Assessment of Research Opportunities at EARTH, Costa Rica: An exploratory study to identify an innovation appropriate for thesis fieldwork in International Extension and Tropical Conservation and Development

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The University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) faculty have had long standing ties with EARTH (Escuela de Agrícola de la Región Tropical Humida) University in Costa Rica through a cooperative agreement that allows for collaborative research and faculty and student exchange between the institutions. This agreement allowed a University of Florida graduate student to be based out of EARTH in order to conduct an exploratory investigation in research opportunities.

Purpose: This poster represents the findings that were a result of the preliminary trip to Costa Rica from June until July, 2003. The purpose of the on-site investigation was to find a research opportunity suitable for Master’s research on extension in international tropical agriculture. As the study was intended to be exploratory, a set of flexible objectives were drawn up that would yield sufficient information for the establishment of a sound foundation for a research proposal and ensuing fieldwork the following year. They were: to identify and explore current projects / innovation, to become familiar with types of extension activities and the farmers and change agents involved, and to test ideas in the field in terms of feasibility.

Major Points: Current projects and innovations varied from innovations developed on-site at EARTH to experiments initiated by farmers in the community. Each innovation was focused around the accessibility of farmers to resources required for its adoption. The poster will give a description of each project and details of the researcher’s involvement with them. Included were: Natural One (rehydration drink), Rosa Jamaica plant (drink), Eco-Hum (bio-stimulant), Effective Microorganisms, the Biodigester, Mineral Blocks, Agroecotourism associations, and a Mariposaria (butterfly farm). In order to become familiar with types of extension activities at EARTH the researcher conducted interviews and engaged in participant observation. The change agents from EARTH engaged in participatory research and dialogue thereby making much use of local knowledge. For example, farmers experimented with an environmentally friendly bio-stimulant developed at EARTH to determine the best way to apply it to crops. As a result of their trials, a compilation of farmers’ recommendations now serves as the instruction manual for that product. Other interviews were conducted with farmer members of an Agroecotourism group and a Ministry of Agriculture extension agent.

Conclusions: As a result of the investigation, it was found that the biodigester was a suitable technology with which to study technology transfer of change agents. The biodigester is currently being diffused and installed by the Ministry of Agriculture, EARTH, and a local energy company. A proposal has been created to use fieldwork from the following year to determine the role of the change agent in the adoption process within the context of established diffusion paradigms, which would test them in the process.