

## Tropical Ecology: The Glories of Experiential Learning

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Spending your days in the lush tropical rainforest while studying exotic birds, plants, and insects is not typically what students expect to do during class. But then, Tropical Ecology is anything but an ordinary class.

Dr. Caleb Gordon specializes in conservation biology, entomology, and ornithology, and teaches the course biannually. It includes a ten-day field trip over spring break where students conduct research projects on site.



In the course's first year, Dr. Gordon planned to take students to Bolivia. However, just weeks before the trip, violence erupted and the political tensions made the trip too dangerous. Scrambling to find another location, Dr. Gordon consulted a longtime colleague and friend who recommended the "best patch of cloud forest" in Costa Rica. Dr. Gordon contacted Savegre Lodge, located in the desired area, and hastily made arrangements over the phone.

Luckily, this turned out to be "the perfect spot" and there is no reason to find a new location; transportation is easy, the Costa Rican government is stable, and Savegre has a host of amenities that cater to student needs. The lodge has a library, laboratory, restaurant, dormitories, and laundry services. Still, this class is no vacation.

Tropical Ecology students are required to participate in two research projects, one independent and one class-wide project. Prior to the trip, students spend their time reading literature and preparing an independent research project. Data is collected during the spring break trip, which can be very strenuous. Students should expect long hours in the field and must be reasonably fit.

Field experience is crucial to the value of the course, however. Dr. Gordon explains that hands-on experience really makes people learn. Students, including Allison Toal '06, spend even more time in the field than is required. She applauds Dr. Gordon for making the experience both fun and rewarding. All students from the course present their independent research projects at the annual Student Symposium at Lake Forest College. Both Lake Forest College and the Biology Department strongly emphasize a lab based and experimental curriculum. Because of this, the

college helps cover more than half the cost of the trip. While the expenses may be difficult for some students to cover, Dr. Gordon has never had a student express financial concerns to him.



Overall, the course provides an excellent academic and personal experience. Students are able to learn experientially in an amazing location, as well as have fun bonding with both peers and professors.

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