My trip to Costa Rica helped me realize the natural beauty we have protected here in Florida. While we don’t have mountains, other than Mount Dora or Pleasant Hill which are mere bumps in the highway, we do have many unique and varied ecosystems that hold fascinating ecological wonders.

I am grateful for Florida’s dedication to land preservation and our access to natural areas through Florida’s Department of Environmental Protection - Division of Recreation and Parks. Our state is well known for our land preservation efforts through P2000 and Florida Forever funding.

Costa Rica is small in size, about the size of the state of West Virginia. While it is only about .03% of the earth’s surface, it contains about 6% of the world’s biodiversity. Scientists have identified more than 850 types of birds, 600 categories of butterflies, 1200 varieties of orchids and more than 230 species of mammals, many of them bats.

Costa Rica is recognized internationally as a country with vision to protect natural ecosystems through a mosaic of national and private parks and preserves. Many local communities have grown and evolved around their natural resources. Now there is an effort to form a greenway throughout Central America creating wildlife corridors and ecosystem connections from North to South America.

While in Costa Rica on a University of Florida study tour, I stayed at Proyecto Campanaria Biological Reserve, a preserve and research center located on the Pacific coast to the south on the Osa Peninsula. It is a private preserve, comprised of approximately 65 hectares (160 acres) of preserved mountainside just north of the Corcovado National Parque.

It took about an hour by boat to reach the "camping place". The inlet of the Sierpe River opens into beautiful blue-green water. The Pacific coast has rocky outcroppings and high cliffs where the mountains meet the ocean. The beach sand was very different from what I am used to, composed of tiny pebbles of weathered and tumbled volcanic rock.

The big tide changes leave creatures stranded in shallow tidal pools and in crevices of the exposed volcanic rocks. While many survive, some become food for others. Beached boats lie on their sides until the tides turn. Getting our gear out of the boat to shore was a wet challenge since there were no docks and crashing surf.

Toucans, parrots and howler monkeys call from the trees. Scarlet macaws pass by overhead. The area is home to rare jaguars and white lipped tapirs. Orchids dot the treetops, bromeliads are braced on branches and ferns cover the rainforest floor up the side of the mountain. There are fruit trees of many kinds including a red water apple that the tapirs seemed to enjoy. Huge flowering gingers and heliconias provided decorations at the dining table.

Wildflowers abound. Huge vines the size of my arm, known as lianas, climb to the treetops for sunlight. One, called a monkey ladder, is flat and expands sideways like a flat ribbon instead of in diameter as many plants here grow.

Nights are alive with activity. Waves crash on the beach. In the trees on the cliff, cicadas, crickets and treefrogs call. Common and lesser moustache bats emerge from their cliff cave at dusk. Many snakes and moths are active at night as well. We observed a huge marine toad that set up residence near a light to capture dinner. Moonlight dances on the water’s surface at night. Bioluminescence, a natural glow caused by biochemical reactions of microorganisms in the water kept the college kid entertained until a large fish (or shark) churned the water nearby.

The area is remote; no nearby roads, only boat access. All provisions are brought in weekly when researchers, tourists and volunteers arrive. In addition, all waste that is not reused on-site, is returned to the mainland upriver for recycling or disposal.

The staff makes visitors aware of the need for conservation. All water comes from rainwater fed streams flowing
down the mountain. Drinking water is filtered. Daily dunks in the beach keep you refreshed but fresh water showers are available for bathing. They are quick and cold. Laundry is washed and scrubbed in a flat sink. A septic system is designed for sewage processing and filtration to minimize runoff and nutrient pollution into the nearby beach.

Photovoltaic systems generates power for lights and the satellite phone. Batteries for computers and flashlights are recharged at night and compact fluorescent lighting conserves power. Guests are reminded to conserve electricity and turn lights off that are not needed.

I loved my visit to Costa Rica, but realize I have taken our natural wonders for granted. Explore our state parks and visit Florida’s biodiversity in person. Find them by going here.

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