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ISU Foresters Visit Mexico and Costa Rica

In the spring of 1989, a group of forestry faculty members and international graduate students were discussing opportunities to visit tropical countries where they could see tropical forestry and agroforestry activities, and explore opportunities to do research. As a result, the Forestry Department had a seminar during the Fall, 1989 semester on forestry in tropical countries, with an emphasis on Central America. Then on January 3, 1990, nine of us, Gary Bahr, Joe Colletti, William Edwards, Rob Hilken, Jim Rosacker, Dick Schultz, Cyndi Snyder, Jan Thompson, and myself, flew to Cancun, Mexico.

Two other participants, Rich Hall and Patricia Negritos Castillo, were waiting at the airport with Mr. Javier Chavelas, (head of the agroforestry project being conducted by the Mexican government in Quintana Roo), two cars, a jeep, and plans for a busy week. The group, consisting of four faculty members, one state employee (an ex-graduate student), three graduate students, and three undergraduates, was given a quick initiation to January in the tropics with a pleasant dip in the ocean along Cancun's beautiful beach front. Unfortunately, some members of the group don't see very well, so they wore their glasses into the ocean. Three went in with their glasses, only one returned with them.

Our first full day was spent learning about and exploring Chichen Itza, the ruins of a major Mayan city. We were very impressed with the city, which demonstrated the sophistication of the Mayan people. A common statue seen in the city was a Mayan god named Chac Mol. His name came up so often during the next couple days that we nick named ourselves the Chac Mol 11. From Chichen Itza, we went to Felipe Carillo Puerto where we spent a day with foresters working to help 15 ejidos improve the management of their natural forests. Ejidos are groups of Mexicans that own, by governmental decree, land in Mexico. The foresters explained how they were helping the ejidos, then they took us to a second growth forest where we discussed dendrology, forest succession, and chikle (the base for bubble gum) production. We also visited a saw mill that an ejido has set up to process the mahogany that they cut on their land. Finally, we visited a factory that peels light colored tropical woods to produce paint stirrers, pop sickle sticks, and other small wooden items.

The next day we met with a German forester from GTZ, an organization similar to US AID. He is working with 16 ejidos to help them improve how they manage their forests for mahogany, the most important timber species in that part of Mexico. He described his work and took us to an area that was being managed for mahogany. By this time the Chac Mol 11 had acquired a habit that would follow us all the way to Costa Rica and then back to Ames — hacky sacking. Gary Bahr, veteran hacky sacker, brought a hacky sack with him. He got a few of us to play in Felipe Carillo Puerto, then a few more times during the morning while we waited for the German forester, then in the evening after we had been in the woods, and then almost any time that we had 5 or 10 minutes with nothing special to do. Except for Gary, the super hacker, non of us were good to begin with and none of us were very good when we got back. Playing hacky sack was fun and helped bridge some cultural barriers as we got Mexicans and Costa Ricans to play or at least be amused as they watched us flail at the air.

After spending the day with the German forester, we proceeded to San Felipe Bacalar, a research station for INIFAP, an organization similar to the USDA Forest Service, in Quintana Roo. We spent two days at the station in houses that were located about 150 yards from a beautiful lagoon. We met with researchers from the station and were shown some of the research that they are doing on agroforestry practices.
in and around the station. One afternoon we had a party by the lagoon with foresters and researchers from the local area that continued into the evening at the house of the German forester where some of us did some fine Latin dancing. The field tours and discussions with our Mexican colleagues convinced us that research opportunities abound in such things as mahogany management, wood utilization, and developing ecotourism. All that is needed is money!

After one fast week in Mexico, we flew to San Jose, Costa Rica. We were met at the airport by Dr. Jose Distefano, a professor of forest ecology/biology at the University of Costa Rica, who was our host and guide for our week's visit. He was accompanied by a bus driver, Mr. Edwin Jara, who drove a 20 passenger bus that was provided by the University of Costa Rica.

At 5:00 AM the next morning we left for the Guanacaste province in northwest Costa Rica. We met with a researcher who is studying reforestation in the area, which has been heavily cut over and intensively grazed. We also met with Dr. Rafelo Montaeo, who discussed a large irrigation project that is being planned in the area. We briefly discussed the possible role that personnel from ISU could have in the project, especially relating to agroforestry.

The next day we went to Monteverde, a biological reserve that is located on the continental divide. We spent many hours exploring this cloud forest that had oak trees covered with epiphytes and many other things that we had never seen before.

The next day we got up at 5:00 AM and returned to San Jose to visit with members of five departments at the University of Costa Rica to learn about the types of research that they are conducting. Then we traveled on to the Costa Rican Technological Institute where we met with Edgar Ortiz, who received an M.S. in forestry from ISU in 1985. He described some of the forestry related problems of Costa Rica and the research that he and others at the institute are doing.

The following day we were at CATIE, the Central American Center for teaching and research in agriculture, for a tour of the many agroforestry projects that they have undertaken. We spent the night before and after the tour at CATIE. The last night we went to Turrialba, a nearby city, to search out a disco. Luck was on our side, and we found a nice place. As the evening progressed, almost all the Chac Molers plus Jose DiStefano and Edwin Jara found their way to the dance floor to shake it for awhile. Jose and Patricia Negreros showed the greatest stamina as they out danced the rest of us. Those Latinos (Patricia is from Mexico) must have it in their blood.

On Sunday we went to the Cahuita National Park, which is located on the Atlantic Coast of Costa Rica, i.e. it's a beach. After quickly admiring the coastal forests, we jumped into the ocean and spent most of the day admiring the reef, coconut palms, white sand, and warm sun. Fortunately, most of us had applied enough sun tan lotion to not burn more than the tops of our feet. We didn't burn our feet so badly as to stop our hacky sacking, but it didn't help either.

From Cahuita, we went to LaSelva, a world famous biological preserve in a rain forest owned by the organization of Tropical Studies, to hear about and see some of the research and teaching that is being conducted in tropical ecology. We saw the world's largest leaf, one of the brightly colored, poisonous frog species, and a platoon of army ants. We drove to San Jose that afternoon to do some shopping and get ready to return. As we said goodbye to Jose and Edwin, Gary gave the well used and traveled hacky sack to Edwin to take home and teach his kids the sport of the strange gringos from Iowa. I told Edwin as I tell many Latin Americans that Iowa is close to Chicago because Iowa is not well known in Latin America, but Chicago is.
The next day we flew back to Des Moines. We were tired from an intense trip but very happy with what we had seen and learned about the forests, history, and culture of Mexico and Costa Rica and the contacts that hopefully will be continued. Patricia Negreros Castillo and Edgar Gutierrez-Espeleta are heartily thanked by the travelers for having organized our visits to Mexico and Costa Rica, respectively. INIFAP and the University of Costa Rica are also gratefully thanked for having helped with the transportation and providing someone to travel with us. Each of us paid our own expenses for the trip and received benefits much greater than the trip cost.

We hope to develop the contacts that we established during our trip. We are looking for funding to allow some of us to go to Mexico and Costa Rica to develop research proposals and possibly do some teaching. We have discussed the possibility of splitting summer camp into three weeks in Mexico during Christmas break and three weeks somewhere in the States. There are a lot of possibilities, and we plan on seeing some of them to completion. We don't know if we will do something like this again, but Korea, Malaysia, and Indonesia were mentioned as possibilities in two years, maybe. If it happens, one of us will write about it.

— Carl Mize