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Cross-Cultural and Experiential Learning in El Salvador for Extension Specialists: Lessons Learned in the Field

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Abstract

A delegation from Lincoln University (LU) Cooperative Extension of Missouri participated in a 12-day exchange program that included visits to communities and institutions in Central and Western El Salvador. The delegation included LU Native Plants Program (LU-NPP) staff and members of four communities in Missouri. The objectives were: 1. For the LU delegation to be immersed in the Salvadoran culture and learn how communities protect their resources and use native plants in their daily lives; 2. To exchange lessons learned between the LU-NPP, Salvadoran educators, producers, farmers, and communities; and 3. Identify organizations or agencies interested in forming alliances with the LU-NPP. Joint collaborative efforts between LU and organizations in El Salvador will help empower small farmers and will further advance agricultural and ecological education for low-income students in El Salvador and in Missouri.

During site visits, local leaders from different agencies and community organizations and the LU delegation engaged in conversations to learn from each other's experiences. Salvadoran specialists were surprised to learn that Lincoln University also works with low-income communities and that farms in Missouri do not only grow cash crops. Many of the Native Plant Program's lessons learned in Missouri could be adopted in El Salvador to help small farmers and rural entrepreneurs. Evaluations from participants of this exchange program indicate that the delegation members increased their level of understanding of Latino culture and some had the opportunity to practice their Spanish skills which they can also use in Missouri. This program was funded by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) and was part of two Capacity Building Grants.

Keywords: native plant programs, cultural competence, rural entrepreneurs, extension exchange program

Introduction

The primary mission of Lincoln University (LU) Cooperative Extension is to enhance the quality of life of underserved populations in Missouri and beyond. The Native Plants Program (NPP) as part of LU Cooperative Extension offers educational opportunities to communities through the adoption of native plants for conservation, consumption, and income given their potential as specialty crops. Intercultural learning experiences for Extension specialists and others working directly with people of different ethnicities and cultures can provide tools to make their work more efficient. For this reason, the NPP developed a cross-cultural and experiential learning project in El Salvador for Extension specialists in 2014.

This project used the model of Michigan State University's Experiential Learning Program in Mexico, which the first author attended in 2009. The purpose of this professional development program was to enhance the capacity of educators to work with socially disadvantaged Latino farmers by means of an educational model that integrates an experiential learning curriculum that was focused on Mexican cultural values and sustainable farming systems (Michigan State University, and personal observations). In Mexico, the group visited several communities that were adopting sustainable practices and used native plants in their daily lives. Some of these communities were isolated (Navarrete-Tindall, 2009a, 2009b). The group learned about the culture, people, food, native plant crops and their value-added uses. The Experiential Learning Program in Mexico also introduced participants to approaches that educators can use to earn the trust of communities (Wilson, 1982, and personal observations).

The NPP developed the El Salvador delegation because the program works with people of different ethnicities and with low incomes in Missouri, but in many cases, outreach and education can be challenging due to lack of understanding of other cultures, foreign or not. By visiting small communities in El Salvador with cultural backgrounds

similar to those in small towns in Missouri, we predicted that people participating in this experience would have a better understanding of Hispanic cultures and help improve relations among Extension educators and their stakeholders. The delegation from Missouri included two senior citizens, three NPP staff and two NPP volunteers (one is an ethnobiologist and Spanish-English interpreter, and the second is an anthropologist and photographer). In El Salvador, the visits were limited to small rural communities that have adopted sustainable practices for farming and the production of value-added products. The Salvadoran participants in the exchange included more than 20 individuals, many of them leaders of their communities. Delegates were exposed to local cultures, learned about what people are doing to use and protect their natural resources, and about challenges that communities face every day due to the unstable situation in El Salvador. This visit was part of two projects: FINCA (Families, Integrating Nature, Conservation and Agriculture) and Gardening as Therapy for Physical and Mental Health, both funded by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA).

