' unique ecosystems are under attack. Alien plants and animals have invaded the islands and are driving out the native vegetation. Numerous local environmental foundations are working hard to counter the trend with conservation initiatives and the work of many dedicated volunteers.

International Educator featured in interview with Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Wangari Matthai in the March/April 2006 issue. It is available online at http://www.nafsa.org/_/File/_/mar_aprvoices.pdf. Matthai founded the Green Belt Movement that is mentioned in this article.





Education abroad programs aren't just about expanding the minds of today's college students and teaching the values of global citizenship. These days, it's also about giving back to the communities where they study.

Gabriel Pollack (right), and Rojel Salas Huaman, his host father, planting fruit bearing trees to benefit the village and offset the carbon emissions from Gabe's international flight to Peru.

GABRIEL POLLACK, LIVING ROUTES PERU ALUMNUS 2007



Julia Metzger-Traver harvesting rice from an organic, rain-fed rice field in Alto Chambuyaco, Peru. Rain fed rice fields are less water intensive and more eco-friendly than the industrial rice fields that until recently dominated the area.

For a few weeks in 2004, Lindsay Watkins, at the time an undergraduate student at Cornell University, became one such volunteer. At the Jatun Sacha Foundation's biological research station in the San Cristóbal highlands, Watkins helped set up an agriculture farm for fruits and vegetables that are on the approved growing list for the islands. The work was part of an education abroad program by the International Partnership for Service-Learning and Leadership (IPSL), a nonprofit organization offering education abroad programs that link academic classroom curriculum with volunteer service throughout the local communities. "This combination enriches the learning experience and teaches civic responsibility," said IPSL's president, Nevin Brown. "At the same time it strengthens communities for the common good."

Adding 'Service' to Education Abroad

A growing number of universities offer education abroad programs during which students not only take classes at their host universities but also engage in service learning by participating in volunteer work in the local community. "More and more institutions in the

United States are embracing international service learning options as part of their study abroad programs," said Brown. At the same time, a growing number of students are interested in an education abroad experience that goes beyond academic coursework. "I wanted to do more than just take classes," said Watkins. "And doing volunteer work in the community just seemed to be a good thing to do." Daniel Neudorf, who volunteered at a local rural hospital during IPSL's Galápagos program in 2006, commented, "I hate being a tourist. When I travel some place I like to help in the community and give something back to the people."

IPSL had already been offering an education abroad program in Quito on the Ecuador mainland for about a decade when it started its Galápagos program in 2004, shortly after the Galápagos Academic Institute for the Arts and Sciences opened. "The new institute provided an opportunity for our students to engage in academic study while at the same time making a difference on the island through community service work," said Brown.

The Jatun Sacha Foundation opened its Galápagos station a few months before Watkins arrived on San Cristóbal, and part of her

work involved building the station field house as well as a nursery and a green house. The foundation's main objective is the preservation of the local environment, for example by replacing invasive plants with native species. "The Galápagos Islands are home to very delicate and unusual ecosystems," said Brown. Because of its remote location and the relatively recent settlement by humans, a large number of the archipelago's native species are still intact. But the introduction of invasive plants and animals has become one of the most severe threats to the islands' exceptional biodiversity. "The recent population growth is likely not going to be reversible," said Brown. "So the challenge is to generate sustainable development in the islands." Non-indigenous blackberry species are among the worst weeds that are threatening San Cristóbal's rare endemic plants by taking away light, water, and nutrients. Watkins spent several days cutting down the dense brushes that can grow several feet high. "It was hard work but it was also fun to work outdoors," Watkins remembered. In addition to environmental preservation IPSL's Galápagos program focuses on education of the locals, said Brown. "There is a huge need to provide better environmental and science education, particularly for children, because it is important for the future of the islands that its people are sensitive to how they live on them. That's what our service work in the Galápagos is trying to address."

Local Integration, Deep Immersion

Teaching and working closely with the local people allows for a deep immersion in the culture of the host country, Brown said. "In traditional study abroad programs the students are not necessarily very much engaged with the local population. But by volunteering in the community, the students are directly exposed to the local culture and learn how it functions."

Joseph Palacios, assistant professor at Georgetown University, agreed and added that volunteer work provides a powerful way to open the students' eyes to both the beauty and the problems of the host country. Palacios directs Georgetown's summer program at La Universidad Alberto Hurtado in Santiago, Chile, an education abroad program that combines coursework with volunteer service to address the needs of poor and disadvantaged residents of the metropolitan city. The program, which started in 2004, grew out of Georgetown's community-based learning programs during which students work four to six hours a week at local nonprofit organizations in Washington, D.C. Their work consists not only of volunteer service but also includes actively helping the organization think through its research needs and conducting research projects, said Palacios. "Having students work with these institutions in ad-

dition to taking classes helps us train our students not only to be scholars but also to be socially concerned citizens." Because at least one quarter of Georgetown's students are usually involved in international programs somewhere around the world at any given time, incorporating community-based learning into education abroad programs was the obvious next step, said Palacios.

