

2005 Monkey River Field Study

Project Goals and Outcomes

This is the second year students from the Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences have conducted field research in Monkey River Village, Belize. In 2004, student teams concentrated on collecting baseline information on the community and the ecological conditions of a nearby lagoon that was targeted for a tourism development. This year's group expanded upon some of the issues "discovered" in last year's assessment.

The nature of the projects conducted in 2005 depended largely on the mix of student interest and majors represented in the course. We could have identified the specific projects first, and then recruited students with related interests and skills for each project, but that seemed unworkable given the realities of the enrollment process. Luckily, this year's group was a large (almost 20 students enrolled), diverse, and quite experienced. Graduate students with specific interests that matched up well with key issues identified in the 2004 assessment report took lead roles in organizing each team.

The 2005 Monkey River Project had five main educational goals:

- Provide a unique and affordable service learning experience for Penn State students that allowed them to plan and implement a field research project in a Belizean village.
- Examine women's lives in Monkey River Village through personal interviews, conversations, organized forums, photo documentary and a community celebration of International Women's Day.
- Explore the needs and potential for developing the ecotourism economy in the village by working directly with members of the Monkey River Tour Guide Association.
- Investigate farming practices in and around the Monkey River Watershed with special attention on plantation agriculture such as bananas and shrimp production that could be heavily impacting water quality in the region.
- Develop a pilot project with Peace Corps Belize that puts Penn State students and actively serving Peace Corps volunteers in direct communication in order to prepare and implement their field research projects. This pilot project could be used to expand Penn State's efforts in Belize, and to help develop Peace Corps recruiting efforts on campus.

There were clear educational benefits for all parties involved in the three course projects. Students had the opportunity to plan a project from start to finish with faculty supervision, and the assistance of field contacts in Belize. For some students, this was their first trip abroad or their first trip to a developing nation. Some students were interested in the Peace Corps prior to the course and this experience was intended to help them experience what Peace Corps volunteers do in the field. The Peace Corps volunteers who had contact with the students learned about the subject areas being investigated through their interaction with the students, and their participation in the project. Community members learned about their community by having the chance to talk about

their life experiences with students and discussing local issues with people having a very different life perspective. Important lessons were learned about the logistics of managing a larger group of students in the field, and some of the tactical concerns of engaging a small community in multiple research/service learning projects.

Course Planning

The planning for the 2005 course started soon after the 2004 group returned from the field. From that experience it was clear that we had a very interesting community to work in, and we needed to expand our connection with people both inside and outside the community in planning the next field experience. The community interviews and the community “forum” conducted in 2004 generated some important insights into the needs of the community and its unique strengths. In some respects, we knew that the main thing lacking in the community was organization and a common vision. One approach might be to have the class work together to plan and implement a visioning program—but the short timeframe and need to develop trust and insight between the students and the residents almost made that impossible. Another approach might be to allow groups of students to explore and build upon local strengths, or investigate local concerns. This later approach seemed more feasible given the length of time in the field and the unknown interests/skills of the students in the next course.

Another idea that grew out of the previous field experience was the connection between the students and Peace Corps volunteers working in similar areas in Belize. We had a good experience in 2004 receiving logistical assistance from a Peace Corps volunteer serving in Belize City. We also established communication with Matt Miller, an Associate Peace Corps Director in Belize, and there seemed to be a good opportunity for us to broaden our interaction between the class and volunteers in the field. We made some inquiries and found out that Matt Miller was willing to put information about the course out as general information to volunteers serving in Toledo District, and he provided us with some names and email addresses so we could make contact with the volunteers directly. The idea was for volunteers to communicate with different teams on an “as needed” basis for program planning, logistical concerns and general insights into the projects themselves. These contacts proved to be quite valuable as the women’s empowerment and agriculture group got valuable assistance from Elicia Blumberg, a volunteer serving in Placencia.

Monkey River Village is relatively isolated in terms of the transportation links. The best way to get there is by boat from Placencia—but it can cost as much as \$10-15 per person from Placencia. This was a major obstacle to overcome and our lesson from 2004 was to avoid making the journey any longer or more difficult than necessary. This year I explored the use of chartered transportation to get our group from the airport to the site—especially since we had problems with public transport the year before. After getting in contact with Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, it was clear that they were able to provide all of our transport services, and it was a clear advantage to be able to pay for these upfront and feel confident that they would follow through as planned. We contracted with Monkey Bay to pick us up at the airport, take us to the site, pick us up at the site and transport to San Ignacio, then take us from San Ignacio to the airport. Having one service provide the transport was a huge advantage and I’ll make every attempt to do it again in the future.

