Improving Costa Rica Agrotourism through Service Learning

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Abstract

Limited resource farmers are known for their struggle to increase their quality of life (Black, 2001). In Costa Rica, initiatives like Café Britt earn a significant amount of money through farm tours and other touristic attractions (Café Britt, 2008). EARTH University’s mission is to promote local sustainable development in the humid tropics. Since its creation, EARTH students have been part of service learning projects within local communities (EARTH University, 2007). The university focuses mostly on small-scale projects since large community projects need a significant amount of effort and investment from various stakeholders (Bridger & Lulloff, 1999). Small initiatives tend to be more successful since locals are involved in the process and can be motivated to continue to implement changes (Chambers, 1993). The “Agroecotourism Association of La Argentina de Pocora” (AALP) is one of the local communities that has been working with the university for the past eight years to increase their income through agrotourism. However, to date the association has struggled because it has had to rely only on EARTH University for tourist contacts. The purpose of this poster paper is to share results of an international service-learning program between EARTH University and Tarleton State University students.

Tarleton State University and EARTH University developed a partnership with the intention to develop a Web site to help promote Costa Rican agrotourism. Students from Tarleton State University worked with AALP, to develop a detailed agrotourism Web site. With the help of a Translator, data was collected through farm interviews, photos, and video. Six out of seven farms were visited and students were able to spend a night in a couple of the farms. In addition, students had meetings with EATH University staff responsible for the community projects so they could collect the information missing. Upon returning to the United States, students developed a website. Students used professional applications such as Dreamweaver and Final Cut pro to develop both Web site and videos. The project was later edited by Costa Rican
students performing community services on the association. Tarleton State University students collaborated with EARTH University’s students, staff and locals, and created a website containing three videos, photo journals, and promotional pages.

Service learning programs can be a venue for international development. This program brought two institutions closer while promoting sustainable international development. In addition, the association has a venue for tourists to contact them without the help of the University. Initiatives that work with small farm associations in order to increase their agrotourism income help bridge the gap between the rich and the poor in Costa Rica. Programs like this are an example of experiential learning opportunities linked with international collaboration. Students learn from the process while help others increase their quality of life.

**Keywords**: Service Learning, website, study abroad, international development