During Georgetown's summer program at La Universidad Alberto Hurtado, students take classes in Chilean culture, society, development and poverty, and volunteer at local NGOs, such as after-school care centers for children in poor neighborhoods. Besides working with the kids, students also try to advance the after-school programs. "As part of their work at these care centers our students devise their own educational programs for the kids. They observe what the children do well and try to think of what they could do to improve the curriculum," said Palacios. Volunteer work in Latin America is often organized in a charity-oriented manner, he said. "People come in from the middle class and the upper class and then just provide their time, but they don't really change anything. In the United States, on the other

hand, you usually bring people in and then try to get problems solved to benefit your program down the line." That's the approach that students in Georgetown's program take. For example, Katherine Sheridan, who went to Chile in 2005, devised a sports program for the kids at the care center, introducing girls to soccer. The program was a success and has been continued ever since. "The purpose of these after-school care centers is really just to get the kids off the street, and it was great to see that they enjoyed what we were doing with them," she said.

The work that students do in these NGOs not only contributes to the public good, but it also provides them with a sense of empowerment and helps them to

understand how the practical application of their academic skill can contribute to positive social change, said Palacios. The volunteer work has also proved valuable for language acquisition, he added. "When you are actively engaged with the regular people on a daily basis you have to use the language," he said. "And in those poor neighborhoods in Santiago not a soul speaks English."

Chile has one of Latin America's strongest economies and shopping malls, and modern high-rise buildings that spring up all over the country's capital reflect its growing prosperity. But at the same time about half a million people in Santiago suffer extreme poverty. And the divide between the wealthy and the poor is enormous, said Palacios. "The gap is one of the most extreme in the world." Because of the structure of Georgetown's program, participating students are exposed to all the different levels of society on a daily

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basis, said Palacios. Students stay at host families mainly found through alumni networks of La Universidad Alberto Hurtado. The vast majority of these families live in affluent areas of the city. At the same time, the students' classmates at the university come mainly from the middle-class, and after school the students work in some of the poorest neighborhoods of the city. That is not only an interesting experience for them but also proves valuable to their host families, said Palacios. "When our students come home at the end of the day they talk about their work in these poor neighborhoods that their host families would never go to. That means that the families that our students stay with get a glimpse of their own country through American eyes," he said. "No one else could give them that message of what parts of their own society look like."

Volunteerism

While education abroad programs such as those of IPSL and Georgetown University combine coursework with community service in the host country, other schools let students focus on volunteer work full-time. One example is Emory University's UPGRADE (Undergraduate Program in Global Research and Development Experience) program, which was developed in 2006 and offers grants to Emory students who want to spend their summer volunteering in developing countries. UPGRADE students independently apply to reputable international volunteer organizations and then, after successfully applying to UPGRADE as well, are awarded funding for their trip abroad.

The program builds on education and training that students have had in the United States, said Cornelia Lindenau, assistant director for international outreach programs at Emory University. That includes not only the academic training that students received at Emory but also community service work conducted in the United States. "UPGRADE applicants are required to have a history of serious service commitment," said Lindenau. "That doesn't mean just volunteering here and there, but instead they need to show us that they have committed to some ongoing service throughout high school and throughout their time at Emory." It is important that students think critically about why they are planning to go to the particular country and what the role of Western humanitarian assistance is, she said. "If you look at the history of Western involvement in developing countries, you see that it has not always been that successful. That's why we like to have our students to have prior experience in community service so they have started to think about these aspects."

Emory developed the UPGRADE program in response to requests from students, said Lindenau. "We started to hear more and more students say, 'I don't want to go abroad and take classes that are very similar to those that I can take at Emory. Instead, I

would like to do something completely different.'" Many students also said that they wanted to engage in a more hands-on experience instead of focusing only on the academic portion of education abroad programs, she added. That is an important aspect because "no theoretical knowledge just sitting there in an isolated way makes sense. Students need to learn the theory but they also need to be able to see how it can be applied in real situations."

Curricula Boosts Community Service Programming

One reason for the growing interest in community service could be the increase in the number of courses that relate to humanitarian aid and development studies topics taught at Emory University, said



Zoe Kantor using a coffee depulper to separate the cherry, the red rind surrounding the coffee bean, from the coffee bean itself. The machine has made a huge difference to the town of Alto Chambuyaco and was purchased through increased profits from joining the fair trade coffee cooperative "Oro Verde," Living Routes' partner organization for the fair trade and biocultural regeneration in the high Amazon.