Background

Since 2012, the Native Plants Program of Missouri has sought to create alliances with different institutions and private groups in El Salvador using presentations to introduce the program and the importance of native plants. These presentations have been offered to academic institutions, private and governmental agencies, farmers and producers, and people of different disciplines in El Salvador. One of the alliances created is with Asociación AGAPE of El Salvador, a Catholic organization (AGAPE, 2015). AGAPE works mainly in the western part of the country on environmental issues to improve the lives of people living there. They conduct outreach, research, and education projects to promote the protection of the Biosphere Reserve Apaneca Ilamatepec in Sonsonate. This biosphere is located in three states: Sonsonate, Santa Ana and Ahuachapan, all in the western

part of the country (MARN, 2015). LU-NPP partnered with AGAPE to organize this Experiential Learning Program, and in November of 2014, the delegation from LU visited El Salvador for 10 days. A local horticulturist and biologist specialist was contracted to offer vegetable and flower gardening classes to a group of senior citizens. AGAPE was also contracted to organize trips in Sonsonate. In addition to AGAPE, main collaborators included the Agronomy College (Facultad de Ciencias Agronomicas in Spanish) of the University of El Salvador, Eco-Hotel Arbol de Fuego, the non-governmental organizations (NGO) El Balsamo, Lamatepec Foundation, and the San Vicente de Paul Senior Citizen Home; volunteers included members of the Chicaromero and Navarrete-Baires families. The visit included presentations and conversations with local community leaders, a gardening demonstration, staying at an eco-hotel, and travel to sustainable tourism sites.

Objectives

Objectives of this experiential learning were: 1) To immerse the LU delegation in Salvadoran culture and learn how communities protect their resources and use native plants in their daily lives; 2) To exchange knowledge between the LU-NPP, Salvadoran educators, producers, farmers, and communities; and 3) To identify organizations or agencies interested in forming alliances with the LU-NPP.

Expected Outcomes

- To improve relations with Latinos in Missouri
- To develop more collaborative efforts between LU and organizations in El Salvador to advance agricultural and ecological education for communities in El Salvador and in Missouri
- To support opportunities for cultural and education exchange for Salvadoran and Lincoln University students
- To offer Experiential Learning to other groups in the future.

Methodology

To determine the impact and response of presentations, conversations, and visits in general, we recorded the number of participants, their gender, estimated age, urban or rural background, and the number of one-on-one conversations. This was mainly done via interviews, videotaping, or personal observations (Swanson et al. 1997).

To determine the level of impact that this experience had on participants from Missouri, they were asked to complete a survey. For the purposes of this paper, only one of the questions from the survey will be analyzed: "Please share your overall impressions about your experiences in El Salvador in terms of the culture, people, food, nature, native plants, and other areas."

Ten Day Itinerary

Prior to the visit, the trip was planned via Skype, email, and by phone. Transportation was contracted with the NGO El Balsamo, the University of El Salvador organized a presentation by Dr. Navarrete-Tindall, and AGAPE personnel planned the itinerary with the collaboration of local families and entrepreneurs.

The visit began on November 18 and ended on December 3, 2014, with the leader of the delegation and one of the volunteers arriving three days prior to the full delegation. During this period, the Agronomy College of the University of El Salvador sponsored a presentation by the delegation leader Dr. Navarrete-Tindall about the importance of Native Plants in Missouri and in El Salvador. The target group was students and faculty of the Agronomy College. One of the objectives of this presentation was to increase awareness about underutilized native plants in El Salvador for human consumption. A workshop organized by the coordinator of the Outreach and Education Program of the Agronomy College was offered for communities in San Salvador. The workshop was on container vegetable gardening in small spaces. The day after the workshop, the rest of the delegation arrived and were introduced to local

Salvadoran cuisine for their first time.

On day four, the whole group visited Coatepeque which is part of the Biosphere Reserve Apaneca Ilamatepec (MARN, 2015) located in western El Salvador. During this tour, two students of the two-year technical program on EcoTourism at AGAPE were tour guides. They introduced the ecology of the region and identified native plants utilized for food or other value-added products, as well as local culture and traditions. The group visited the volcanic Coatepeque Lake, the town of Coatepeque, two fincas (Spanish for farms), a fruit sale stand, and the town of Nahuizalco. One finca visited was very diverse, where the farmer and his family have a small plant nursery and grow vegetables and fruits on 2.5 acres. They sell their produce and plants at their farm or in a sale stand beside the farm. The second finca visited is owned by Los Pinos cooperative which produces coffee as the primary crop. Shade trees planted to protect the coffee also provide firewood and fruits as secondary crops. In addition, they offer cabins for overnight rental and have a restaurant where coffee tasting and sales are also offered. In Nahuizalco, which is a small town in the mountains, the group visited a Living Museum where indigenous senior citizens share stories about their culture and traditions. Traditional trade stores where ethnic goods are sold are owned by locals and can be found across town.

On day five, the group stayed in San Salvador. The owner of the Eco-Hotel Arbol de Fuego gave a presentation and tour of the hotel to show the sustainable practices they used in their daily operations. By adopting conservation and alternative energy practices, their carbon footprint has been greatly reduced as their profits have increased.

