I've just returned from a visit to Costa Rica for a college study tour and intensive Spanish language class. I really enjoyed my travels and hope to return someday.

As I toured, I found more than mountains, monkeys and quetzals, the prize sighting for bird watchers. I made lifelong friends and built terrific memories for future days when long-term recollections are all that holds my world together.

The trip allowed me to get a jump start on learning better Spanish. The language is still a challenge for me. I also learned about eco-tourism and sustainable agriculture in Costa Rica. The trip helped me better understand the culture and environment and has inspired me with ideas for educational programs here.

The study tour included an extended visit to the Osa Peninsula on the southern Pacific Coast of Costa Rica. This area of the country is still rustic rain forest and farmland with few roads. We arrived at a small research center by boat after traveling over an hour down the Sierpe River and through coastal mangrove swamp. We got our first glimpse at white faced monkeys eating figs and saw a green boa lazily hanging over a limb.

The mangrove forest is similar to our coastal mangroves, but the trees are much larger, towering nearly 80 feet in some places. The mangroves play a critical role in the estuary area where the fresh water of the river and the salt water from the ocean meet. The long arching prop roots are adapted to the drastic changes in salinity as the tides change. They brace the trees in the wind and tide and are a critical nursery for juvenile fish, crabs, shrimp and oysters.

The tall trees provide habitat for a variety of fauna. Herons, egrets, anhingas and kingfishers were common. Many are the same species we have here and some are easily recognized as close cousins to our Florida feathered friends.

As the mangrove trees grow, they drop leaves that are an essential component of the coastal food web. Many bacteria and fungi play the primary role as decomposers converting the leaf litter and other debris that falls to a nutrient rich soup for floating phytoplankton and zooplankton as well as minute crustaceans and tiny fish. While biologists refer to this as the "bottom of the food chain", it in no way means that it is at the bottom of the list of importance. In fact, this is the basis of life for coastal ecosystems and many larger creatures depend on the smaller ones for food. The health of the mangrove forest is critical to sport fishing, recreational fishing, snorkeling, scuba diving as well as food fish industries.

I met with a young Costa Rican scientist, Priscilla Zamora, who had recently completed a research project to determine the extent of Costa Rica’s marine environmental education program. She was astounded to discover that there is virtually no communication about marine life, coastal ecosystems or oceans to local school children and residents. She was working with a not for profit group to develop strategies for teaching teachers. I was excited to discuss with her some of our resources through our 4-H marine science program and the Florida Marine Science Educators Association (FMSEA)

In contrast, tourists visit specifically for the beaches, reefs and surf. The country is known internationally for its sea turtle nesting beaches and surfers from around the world visit to ride the curl. There has been an increase in tourist related businesses offering diving and snorkel charters as well as turtle watch, whale watch and dolphin tours.

The beach is crushed rock or smooth pebbles washed down from nearby mountain streams. The dark brown and black beaches with jutting rocks are quite different from our flat gulf beaches with brilliant white quartz sand or the crushed coquina shells of the Atlantic side. Rocky cliffs are covered with lush greenery and flowering plants. Coconut palms growing on the beach create the perfect picture of paradise.

The Osa is miles away from airports and is far enough from major cities that its beaches are not crowded. The
peacefulness was relaxing. I was nearly half a world away from Kissimmee yet I felt right at home in the amazingly different landscape.

If you want to learn more about our natural landscapes, join me on a Woods Walk in one of our local preserves. Contact Cindy Rutherford at UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension, phone 321-697-3015 or email crut@osceola.org for details on dates, locations and meeting times.

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