Communication with contacts in the community was a major problem in 2004, and it remained a problem in 2005. It was nearly impossible to develop any direct communication with the community aside from a few email messages exchanged with the Monkey River Tour Guide Association a few weeks before the group arrived. We did try something that may have been a good or bad thing depending on how you look at it. Students in class wrote personal notes and cards to selected contacts in the community explaining what they hoped to do and when we would arrive. In some cases, this student to community contact helped us develop a relationship prior to our arrival—and in at least one other case, it caused some confusion about our intentions. In practice, each student provided a slightly different spin on our purpose and logistics and it would have been better to coordinate those contacts more closely.

Course Outcomes

One of the main goals of the course was to provide Penn State students with an opportunity to learn about community and economic development by directly planning and implementing field research projects in Monkey River Village. Based on the feedback from the students and observations from the fieldwork, the students had a quality educational experience that required a high level of maturity and involvement on their parts before and during the fieldwork. It is worth mentioning that students worked independently on their projects with minimal faculty supervision. This high degree of independence gave the projects an “edge” that is rarely experienced in a college course. The stakes were high, and a great deal depended on individuals working together to achieve a common goal.

The **Women’s Empowerment Team** set out to examine women’s lives through personal interviews, conversations, organized forums, photo documentary and a community celebration of International Women’s Day. This team was probably the most dynamic and well organized of the three groups. The team leadership was shared and the group generated a set of project goals with very little faculty input. One of the most exciting goals was the submission of a conference paper on the topic of women’s lives in Monkey River at an international conference in Summer 2005. They carried out their research tasks to the letter, and held the community celebration as planned. In general, there was a high level of enthusiasm generated by the women’s empowerment team and it helped spur the other groups to become more organized as they prepared to enter the field.

The **Ecotourism Team** set out to explore the needs and potential for developing the ecotourism economy in the village by working directly with members of the Monkey River Tour Guide Association. This team was the most diverse in terms of majors, age and interest level. Given the uncertainties they faced before entering the field (about the nature of the Tour Guide Association and its leadership), they were able to generate a great deal of excitement and interest by their work in the field. The main team leader, a CEDEV graduate student, was able to keep the group on task, and managed to move them from task to task pretty effectively.

The **Integrated Pest Management Team** was charged with exploring farming practices and pest management techniques in the Monkey River Watershed with special attention on plantation agriculture such as bananas and shrimp production that could be heavily impacting water quality in the region. This team had the most difficult job of all the groups because they were being asked to evaluate farms outside the village that they

had very little knowledge of before hand. The transportation was a concern from the beginning and it proved to be unpredictable once they were in the field as well. A national holiday fell on the first day of the fieldwork (unexpectedly) and meant a reshuffling of their first day's agenda. There was also a change in driver and farm visits as the project unfolded that were unanticipated. Regardless, the team was able to collect some important data on crop management and sources of non-point pollution in the watershed.

An overall goal of the course was to develop a successful pilot project with Peace Corps Belize that puts Penn State students and actively serving Peace Corps volunteers. As we had hoped, each one of the teams was able to develop a good relationship with one or more volunteers prior to arriving in Belize. This direct communication was essential in order to prepare and implement their field research projects. Contact with volunteers was a pivotal piece of the course planning and helped prepare the students to work effectively in the field. In the future, this "Peace Corps" connection might help us create more opportunities for Penn State students to work directly in Peace Corps communities, and it might help boost Peace Corps recruiting efforts on campus.

Local Contacts

The most important contact for the class was probably Elicia Blumberg, a Peace Corps volunteer working with Friends of Nature, an environmental NGO based in Placencia. Elicia had more than a dozen email contacts with our class, and she was instrumental in helping set up the more productive community members prior to the fieldwork. She put the Ecotourism team in touch with Eloy Cuevas, the President of the Tour Guide Association; made contact with Eleanor Tillette at the local elementary school for the Women's' Empowerment team, and was instrumental in getting the transportation set up for the Integrated Pest Management Team.

Community Relations

At the end of the fieldwork it was clear that a number of friendships had been forged between members of the class and the community. Students were on a first name basis with many members of the community, and some of the students had even been given "pet" names by some of the local children. One student, who took the time to play soccer and some other games with the local boys, was nicknamed "Burrito", meaning he had a fat belly. It was a good-natured exchange, and further evidence of this was a soccer game where mixed teams of students and community youth on the day before the community celebration.