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### Costa Rica: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Sustainability

Four weeks ago, I arrived in the Miami International Airport with butterflies in my stomach and excitement shining in my eyes. I greeted fourteen strangers with tentative handshakes, not knowing that they would soon become my family as we began the journey of a lifetime together. That day, I had no idea just how much my summer trip to Costa Rica would impact me and my perspective on traveling. Looking back, I know that every night I spent waiting in nervous anticipation was well worth it. My time in Costa Rica taught me more about the environment, Latin American cultures, the Spanish language, and myself than any classroom could have.

My trip began in the Capital of Costa Rica, the bustling city of San José. We received a short orientation where we were taught the cultural norms and basic language of our new home. Already, it was easy to see our trip leaders were well prepared to cater to our needs and just as excited for the trip as were the members of my group. After our orientation we got to explore the central market and try new foods such as locally grown coffee, homemade ice cream, and traditional candies. My group members were quickly becoming my best friends.

On our way to our next destination, we took a pit stop in the forest canopy for a bit of zip lining. During our time in the tree tops we sailed past sloths and macaws and listened to the sounds of toucans as we zipped on some of the longest zip lines in Costa Rica. The second location we visited was Finca Köbö, a sustainable family farm that focused on producing chocolate. Here we got to take a tour and try freshly picked organic fruits. We ate everything from starfruit to sugar cane and saw monkeys, butterflies, and iguanas darting between the trees. The staff at Finca Köbö taught us about farming and helped us plant trees and spread compost throughout the farm. Our nights were spent making delicious home cooked meals in the kitchen and lounging on hammocks while playing card games. When it came time for us to leave Finca Köbö we were all sad to say goodbye.

For our third stop, we arrived deep in the rainforest at a biological reserve called Campanario. Here we took hikes through the jungle with local guides and spotted scorpions, leaf cutter ants, snakes, monkeys, birds, poison dart frogs, butterflies, and even a large docile animal called a tapir. We swam in waterfalls, explored the inside of ancient trees, and spent our free time jumping through waves at the beach. We were able to accompany a biologist on a night hike and granted the opportunity to catch and examine bats. Campanario was an amazing learning experience that allowed me to participate in activities that coincided with my interest in biology and scientific studies.

Finally, we arrived in the location that I and my group members had been waiting for: our homestay community of Palmichal. On our first night we received a welcome ceremony and I finally met the family that I had been wondering about for so long. My host family was amazing,

I had three sweet younger siblings and two wonderful parents who were always there to take care of me or feed me great home cooked meals. My host mom loved to cook and clean and was very involved with many activities within our community. My oldest sister, an eleven year old named Alyssa, was always eager to help translate and loved to learn new English words. Although at first it was difficult to communicate, I adapted to the fast paced Spanish quickly and felt like my host family was definitely making an effort to help me learn and feel included in their daily lives. We spent many nights laughing over my countless Spanish blunders and playing games such as jenga together. My younger siblings loved to make silly faces and dance around the kitchen with me. My days were spent with my Experiment group members volunteering on a service project at the sports center of our community. We helped paint the fence surrounding their soccer field and never failed to enjoy ourselves while we worked. During my two weeks in Palmichal I was able to go to bingo night, take dance lessons, learn how to cook a Costa Rican pizza, experience several birthday fiestas, accompany my family to church, and even take a Zumba class with my host sister. I truly got to live another life during my homestay and I feel as though I now have a second family thousands of miles away.

After a tearful goodbye when we left our new families, my group and I arrived in Ostional, a turtle reserve where the community has a unique relationship with the millions of Olive Ridley sea turtles that come to nest on their beaches each year. Here we learned about the turtles that their beaches are so famous for and even took a turtle walk at 3:00 AM to watch turtles nest and lay their eggs. We also got to relax on beautiful local beaches during the day. Before leaving the country my entire group had fallen in love with, we took one more excursion to the Poas volcano. We climbed to the top and watched as the clouds cleared to reveal the giant water pool on the surface of the volcanic opening. After this breathtaking sight we spent our final day on the beautiful white sand beaches of the Sugar Beach Hotel.

Leaving my group members after our short flight back to the USA seems like a dream. Hugging each one of my newly made best friends goodbye brought tears to my eyes, but I know we will always remember our experiences together. This short summary of my time in Costa Rica does not even come close to capturing the beauty of the country I now feel so connected to or just how amazing my experience truly was. I am forever grateful to the Naples Council on World Affairs for making my trip possible and I am already excited about experiencing more of the world. Words on a page cannot do my experience in Costa Rica justice, but for any prospective student I offer this advice: live the journey yourself, I assure you it will be the best decision you've ever made.