Environmental Service-Learning in Ecuador.....

immerses Lasell College students in the culture and environment of Ecuador through pre-trip coursework and strategic partnerships with municipalities, universities, eco-tourism businesses, and non-governmental organizations.

The Ecuador: Shoulder to Shoulder Environmental Service-Learning trip began in January of 2010 to provide the third experience of its kind to students at Lasell College. Building on the existing Shoulder to Shoulder program model, Environmental Studies Professor Aaron Toffler, and Assistant Director of the Center for Community-Based Learning, Amy Greene, undertook an exploratory trip to various regions of the country to lay the groundwork for community partnerships.

The historic city of Cuenca was selected as our primary destination for several reasons. We were received warmly by the administration and faculty at the University of Cuenca, many foundations were based in the city and providing a diversity of services to the residents, and most uniquely Cuenca is situated in close proximity to Cajas National Park where we were able to begin conversations with ETAPA (the city’s water and light company which manages the national park as part of its critical watershed).

Essential Partners

For a trip to truly create a Shoulder to Shoulder dynamic, positive relationships with a variety of community stake-holders must be established and maintained.

On the ground in Ecuador, we are fortunate to collaborate with individuals and agencies from all sectors and backgrounds. Partners include: education and chemistry faculty at the University of Cuenca, administration and park rangers at ETAPA, educators at the Simon Bolivar Foundation, staff at Ecuador Nature Expeditions, teachers at the primary school in Tierra de Vulcan, staff and children from the orphanage Hogar Miguel Leon, and hacienda manager Jose Luis Chiriboga.
ETAPA: Water Conservation is Their Focus
In Cuenca, as in the rest of Ecuador, clean water is a precious resource and Cajas National Park is an ecosystem that provides up to 60% of the municipalities’ water. ETAPA Park Rangers are responsible for patrolling the 285 square kilometers for illegal activity like grazing or dumping that could pollute the 270 lakes in the park. As Lasell students learned through shadowing the rangers for several days, this can be a difficult job, but an incredibly important one.

Biodiversity On Display
Ecuador is one of the most biodiverse locations in the world. Its borders contain three major ecosystems: the Amazon, the Andes, and the Coast. Within each distinct zone you will find indigenous species of plants and animals unique to those conditions. In the Paramo zone of Cajas, students were amazed to spot a rare species of endangered frog, and an array of grasses and shrubbery like none they had seen before.

Commerce vs. Nature
Park rangers at the gate to Cajas National Park are both the guardians of their city’s water supply and the toll collectors for the major roadway from Cuenca to Guayaquil, Ecuador’s most populous city. In order to keep the Cajas landscape pristine and wild, a time limit is set for vehicles to reach the other side, and a fine is imposed for taking too long. With limited time, hopefully fewer vehicles will stop to dispose of rubbish in the park.

Environmental Education is Reciprocal
Although they’ll be prepared with lesson plans and activities, members of the 2011 Ecuador trip know they have a lot more to learn from the children at the Volcanoland School and Hogar Miguel Leon than they could hope to teach. Lasell students plan to use the lessons as a tool to begin conversations about the importance of nature and our shared experiences as global citizens. They are eager to meet the children.

Love Your Pachamama
Visit the Eco-friendly Hacienda of Jose Luis Chiriboga
We met Jose Luis at the waterfalls in Mindo, and he is a valuable connection. We now visit and volunteer at Hacienda Pachamama south of Quito each year. His farm produces delicious low impact dairy products and his family is working hard to preserve indigenous culture through tours focused on the SINCHE principles of Sustainable, Integral, Natural, Cultural, Human and Spiritual. Visitors are invited to sample traditional foods, dig their toes in the earth and search for Atahualpa’s gold.

In Ecuador - Environmentalism is Law
Five articles of the Ecuador constitution approved in 2008 emphasize the inherent value of the earth and our responsibility to care for it. It outlines the “Rights of Nature” including the right of an ecosystem to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and processes of evolution. What better place for young American students to explore their connection with the earth through volunteerism?