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Ethics in Tourism and Sustainable Development

Thinking Green

Before going to Costa Rica this past summer, I had already started to learn some general ideas about environmentalism. Starting in elementary school, I can often recall lessons involving the mantra of “reduce, reuse, recycle.” During my freshman year at MSU, I was able to learn a lot more about environmentalism, especially as it relates to food. For instance, I took a writing class that focused on the problems of the food system in the US. We learned how detrimental chemical-heavy, industrial farming can be to our health and to our environment and what buying organic really means. During the same semester, I also took a Cuban history class and learned how farming there was almost exclusively organic and pesticide-free.

Despite piquing my interests with these courses, a lot of the ideas of environmentalism still felt very far-off. My family and I try to buy healthy and organic foods, but options at local supermarkets tend to be somewhat limited. I also do not own a farm and gardening in Michigan can prove somewhat challenging when half the year you cannot even see the grass because of all the ice and snow. I really did want to practice an environmentally sustainable lifestyle, but felt that I had little control and was not sure where to start.

Little did I know that living the environmentally-sound lifestyle that I imagined is actually much more doable than I thought. In fact, I was able to live it myself during my two-month stay in Costa Rica.

In my first month there, I stayed just outside the capital of San José and took Spanish classes in the morning. Afternoons were filled with Arts and Humanities classes, where we

learned about the ethics of ecotourism and sustainability. During the second month, my fellow students and I had to put what we learned into practice by participating in civic engagement activities throughout the country. We were paired up, put on a bus, and sent off.

Lucky for me, I was placed in the mountains of Monteverde, in a smaller town called Cañitas. The assignment my partner and I were given was to work on an ecotouristic coffee farm called LIFE. We were to help out with daily activities, including feeding the animals, weeding, and helping with group tours. During my time there, I was able to learn about how easily sustainable practices can be implemented on a farm and into anyone's everyday life.

In Cañitas, I learned more than I ever could have in a classroom alone. One crucial message was the importance of not being wasteful. On the farm, for instance, there was a strong emphasis on not wasting electricity. Everything that could be done without using it was done. Since we were on the side of a mountain, no water pumps were needed as water was continually flowing downstream, right next to the farm. Along with this, water was collected in rain barrels so that none of it would be squandered. This could then be used for crops, drinking water for animals, and to clean cars or tools.

More than just not wasting our natural resources, I learned about the importance of repairing the environment. The Monteverde area is a cloud forest, but much of the forest has been cut down and replaced with buildings and tourist commodities or pastures for dairy farming. For example, next to LIFE farm is another large patch of land that used to be used for dairy farming. The owner has recently scaled down but still owns the land and has simply left it empty. Since nothing productive was being done to the land, the workers at LIFE talked to the owner and asked if they could reforest it. The owner said yes. Now, every time a student group

visits the farm, they are giving a baby tree to plant in the neighboring vacant land. This is such a vital idea, that our mantra mentioned in the beginning should have the word “restore” added to it.

The farm also works on preserving patches of forest within its own land. Guillermo, one of the owners, told me that all farmers should keep forest near them, if at all possible, because nature is one of the greatest teachers. He told me a story about his experience with ant invasions. In the forest, there are a lot of leaf-cutter ants. Because there are large patches of forest on the farm, these ants can easily find their way to the coffee plants. He brought me over to a particular patch of land that, from afar, appeared to be the muddy red of a brick. As we got closer, I noticed that the ground was not covered in dirt, but in ants. There must have been thousands here and they had taken over the surrounding coffee plants. They were crawling up and down the branches and had stripped it bare.

Guillermo told me that often, with ant invasions like this, farmers are inclined to spray their crops with some sort of pesticide to keep the plants alive. Guillermo, concerned as he is with nature, decided to let it run its course. What he found is that the leaf cutter ants do much more than just cut leaves. They dig deep into the dirt, mix it up, and eventually create fertile clay. They don't often take up large amounts of space on the farm, maybe enough to span six coffee plants (and this farm has thousands), and after a few months they will move onto the next set of plants. Normally, the coffee plants live through this process, though they do not bear fruits until the next season. The clay that results can be mixed with other dirt and used as compost to spread throughout the farm, and it can also be used for pottery, which is super convenient because Guillermo's wife has her own studio at home. If the forest were not next door and nature did not meddle its way into the farm, the productivity of these ants may never have been discovered. What Guillermo showed was an admirable respect for nature that I hope to exercise myself.

Along with preserving and restoring nature, the farmers at LIFE also strongly believed in the importance of giving back to their local community. This could be as simple as buying and selling at their local farmers market or as involved as helping high school students design and carry out science research projects on the farm and in the forests. LIFE also placed a high value on education. All the farmers were constantly learning in the classroom. They enrolled in different types of ecology and science courses and many were also working on learning English.

Before becoming an owner of LIFE, Guillermo was actually a teacher himself. One of his goals of the farm is to educate its visitors. Guillermo and his family are able to see firsthand the effects of deforestation and how this is destroying our earth. One person cannot change the world alone, and it is only through spreading this knowledge and these experiences that others can learn to leave the world a better place.

During my two months in Costa Rica this past summer, I learned that environmentally responsible living is not only possible, but really not that difficult to achieve. Instead of simply worrying about current consumption, we should think about ways of giving back and helping others. We should support our families, friends, and local communities in every way that we can. Most importantly, we should think about how our actions today will affect the world of tomorrow.

We now have a new set of Rs to teach elementary school students: not just reduce, reuse, and recycle, but also restore and respect. With this in mind, I am now convinced more than ever of the importance of implementing ecological practices into our everyday lives. I now feel empowered to change the future and impact the lives around me to help restore and respect the world around us.