Another aspect of this Experiential Learning included vegetable gardening with a group of senior citizens, residents of the San Vicente de Paul Senior Citizen Home. Their training was initiated four months before the LU group visit with the assistance of a horticulturist and the home group therapist. Participants and educators presented the results of their project by growing greens and some fast-growing vegetables. This was followed by a visit

to the Arts and Crafts Market, also located in San Salvador, which exposed the group to a touristic and cultural experience.

On day six, the group visited cooperatives of producers and small entrepreneurs in San Julian, Cuisnahuat, and Sonzacate, all small towns in the mountains. In San Julian, the group visited a local market; in Cuisnahuat, the group met the mayor and visited an old church, a cooperative where members make clay figures, and a cooperative making indigo dye from a native plant. In the afternoon, the delegation was greeted by a group of more than 40 community members and their leaders, and six members of a local cooperative exhibited their products. There were conversations between the LU group and local farmers and other attendees.

On day seven, a professor and three of his student interns from the University of El Salvador gave a presentation at the eco-hotel about sustainable projects that they conduct with local communities in different towns in El Salvador, including the students' experiences from their three-month internships. Later that day, participants experienced more of the traditional cuisine eating pupusas, tamales, and beverages prepared with local fruits. On day eight, AGAPE hosted an entrepreneur's day at Izalco, another small town with strong cultural traditions. During this visit, conversations among participating groups revealed extensive work being done with native plants of El Salvador, especially cacao (*Theobroma cacao*), ojushte (*Brosimum allicastrum*), and indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria*). Ojushte is a tree that produces a seed called Maya Nut which is native to El Salvador and the region and promoted for its high nutritional value (Orwa et al., 2009). Several young entrepreneurs sell the processed seed for making tortillas, baked goods, and drinks. The mayor of Izalco welcomed the group, and a recently finished mural of the Biosphere painted by a local artist was inaugurated. Day nine was a free day to visit touristic places in San Salvador and on day ten, three of the LU delegates left El Salvador. On day 11, those that remained visited the beach and learned about coastal vegetation and on day 12, the group provided a formal presentation about uses

of native edible plants in Missouri for farmers and staff of the NGO El Balsamo.

Results

Based on observations, surveys, and personal interviews, the three objectives included in this paper were achieved. The following comments were responses from six participating delegates to the selected question mentioned in methodology about participants' overall experience in El Salvador. Select comments are shared here in thematic areas that were commonly mentioned:

- Feeling welcomed by friendly people: “The people were warm and accommodating.” “Overall, people were very friendly and were pleased to show their culture to foreigners who were interested.”
- Natural resource differences and management: “El Salvador is a small and beautiful country with many natural and social resources, but high population density and political instability are straining the natural and social systems.” “The vegetation was very different, densely abundant, and interesting.” “We visited the Botanical Garden of San Salvador, and it was a treat to experience the canopy of a rain forest next to orchid display and a desert garden.”
- Farming practices: “Most memorable was visiting the fincas and the places where the people were investing in their past culture and revising their agricultural practices that worked.” “The sight of so many fruit and nut trees in most of the yards and fields was a new experience for me.”
- Food and cultural experiences: “I had the experience of being totally immersed in a new culture, the food was very delicious and different and very surprising to include corn, squash, and beans in many dishes.” “The cultural festivities that we saw demonstrate that the past indigenous and religious history of the country still play an important role in current events and artistic manifestations.”

Future Implications/Plans

As a result of this and previous visits, three alliances have been secured. The LU-NPP has initiated collaboration with a special educational institution called Hogar La Rioja. Similar to our project with the San Vicente de Paul Senior Citizens Home, a six-month gardening project was initiated in August 2015 with children with intellectual disabilities at Hogar La Rioja. Secondly, a group of neighbors and the Eco-Hotel Arbol de Fuego are interested in establishing a small urban farm with native plants following the FINCA model and contacted the Native Plants Program to seek advice. Finally, a relationship is being built with officials of the University of El Salvador in connection with their newly created Research Institute of Agriculture, Food, and the Environment (Instituto de Investigaciones en Ciencias Agroalimentarias y Ambientales) at the Agronomy College of the University of El Salvador. These partnerships are expected to be formalized with the signing of letters of understanding to assure future collaboration including the search for grant funding to offer internships for Salvadoran and LU students in El Salvador.

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