

Research and Growth in Cuba

Experiences from the ecology research trip to Cuba in May 2017

[Campus News](#) | Posted on October 5, 2017



The Isla of Youth at a place called Punta Frances. The area is known for its coral reefs and rocky shores. (Photo by Daniel Gonzalez)

By: Hannah Gallant

This past May, 12 students led by Daniel Gonzalez, associate professor of biology at Andrews University, had the unique opportunity to take a two-week ecology field trip to Cuba. They were accompanied on their journey by William Hayes, professor of biology at Loma Linda University, and his wife, Patricia Barry-Faillers, an avid naturalist and emergency room nurse.

The goal of the trip was to make ecology material more accessible and applicable for the students. After observing ecology scores on the science section of senior exit exams, the Andrews University Department of Biology implemented this undergraduate research program to hopefully help students better grasp ecological concepts.

Prior to actually traveling to Cuba, the students had one week of intensive core ecology lectures accompanied by videos regarding Cuba's geopolitical situation and natural history. While in Cuba they endeavored to view as many different ecosystems and habitats as possible.

The group stayed mostly in Western Cuba, as well as the Island of Youth. They caved and snorkeled frequently in three different areas. Students had a chance to personally observe reefs, mangroves, rocky shores and seagrass beds. The animal life they observed included: dolphins, manatees, arachnids, bats, tropical fish, crabs, spiny lobsters, lion fish, tarantulas, frogs and various bird species.

"They experienced a lot of the endemic species which is what makes islands so special," Gonzalez explained. In fact, they saw over half the endemic birds on the island of Cuba (there are approximately 21), including the smallest bird in the world known as the bee hummingbird.

An average day on the trip would generally consist of a formal lecture from one of the professors, followed by active observation and data collection. They changed locations frequently, and usually spent the night with various host families. Julie Johnson, a sophomore at

Andrews University, says, “the most learning was done outside of the lecture times! We all carried a field notebook with us, because it was not out of the ordinary for a professor to randomly tell us intriguing facts.”

This type of learning really helped to solidify the ecological concepts in the minds of the students. “For us there was no on-the-side. The whole trip was engaged,” Gonzalez says.

Isabella Hwang, a third-year biology major, captures this idea, “Reading ecology from a textbook is very different from crouching down in a bog with blood-sucking mosquitoes and listening to the calls of a Cuban trogon.”

Throughout the trip, the group was accompanied by local biologists. Consequently, this made the trip more customized than a traditional tourist trip. “We were able to get access to locations and lectures that your average tourists would never have access to,” Gonzalez explains. “I think that God really blessed us; I think the nationals who traveled with us noted that.”

For some students, meeting the local biologists was one of the best parts of the trip. Adam Weir, a second-year biology major, describes how his most impactful experience was “meeting Dr. Barro of the University of Havana. His commitment to his work, his people and protecting the biodiversity of a unique island inspired me.”

Traveling with the local biologists and staying with host families not only gave the students a more immersive experience, but it also allowed them to be a witness. “Often times people in my field will have a certain stereotype of what Americans are like or what college-aged students are like... We had a group that was so representative of our university that I think they were really amazed by that,” says Gonzalez.

Being a witness was just part of the experience the students had. Through their travels in Cuba they were exposed to a different culture and various life stories. Gonzalez explains, “Because I know the culture and I understood the language, I really wanted these kids to interact with the local people and to know the real Cuba, not the sort of romanticized ‘they drive old cars kind.’ I wanted them to know and hear from the voices of real Cubans what their lives were like.”

Staying with host families, instead of in hotels, was a large factor in helping the students have a more immersive trip. Joshua Ahn, a fifth-year biology major, adds, “The experience that we had with our host families and the Cuban colleagues made me realize that although many natives leave Cuba seeking greater opportunities and better living conditions, there are many who are also willing to fight and persevere out of love for their people and their nation.”

With this cultural exchange and bonding experience, the students walked away with a broadened worldview. It also provided them with a hands-on opportunity to fall more in love with science.

“To see that element of discovery in students, and see that joy in their face when they encounter something for the first time. To see them fall in love with these organisms and natural history is invigorating,” expresses Gonzalez.

Ultimately, all the students walked away changed in some way. Some realized their passion for science, others had gained a new friend. Julie Johnson describes her experience of growth and learning as, “a lot of work, but at the same time a lot of fun. Traveling to Cuba as an American citizen was such a privilege, and taking a class that allowed me to hike, snorkel, explore several habitats, and observe endemic species made my summer memorable.”

In the future, the Department of Biology will alternate between trips to Florida and Cuba. There will be no ecology research trip for the 2018–2019 school year. However, Cuban political climate permitting, there will be a trip to Cuba during 2019–2020, and one to Florida in 2020–2021. The trips will happen either during spring break, or after spring semester ends in May. Students have the option to take ecology as a regular semester course or a field course such as this trip to Cuba.

To learn more about being a part of these trips and/or the undergraduate research program, contact Tom Goodwin, chair of the Department of Biology, at 269-471-3243 (goodwin@andrews.edu) or Daniel Gonzalez at 269-471-3263 (gonzalezd@andrews.edu). To get in touch with students who already went on the trip, contact Daniel Gonzalez as well. For future trips, watch for fliers and informational announcements being circulated and displayed.

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