Project: Different projects in Longo Mai Finca Sonador

Key terms: Environmental studies, transnational corporations, rural community development, indigenous cultures, ecotourism, ecosystem health

ICADS General Description

The Institute for Central American Development Studies (ICADS) has been working for 30 years in Central America to increase understanding of the region within a historical perspective; to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of root causes, forms and dimensions of underdevelopment and injustice; to stimulate critical evaluation of current development strategies, analyzing their effects on women, children, the poor, and the environment; and to search for alternative methods, policies, and strategies.

The mission of ICADS is two-fold:

- To educate participants about Central America by teaching Spanish and by offering academic programs that utilize a theoretically critical perspective as well as hands-on experience to help students deepen insights into current social, political and economic realities and their effects on the environment and society, especially the poor and marginalized.
- To provide support to organizations and communities throughout the countries where we work; especially to groups that have demonstrated a commitment to learning and/or are dedicated to social justice work in areas such as education, healthcare, human rights, anti-hunger issues, and environmental issues.

ICADS regular programs include internship opportunities with community organizations, and field research to help students explore topics related to social and environmental well-being. A strong staff of people from both Central and North America accompany students as they learn about themselves and the world.
Community Partner Description

Longo Mai Finca Sonador / Escuela de la Tierra

The community of Longo Mai Finca Sonador is located south of the El General Valley, near Buenos Aires, Puntarenas. It is a unique community in Costa Rica as its origins date back to the late 1970’s when a group of young European activists organized a cooperative and bought land in Costa Rica to provide refuge for Nicaraguan and Salvadoran war refugees. Nowadays, the community is a mix of families from different Central American countries, and each of those families has their own house and small parcel where they practice subsistence agriculture to complement the income they receive from selling coffee, sugar cane, and other kinds of jobs. The community has a strong connection with environmental conservation and sustainable development; through the years, many members of the community have been actively involved in social movements to protect local rivers against detrimental effects of large scale pineapple production in the region and against private hydroelectric projects that pose potential threats to the environment.

Moreover, the community has strong connections with European organizations that constantly send volunteers to help in different projects. The Escuela de la Tierra is a small organization in Longo Mai that recently began to work with students and researchers from different parts of the world, promoting culture, education, human rights, and the defense of nature. More information on Longo Mai and Escuela de la Tierra can be found in their websites:

http://www.escueladelatierra.org/
http://www.sonador.info/en/

Social issues / Potential Project Descriptions

There are several social and environmental issues to explore in Longo Mai. As per conversations with members of the community and Escuela de la Tierra, the following are all potential research areas; all of these are general ideas, the one chosen by the CBR student will be developed through communication between the involved parties prior to the arrival of the CBR student:

- There have been several social movements to protect the local rivers in Longo Mai and surrounding communities, especially from recent plans to
build private hydroelectric projects. A potential project in this area could study community members’ perspectives on the perceived pros and cons of such developments, thus helping community organizations complement their knowledge on residents’ feelings and needs about these projects.

- Pineapple production by large transnationals is a complex issue as it is one of the main sources of employment while at the same time raising serious questions about their environmental and labor practices. Potential research topics are: soil deterioration, river health, labor rights and health, destruction of archaeological patrimony. (In 2017, a CBR student conducted research on the health of one of the local rivers to determine if pineapple production had affected it; the community is always interested in further studying this or another river.)

- A member of the Tropical Biology Program of Escuela de la Tierra has done work on a digital inventory of the plants in Longo Mai. More recently, work is being done in an insect inventory. A CBR student can continue this work.

- With the cooperation of Bosque de Agua Biological Corridor, a two-year project monitoring mammals was done in the Longo Mai Wildlife Refuge. A CBR student could use the materials from this project (mostly photographs) to further investigate the mammals present in the forests of the community and then present to the community members about the importance of protecting those species.

- There has been work done on indigenous petroglyphs present in the community’s land. A local artist is working in a project called “garden of memory” with the goal of explaining the legacy of past cultures to present inhabitants. A CBR student could work in this project by studying the petroglyphs, and gathering perspectives of community members about their knowledge and appreciation of them.

- In the field of biology, species monitoring is an important topic for the community. Identifying species such as birds, reptiles and amphibians that are dependent on specific habitats present in the forests of the community helps educate people about the health and the importance of the conservation of such habitats.

**Community Partner Participation**

The community members of Longo Mai and the members of Escuela de la Tierra often connect with young people who are interested in learning about life in rural Costa Rica. The community members are very welcoming and host students and in their homes and provide advice on studies and projects. The community will participate in the project by sharing their perspectives as well as contacts and
information to learn more about social movements that address environmental and social issues. Key informants will provide some frameworks for thinking about different community perspectives, and the research will work as an objective observer of the different opinions in the community.

**Impact of this Project on the Community**

All of the ideas listed above were suggested by members of the community. The impact may be specific according to the selected project. The expectation is that further information obtained through research will strengthen the overall education of community residents in a particular subject, which will in turn, provide them with better tools to make plans or decisions in important matters.

**Research Mentor and Mentorship Structure**

ICADS Research Mentors are Gabriel Vargas (Lic. in Sociology) and Matthew Dearstyne (ICADS Assistant Director). The ICADS mentors will be the primary academic mentors during the project, and will help to develop objectives and provide feedback on the review of the literature. The ICADS mentors are based in San Jose and will be in contact with students via phone, email, and visits during the data collection phase of the project.

The community mentors, in this case, members of Escuela de la Tierra and members of the community of Longo Mai, will provide on-the-ground support during the data collection phase, providing feedback on objectives and methodology, as well as logistical and cultural support during the time in the field.

**Methodology**

The methods of the research will be defined once one of the above ideas is selected and discussed by the student, community members and research mentors. For social science oriented projects, interviews, focus groups, surveys, workshops, participant and non-participant observation, are common methods. For natural science related projects, many different techniques for data collecting and sampling exist as well. Note that a project can include both social and natural science data collection.

**Student Profile and Skills**
The student carrying out this type of research must be proactive and open-minded. He/she must have an interest in Latin American studies and culture, and a sensitivity toward intercultural issues. Background in social and/or natural sciences is recommended according to the nature of the chosen research project.

Intermediate/advanced Spanish needed.