

# Study Abroad Brings Lectures to Life



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**Francisco Vilella**

## **By Karen Brasher**

When students enrolled in the MSU College of Forest Resources tropical biology course last spring, they had no idea it would take them to another world.

A semester of lectures on tropical rain forests, coral reefs, sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation was followed by a 10-day voyage to the Central American nation of Belize.

“Study abroad experiences are a great way to teach students by immersing them in the natural and cultural history of an area,” said Francisco Vilella, course instructor and wildlife and fisheries professor. “When I first offered the course, I was sure a trip to a tropical rain forest would enhance the students’ learning experience.”

The first course in the College of Forest Resources with a study abroad component, the extended field trip accomplished all that Vilella had hoped.



The first stop on the journey was in the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary and Jaguar Preserve. Located in southern Belize, the sanctuary covers about 150 square miles of tropical forest and is the world's only jaguar preserve.

"Actually experiencing the rain forest made everything we had learned in class come alive," said Alisha Workman, a senior wildlife and fisheries student. "Our alarm clock early in the morning at the Cockscomb Sanctuary consisted of (what sounded like) hundreds of birds, and it was awesome."

Next, the students went north to the La Milpa Biological Station. This is a private reserve owned by the Programme for Belize. Students were able to visit a mature mahogany forest, walk through recently uncovered Mayan ruins and observe neotropical mammals.

"Throughout the trip, students observed a large number of neotropical birds," Vilella said. "In the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary and Jaguar Preserve, there are over 300 recorded species."

The final leg of the trip included a water taxi ride to Caye Caulker, an island in the Great Barrier Reef of Belize. Students spent a day snorkeling in this marine sanctuary, the second largest barrier reef in the world.

"Snorkeling in the reef allowed students to observe a vast diversity of coral reef fish species and close encounters with Manatee, sea turtles, sting rays and nurse sharks," Vilella said.

While in Belize, students visited more than 10 distinct areas that ranged from wet to dry forests. Students also discovered Mayan ruins and a medicine man in the country. Every student member of the group came back from Belize with a new appreciation of study abroad experiences, as well as the wonder and excitement of life beyond the United States.

"It was almost surreal for me to be walking down a path at one of the excavation sites and look up and see a family of monkeys," Workman said. "I wanted to go to Belize for the wildlife but ended up appreciating the people and their culture as well."

*All Photos Submitted*

