

## **TROPICAL ECOSYSTEMS & CULTURES: THE CENTRAL AMERICA PROJECT**

**Meeting Place: Los Angeles, CA**  
(time and location to be determined)

**March 31 – May 12, 2010\*** *(Please note the date has changed since published in the catalog)*

**12 semester system units (equivalent to 18 quarter system units)**

**Program Fee \$ 2595 plus \$75 Application Fee**

Thank you for your interest in our Central America ecosystems project in Costa Rica and Guatemala. Central America has one of the most diverse landscapes on earth, from lava-spewing volcanoes to lush rainforests to tropical reefs. The region's biodiversity is world renown. With 25% of its land in national parks and reserves, Costa Rica alone contains 5 % of the earth's biodiversity, including more than 6000 plant species, 500 butterflies and 800 birds. The region also hosts a diversity of human cultures, from modern cities to indigenous communities to ancient Mayan ruins in Guatemala.

Natural and human communities have co-existed here for thousands of years with varying degrees of success. Yet Central America enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century at a crossroads: An expanding population, free trade agreements, and export based economies threaten both traditional livelihoods and tropical biodiversity. The region's political history and economic dependence upon the US have also had significant environmental impacts. Yet, in spite of the environmental challenges, numerous communities are exploring new and innovate ways to restore damaged ecosystems and continue traditional lifestyles, making our field studies project a timely one.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Our Central America project will provide students with the fundamentals of both tropical ecosystem studies and the human dimensions of ecological changes. This environmental and cultural emersion combines experiential and academic learning and allows us to experience first hand the changes taking place in the region. Through natural history observations and ecological assessments students will gain an understanding and appreciation of the tropical environment. Likewise, our cultural emersion will acquaint students with the challenges faced by people living in these developing countries. Through personal interviews and immersion in daily Central American life experiences students will discover the complexities of integrating human needs with those of the natural world.

### **PROGRAM GOALS AND ACTIVITIES**

We begin our field study in Costa Rica by exploring the country's incredible biodiversity, basing ourselves out of biological research stations deep within the rainforest. We will conduct our fieldstudies in outstanding national parks that provide representative examples of the different ecosystems—rainforest, dry tropical forest, montane, and coastal. While camping and backpacking, we will investigate the complexity of tropical ecosystems and wildlife populations with a view toward understanding how these are impacted by human activities. With a new understanding of conservation biology, we will assess Costa Rica's conservation program and examine the role and challenges of ecotourism. We will experience first hand the land management issues and specific environmental concerns faced by Costa Rica's growing economy and their desire to keep these special areas wild.

Using our background on Costa Rica's wildlands as a foundation, we will explore human land use impacts, visiting banana and coffee plantations, both traditional and organic in order to examine the difference. We will also investigate agroecology, permaculture, and ecotourism projects that promote sustainability, and discuss whether human activity can preserve biodiversity, and the conservation prospects of these local projects.

About half way through the program, the team will fly to Guatemala to continue our field study. In Guatemala, our emphasis shifts toward exploring issues of environmental justice and cultural sustainability. Unlike Costa Rica, Guatemala has a large indigenous population that continues to practice their traditional lifestyle, scarcely unchanged since the height of the Maya civilization. The indigenous people, however, have long suffered political oppression. On this segment of the program, we will explore the connection and complicated relationship between environmental degradation, political oppression, US economic policies, consumer demand and wildland protection. With the opportunity to engage in home stays in traditional villages in the Maya highlands, we will experience the daily life of the indigenous people, including planting corn, and weaving textiles, and gain a first hand understanding of their relationship to the land.

Guatemala also hosts the largest unbroken rainforest in Central America, the Peten. In the latter part of the program, our fieldstudies in this area will allow us to explore Mayan ruins, discuss theories of ecological collapse, assess current conservation challenges and visit communities committed to sustainable development. **All field methods and data gathering techniques will be taught in Central America. No prior research experience is required.** Team members will leave this special region of Central America with a better understanding of the connection and challenges of economic growth, environmental protection and land management, as well as a unique glimpse into the lives of the indigenous peoples and their everyday struggle for justice and sustainability.