Lindenau. The German native observed that, “While it is a part of the United States culture to give back to the local community, in recent years we have seen a strong rise in the number of students who are interested in helping those in poverty-stricken countries who may not be able to help themselves.”

One of the most important aspects of the UPGRADE program is that students learn that there are very specific skills they need to acquire before they can actually start working for an NGO, said Lindenau. “It’s not enough just to be compassionate and have two strong hands. The skills needed to work for an NGO go way beyond standing in front of somebody and telling them what to do.” For example, one important component of NGO work is evaluating the outcomes of programs, which means that employees need to know how to measure the impact of what they are doing. “For example, if an NGO were to organize training workshops for women to help them start their own enterprises, at some point one would need to find out whether these workshops were sufficient and whether the money invested was well spent,” Lindenau said.

One of the first recipients of Emory’s UPGRADE grants was Sheena Sood, who worked at Gremaltes Hospital in Chennai, India, during the summer of 2006. Gremaltes mainly treats patients suffering from leprosy, a disease that slowly destroys nerves, leading to the gradual loss of feeling in the limbs. If untreated, leprosy can cause severe disfigurement of hands, feet, and face. About 60 percent of the world’s leprosy patients live in India, where the ancient disease has traditionally been seen as a curse from God and social stigma is still widespread. “Leprosy patients are wrongfully discriminated against because society is misled to think that it is a contagious disease and because the disease is so noticeable,” said Sood. “I didn’t realize how much stigma was associated with leprosy until I got to Gremaltes. For example, the hospital had one permanent patient who had been living there for five years because his family abandoned him after finding out he had the disease.”

Sood’s work involved the social aspects of leprosy, such as educating local people about it. “We would go to places where people were trained for a future in some

kind of environment where they would have a lot of interaction with others and therefore might get in contact with leprosy patients. For example, we gave awareness talks about the disease at a hotel management school and at a number of colleges to help eliminate the stigma,”

she said. Sood had always been interested in global health issues but her work at Gremaltes gave her a unique look inside some of the problems that people in other societies have to deal with, she said. “I learned a lot about the issues that leprosy patients face on a more personal level, for example how they deal with people staring at them on a daily basis.” Coming face-to-face with the problems that people in different societies encounter often has a profound impact on students, said Lindenau. “They bring back a wealth of impressions and talking about their experiences encourages other students to think about these issues as well.”

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Partnering with Local Institutions

While UPGRADE sends students abroad with international volunteer organizations, some education abroad programs engage with local institutions. One example is the Kenya summer program of Washington University in St. Louis. “We take our students to various communities in Kenya to work with indigenous organizations that are making an impact in trying to eradicate poverty,” said program director Mungai Mutonya.

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Program participants have worked, for example, with the Green Belt Movement (GBM), a women's civil society organization that advocates for human rights and peaceful democratic change through the protection of the environment. One of GBM's core programs is environmental conservation, for example mitigating problems brought about by deforestation and soil erosion. In 2004 Washington University's students not only helped the organization by planting trees but also met with GBM's founder, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Wangari Maathai. "Meeting her was an amazing experience," remembered Dionna Little, one of the students who participated in the program. "Wangari Maathai told us that you never know what a difference you can make with small actions—I felt that was very powerful."

Washington University started its Kenya summer program in 2000 and initially didn't include a community service component. "All we did during the first year was give our students an opportunity to go into classrooms and teach and be able to interact with the people a little bit," said Mutonya. "However, after we got back to the United States, students told us that they thought it would be more enriching to incorporate volunteer service, not only to have more interaction with the locals but also to give back to the communities that opened their doors to them. Ever since we have made community service one of the main components of our program."

Students stay with local families in Kenya and that opens up an international dialogue that is valuable for them as well as their hosts, said Mutonya. "It is usually the first time that the children in these families see an American university student, and, more importantly, an American university student who is interested in their culture and their language." Often students establish a life-long relationship with their hosts, he added. "Even though we only spent four weeks in Kenya, I think even this short amount of time helps to make a big difference in a small way."

