HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

COSTA RICA CHANGES

I recently visited Costa Rica in Central America. With changes in latitude, there are changes in attitude and truly, nothing really looks quite the same.

The population diversity and desperate attempts to save some of the natural landscape while growing at a breakneck pace reminded me so much of home. On the other hand, the simple lifestyle and spirit of appreciation for small things was very refreshing. After living out of a suitcase, with hot water as a luxury, I have a changed attitude about what is important. I am attempting to clear the clutter and re-assess priorities.

I participated in a spring break study tour with 23 University of Florida students and two other UF faculty members who lead the group. Our guide was Dr. Jose Mora, professor at University of Costa Rica and adjunct faculty at UF. He is a multi-generation Tico, a fond term for Costa Rican natives.

Dr. Mora enjoys teaching about the biological diversity of his homeland. He has seen many changes in his native country in recent years as foreign investors are buying tracts of farm land and converting them to housing developments and tourist resorts.

Fortunately, the government thought ahead to protect natural areas and set in place many preserves and national parks to protect species richness and diversity in the small Central American country. Additionally, non-governmental organizations and families have set land aside to preserve natural plant communities and protect the very unusual animals that live in this special place. There are goals to establish a greenway throughout Central America to allow for continued migration of large mammals such as the jaguar and protect important ecosystem connections.

The plant life is so lush and rich. I saw mangroves and ferns typical of our coastal areas. I observed many plants which are common in South Florida landscapes where it doesn’t freeze. Many of their native plants, including palms, gingers, marantas and dieffenbachias are common here for interior-scapes in homes and hotels. I saw some species of birds that are common here in Florida while others are migrants we see only for a few weeks during the year.

In Costa Rica, tropical rainforests get more than 300 inches of rain a year. In contrast, Central Florida receives close to 60 inches of rainfall in a normal year. The rain drenches the forest with life sustaining water and feeds mountain streams that are critical water sources for plants, wildlife and human communities.

Natural ecosystems form the fabric that connects the Caribbean in the east to the Pacific on the west coast and link the lands of Nicaragua to the north to Panama in the south.

High humidity, frequent light showers in the spring and downpours the rest of the year as well as tropical temperatures are ideal to support the many canopy trees, orchids, bromeliads, palms and gingers native to the rainforest. Cloud forests, though at higher elevations, remain drenched in fog most of the year and mosses, lichens, bromeliads and ferns thrive in the soggy air.

A patchwork of fincas, or farms and plantations, connect the central valley lowlands to the cloud forests of the volcanic mountain ridge. Brahman cattle, a heat tolerant breed are raised on lowland pastures while dairy herds of black and white Holstein cattle as well as Jersey, Guernsey and Brown Swiss cattle climb the steep pastures in the cooler mountainous regions to the north and south of the central valley.

Travel agents market nature tours and schedule hikes, horse back rides, kayak and boat tours so visitors can get close to Costa Rica’s unusual plants and animals. Traditional tours include trips to active volcanoes and swims in hot springs that get heat from rivers flowing near the lava fields.

A rapidly growing segment of the tourist market, generating revenue for local communities, includes adventure
based all terrain vehicle tours, white water rafting, rappelling down mountain cliffs along waterfalls and zip wires that allow participants to speed through forests and over rivers. Sustainable tourism requires trained local guides and businesses that support the local communities while protecting the ecological integrity of the area. The area is changing rapidly and there is a need for local involvement and oversight as well as community education.

I enjoyed meeting the people of Costa Rica, eating their tropical fruits and beans and rice at most every meal, learning of their history and culture, and sharing their interest in their natural features and the environment. The national slogan, "Pura Vida", pure life, is a common response to "Hello, how are you doing?" showing their positive outlook on life.

Central Florida and Costa Rica are facing similar challenges. I hope I can use changes in attitude to help me cope with similar changes happening in our latitude.

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