### TEAM LOGISTICS

Arrangements will be available for participants to fly from Los Angeles, CA to Costa Rica and on to Guatemala. The instructor will meet the team upon arrival in Costa Rica. If this is out of the way for you, you are coming from the east coast or you are traveling prior to the program, you will need to meet the team flight upon its arrival in Costa Rica. As we will be exploring different ecosystems and terrain, you should be prepared for a wide variety of weather, from hot and humid on the coast to chilly nights in the highlands. No vaccinations are required by either Costa Rica or Guatemala. However, we recommend you see a travel nurse at your university or county health clinic and follow their recommendations, as well as consider the travel immunizations recommended by the Center for Disease Control. At the very least, you should have current tetanus and hepatitis vaccinations. A full description of logistical information, including equipment list, flight plans, contact details for our travel agent, health concerns, and other essential logistical details will be emailed to participants about 8-10 weeks prior to departure.

All reasonable efforts will be made to follow the activities outlined above. Weather conditions, road closures, as well as political and bureaucratic considerations may affect our plans. Wildlands Studies has put together an innovative, unique program in Central America, and team members need to be flexible, patient, and prepared to adapt to unexpected situations. Being flexible also allows us to take advantage of unique opportunities that inadvertently arise during our journeys, often producing some of the program's most memorable moments.

### **ACADEMIC CREDIT**

Students will receive 12 semester units (18 quarter units) awarded through California State University Monterey Bay Extended Education. While students usually encounter no difficulties in transferring credit to their home campus, applicants should check with their advisors prior to enrolling. Our staff will be happy to explain the program in further detail to the applicant's advisor, if necessary. The Central America field studies program gives credit in three courses:

- ENVS 370, Environmental Wildlands Studies (4 semester system units)
- ENVS 371, Environmental Field Survey (4 units)
- ENVS 372, Wildlands Environment and Culture (4 units)

Letter grades are based upon the breadth of our endeavors. Team members receiving academic credit will be evaluated on the basis of: 1) active participation in all scheduled class and field activities; 2) examinations; 3) field journals; 4) the design, implementation, completion, and presentation of an independent research project/paper.

Team members are expected to conduct themselves in a mature and responsible manner. Wildlands Studies reserves the right to require any student to withdraw from the program if their conduct is detrimental to or incompatible with the interests, safety, or welfare of any course participants.

### **PROJECT COSTS**

Program Fee:	\$2595 plus \$75 Application Fee. Program fee due February 1, 2010 Enrollment on a space-available basis after the fee due date until the program is full.
Estimated Flight:	\$900 (as of March 2009)
Estimated in-country Expenses:	\$1950 per person includes most in-country accommodations, travel in-country, instructor travel, camping costs/permits, logistical support, group supplies and materials/research costs.
Food Money:	\$350-400 (this varies according to taste – but don't be caught short)
Personal Spending Money:	\$300

Students should inquire at the financial aid office of their home campus regarding the use of their loans or grants for this course. CSU Monterey Bay Extended Education/ Wildlands Studies are not responsible for non-refundable airline or other tickets or payments or any similar penalties that may be incurred as a result of any course cancellation or changes.

### **OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS**

US citizens visiting Central America need a current passport that is valid for at least six months after you depart the region. Entry visas are issued by each host country upon arrival. If you do not have a passport, apply now, as you will need one to participate and it can often take 3-4 months to obtain.



Wildlands Studies

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### **PRE-PROGRAM MAILINGS**

Detailed information regarding gear/food, meeting plans, group expenses payment, medical recommendations and academic preparations will be sent to all team members in a subsequent logistics letter about 8-10 weeks before the project initiates.

### **PROGRAM LEADER**

**Greg Gordon** has taught university and field study programs since 1992, focusing on U.S. conservation policy and wilderness education. He has also worked for the U.S. Park Service in Alaska, Utah and Washington backcountry ecosystems. Greg leads three projects for Wildlands Studies: Two in Montana and one in Central America.