The Kenya summer program is structured such that students volunteer wherever they are needed at the moment. "We always ask the local people what we can do for them rather than saying 'This is what we want to do for you,'" said Mutonya. That approach has led to a variety of different projects, ranging from cleaning up streets in slum areas to building school libraries. "The local school in one of the communities we visited didn't have a library and the books were just strewn all over the floor in an empty classroom, so we spent two days painting and building shelves and cataloguing



In addition to group projects, Washington University students actively participate in the daily chores of their host families. Student Kate Ogorzally learns how to milk the family cow.

the books." Students also routinely work with women in slum areas and visit and teach children in rehabilitation centers. "Working in these centers helps our students understand how these indigenous institutions are working toward solving problems with the meager resources they have," said Mutonya. "One of my students once said 'you always read about people in Africa sitting there, waiting for others to come and help.' But when we get out there the students see that that isn't the case. Instead, these institutions are doing their best to make a difference in the lives of the local community."

Community Service Goes 'Green'

Letting students see and experience the difference that work on a community level can make is the focus of Living Routes education abroad programs as well. Living Routes, an independent, nonprofit educational organization whose programs are accredited by the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, sends students to live and work in ecovillages around the world. These environmentally and socially sustainable settlements provide "real-world campuses" where students can study not only the concepts of sustainable living but can experience it first-hand, said Gregg Orifici, director of admissions at Living Routes. "The people who live in ecovillages are really walking their talk," he said. "For example, they develop renewable energy sources and grow their own organic food." One of Living Routes' programs takes students to Peru, where they work with Oro Verde, a successful, organic, fair-traded coffee-producing coopera-

tive in the town of Lamas. Oro Verde was founded in 1999 as an initiative of the United Nations in an attempt to offer producers in this poor region in the high Amazon an alternative to illicit coca drug trade. The higher price that producers get for their coffee when selling on Fair Trade terms allows them to cover their operating costs and provide for their families as well.

"We partner with Oro Verde not only to increase the standard of living of the communities but also to restore the organic principles and the ancient practices that have been a tradition in Peru for millennia and have more recently been consumed by cooperative farming culture," said Orifici. Students work with the producers, participate in harvesting and processing coffee beans, and learn about the principles of Fair Trade through course work, seminars, and discussions. "By working in the cooperative the students see first-hand how Fair Trade affects the local people," said Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, professor

at Smith College and instructor of the Living Routes Peru program, which started in 2007. One of the projects that students participated in was drafting a new agreement between the cooperatives and coffee importers. After interviewing representatives of either group, the students came up with a contract that addressed not only quality and price of the beans but also social responsibility, said Orifici.

But students also learn about various aspects of indigenous Peruvian culture, for example by visiting a local center that treats drug addiction through shamanism. "There are many aspects to this program, and that attracts a wide variety of students—some of them are interested in agriculture, others are Fair Trade activists, and we also have students who want to learn about the local culture," said Apffel-Marglin.

Volunteering in a foreign country as part of education abroad programs often prompts students to return to their host country for a longer period of time. Alexandra Davis, an undergraduate student at Smith College who participated in Living Routes' Peru program in 2007, said she was so intrigued by the country and the local culture that she plans to return to Peru with the Peace Corps. "I really liked the people I met in Peru, and I realized that I wanted to spend a few years there volunteering."

The experience also steers some students into careers that focus on humanitarian aid

and development. "Our programs often have a long-term effect on students," said Nevin Brown of IPSL. "For example, sometimes students discover that it is the legal system in a particular country that is in the way of social change, so when they get back they go to law school and pursue a career in international law."

A growing number of universities offer education abroad programs during which students not only take classes at their host universities but also engage in service learning by participating in volunteer work in the local community.

Lindenau, the assistant director for international outreach programs at Emory University, said that some of Emory's UP-GRADE students continued in a local setting to engage in the field they were working in abroad. For example, upon her return, one student who worked in India with a small NGO that helped create educational opportunities for prostitutes co-founded an organization in Atlanta that deals with sex trafficking. "Students often realize that they don't need to go abroad to help."

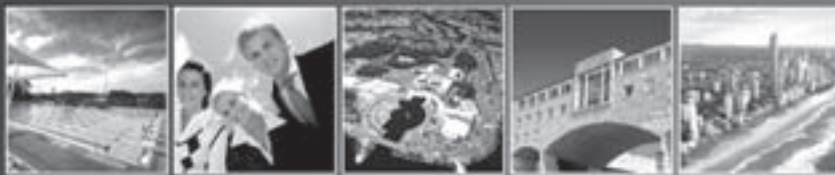
Dionna Little, now a law student at Harvard, said that even though she is not sure what she will end up doing full time, she knows that there will always be a pro-

bono aspect to her career. "Meeting someone like Wangari Maathai and all the other people I met in Kenya made me realize that it is possible to make a difference. You can have a profound impact with small actions and I think because of my experiences in Kenya, I will always keep the community in mind."

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