

The

# Pure Life

One early May morning, 10 anxious students and a professor boarded a plane destined for Costa Rica for a two-week study abroad trip focused on agricultural sustainability.

From their first moment in Jan José, Costa Rica, these students were changed forever. Considering they are from West Texas, the students were not accustomed to the extreme humidity, rolling hills, and all of the luscious vegetation.

For Hunter Parrott, a sophomore agricultural education major from Plains, Texas, the trip was like a dream.

“I was really excited when we finally got off of the plane. Getting to travel to a whole other country and getting to learn about something that I truly care about was amazing,” Parrott said.

For the first four days of the trip, students stayed in dorms at Earth University. The Earth University campus is a living laboratory where tropical agriculture, conservation, and the needs of rural communities find a balance. The campus is comprised of 400 students from 33 different countries. Earth’s educational approach prepares their students to contribute to the sustainable development of their respective country and construct a prosperous and just society.

During their stay at Earth University, the students met professor Alex Pacheco, a Cuban native, who presented the struggles of sustainability in the humid tropics.

According to Virginia Huffman, a junior agricultural communications major from San Angelo, Texas, Pacheco’s presentation gave her insight on achieving sustainability.

“We got to compare some of the major issues farmers in Texas have against the ones farmers in the tropics have, and it was interesting to see how different the problems were,” Huffman said.

After Pacheco’s presentation, Earth University second-year students, Didier Bolaños and Hajaratu

Issahaka, spoke to the students about their work-experience modules. They explained how they traveled to surrounding communities to teach farmers methods to sustainably increase their overall yield and profitability.

Dennis Underwood, an agricultural education master’s student from Dimmitt, Texas, said the first module they visited was the aloe vera farm Issahaka was assisting with.

“The aloe vera farmer was taking all of the knowledge that Earth University was teaching him, and he completely redeveloped his farming operation,” said Underwood. “His plans were

to expand and to completely vertically integrate his farm into producing the actual gel.”

The aloe vera farm experience surprised a lot of the students. Huffman said she never knew people grew aloe vera as a means to make money; she always saw it as a mere houseplant.

The second work module the students toured had a handful of cattle and a dairy operation consisting of three cows. A father and his two adolescent sons operated this farm.

Parrott said it was interesting to see children working on the farm. In America, school is more important, but in Costa Rica the children seem to be okay with working, because it is how they make a living.

“They don’t have a lot of money so they are farming to keep a roof over their heads and feed their families. We farm to make a buck,” said Parrott.

One of the many stops on the trip was to the Corsicana organic pineapple farm. Here the students got to see the process it takes for pineapple to get from the field to ones table.

On the first part of the tour the students were driven out into the fields to see the planting and harvesting process in action.



*A farmer explains the medicinal uses for his Aloe Vera crop.*



While on the trip, students got to interact with the people of Costa Rica and experience pineapple harvesting and processing as part of understanding sustainable agriculture in the humid tropics.

The leaves on top of the pineapple, called the crown have to be planted by hand.

The workers dig shallow holes in the ground and place the crown inside. Each worker plants thousands of leaves each day.

One thing that caught the students' attention was the sea of black that covered sections of the field.

The tour guide explained, after a harvest, workers cover the ground with weatherproof black plastic to increase the soil temperature, speed up the rate of decomposition and ensure quality soil for the next planting.

The students were then driven to another section of the field where a harvest was underway. Here 12 workers slowly walked through the field examining each pineapple they passed, picking only the ripe ones. The workers in these fields were mainly immigrants from Nicaragua. The sword-like leaves on the pineapple plant are very sharp; therefore, workers are required to wear thick materials and other protective clothing to keep from getting injured while walking through the fields.

Through this tour, Parrott said he gained valuable insight and an appreciation from the source of his food.

"I never realized how much pineapple was produced, or how difficult it was to complete a harvest. These people had to walk through the field all day and pick each pineapple individually by hand because they ripen at different times," Huffman said.

From the field, the students were lead through the

factory where the pineapples were washed, examined by workers for imperfections, sorted into boxes

according to size, then stored in a cooler before being shipped to the United States.

Towards the end of students' trip, they began to have a different view on the world and what sustainability really meant.

Huffman said she better understands how

large of an impact agriculture has on the economy; providing much of the employment for the people in tropical climates.

"I see how important agriculture is to these people and how unimportant Americans think it to be. It really changed my perspective on agriculture – getting to see where my food comes from," said Huffman.

Once more, 10 students and a professor boarded a plane; this time destined for the United States. As the plane began its take off, the students looked out at the Costa Rican landscape and reminisced on their trip and newfound knowledge.

"Costa Ricans have the saying 'pura vida', which means pure life. I didn't really understand it fully until the end of the trip, Parrott said. I think if more people adapted this, it would really make a difference." 

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Carlee Smith  
Sweetwater, Texas

