

Natural Resources and Environmental Issues

Volume 9 *University Education in Natural Resources*

Article 4

2002

International experience: Natural resource education overseas

Erin O. Sills

Department of Forestry, North Carolina State University, Raleigh

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/nrei>

Recommended Citation

Sills, Erin O. (2002) "International experience: Natural resource education overseas," *Natural Resources and Environmental Issues*: Vol. 9 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/nrei/vol9/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Natural Resources and Environmental Issues by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE: NATURAL RESOURCE EDUCATION OVERSEAS

Erin O. Sills¹

¹Department of Forestry, North Carolina State University, Raleigh NC 27695-8008. E-mail: Erin_sills@ncsu.edu

ABSTRACT: What are the unique challenges and benefits of natural resource education overseas? This session addressed these questions in the context of short-term study programs in forestry and other natural resource fields. The panel included Tom Hammett, Virginia Tech, who leads summer programs in Central America; JoAnn Beckwith, Michigan State University, who leads summer programs in Australia; Geoff Habron, also of Michigan State University, who leads a summer program in the Brazilian Amazon; Bruce Bongarten of the University of Georgia, which offers several month-long courses in conservation issues, including one to South Africa; Kim Steiner of Pennsylvania State University, which has an exchange study program with Freiburg University in Germany; Gary Blank and Steve McKeand, NC State University, who coordinate an exchange study program with SLU in Sweden; and Ingrid Schmidt and Kristi Hubbard of the NC State Study Abroad Office. My experience with international natural resource education is designing and leading spring-break trips to Latin America. We also had input from many other faculty who have led—or are planning—study programs in natural resource issues around the world.

Everyone in the session agreed that students find short-term study programs to be “wonderful experiences.” Some faculty require students to keep trip diaries, and these often suggest that the programs are truly “life-changing.” Students gain independence, confidence, and a new appreciation for the quality of life in the United States (such as the easy availability of clean drinking water). Firsthand experience with natural resource issues in other countries enhances students’ respect and understanding for different approaches to natural resource management. While the programs are always extremely “educational,” panelists noted that faculty must plan carefully to ensure that there is also “academic” content. This content can be enriched by making use of the great multitude of resources that are available at the destination—this is what makes the programs as exciting for teachers as they are for students.

Panelists disagreed on how much cost affects students’ decisions about participation in these programs. Some noted that motivated students find a way to pay for even relatively high-cost programs. Others argued that keeping the cost down is a major concern. Strategies include seeking in-kind support from forestry and other natural resource industries in the destination country, using campgrounds rather than hotels, and running study programs as an exchange. For example, PSU and Freiburg host study programs for each other; thus, in both Germany and the United States, knowledgeable local hosts make the logistical arrangements and prevail on colleagues to contribute their expertise to the programs. Nevertheless, there are always cost factors that are difficult to control, such as variation in exchange rates.

Study programs run on an exchange basis are one way of “giving back” to hosts (by arranging their study tour of the United States). Other panelists noted that their student groups had volunteered at bird observatories or with cleanup drives in communities. In most cases, the student groups gain as much, if not more, from these volunteer activities as the local people. In fact, several faculty see the “community service” components of their programs primarily as a way to encourage student interaction and communication with local people. Others indicated that the ethics of tourism and of their study tours is a central issue for discussion during their programs, with students challenged to think critically about their impact on local environments and people. The degree to which students can make a meaningful contribution and build meaningful relationships with local people may depend on whether the study tour is organized around a base, as opposed to being structured as a series of stops in different locations. One suggestion that could apply to either of these models is to solicit local people’s input on the design of student activities. For example, rather than just hiring local people as guides, ask them to plan the students’ visit to their village. One caveat raised was that in some cases, it might be best to forego interaction with local people, for example, some aboriginal people in Australia.

Another facet of the ethics of study-abroad programs is bringing the benefits back to campus, to share with students who are not able to participate directly. It is important to recognize student sensitivities surrounding the issue of who gets to participate in study-abroad programs. Students who have jobs, family commitments, or course schedules that prevent their participation may resent this missed opportunity. Alternatives for these students could include enhanced interaction with international exchange students on campus and study tours to locations within the United States that have local cultures and environmental resources outside the students' current range of experience. The NC State Study Abroad Office has a system of peer presenters, whereby students who have returned from study-abroad programs visit on-campus courses and student clubs to talk about their experience. In the Department of Forestry at NC State, students give departmental seminars reporting on their experiences overseas. Another possibility is to embed the study tour as an optional "lab" in an on-campus course and to draw on the experience of students who chose the study tour through group projects and class discussion. A final suggestion is to build contacts between students at the home campus in the United States and at foreign institutions visited during a study tour; for example, by encouraging e-mail communication as a way to extend some of the intercultural benefits to students in both countries who could not participate in the study program.

The panel concluded with discussion of some of the logistical issues involved in planning and leading study-abroad programs. In general, the panelists agreed that there is continuing, strong student interest in these programs and that the logistical challenges of international travel are surmountable, even in the changed international climate. For example, visas may take longer to obtain, but they are still obtainable. The importance of coordination between the faculty trip leader and the university was emphasized, with two-way communication and clear contingency plans a must. All agreed that we should seek ways to expand cooperation and coordination between universities, so that we can continue to provide our students with the many benefits of these programs, while reducing the burden on individual faculty. This discussion will surely continue outside the conference and at the next UENR.