



**ECOSYSTEMS AND CONSERVATION:  
THE COSTA RICA/PANAMÁ PROJECT**

**April 18 – June 1, 2017**

**April 20 – June 3, 2018**

**Meeting Place: San José, Costa Rica**

**FULL PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

Thank you for your interest in our Central America ecosystems project in Costa Rica and Panamá. 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 renowned. 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, 800 birds, and 500 butterflies. Neighboring Panamá is a country with a rich human history that has been largely determined by its strategic importance for various imperial powers. The country hosts a variety of ethnic groups and human cultures, from indigenous communities to modern cities. Panamá also possesses a rich natural history with a diverse and unique association of flora and fauna.

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 U.S. have also had significant environmental impacts. Yet, in spite of the environmental challenges, numerous communities are exploring new and innovative ways to restore damaged ecosystems and continue traditional lifestyles, making our unique field studies project a timely one.

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**I. Background Information**

Our Costa Rica/Panamá project will provide students with the fundamentals of both tropical ecosystem studies and the human dimensions of ecological changes. Through natural history field studies and ecological

assessments students will gain an understanding and appreciation of the tropical environment. Likewise, our firsthand cultural investigations will acquaint students with the challenges faced by people living in these countries. Through personal interviews and immersion in daily Central American life, students will discover the complexities of integrating human needs with those of the natural world.

## II. Project Goals and Activities

We begin our field study in Costa Rica by exploring the country's incredible biodiversity, basing ourselves out of research stations deep within the rainforest. We will conduct our field activities in outstanding National Parks that provide representative examples of the different ecosystems – rainforest, dry tropical forest, cloud forest, and coastal ecosystems. Working out of both wildland basecamps 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 programs and examine the role and challenges of ecotourism. We will experience firsthand the land management issues and specific environmental concerns faced by Costa Rica's growing economy and their desire to keep these special areas wild.

About half way through the program, the team will travel by bus to Panamá to continue our field studies. In Panamá, we will examine issues in conservation biology and land management conflicts through explorations in "La Amistad" International Peace Park and The Smithsonian's Tropical Research Institute (STRI). In addition, we will spend time in the Kuna Yala indigenous reserve on the Caribbean coast of Panamá, where our focus will shift toward the study of environmental equity and cultural sustainability issues.

Although mainly known for its canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, Panamá also acts as a 'biological land bridge' between North and South America and is home to a great diversity of flora and fauna hailing from both of its continental neighbors. Our field study investigations of "La Amistad", STRI and Kuna Yala will allow us to immerse ourselves firsthand in the wonders and beauty of the biodiversity and ecosystems found in the country. It will also provide us the opportunity to evaluate the tremendous challenges faced by various stakeholders to find the right balance between economic development pressures and natural heritage conservation. Some of the wild areas that we'll examine during our field studies in Panamá include: tropical rainforests, lower montane rain forest and coastal ecosystems. **All field methods and data gathering techniques will be taught in Costa Rica and Panamá. 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 environmental equity and cultural sustainability.

## III. Academic Credit

Students will receive 15 quarter credits/10 semester credits from Western Washington University. Our staff will be happy to explain the program in further detail to the applicant's advisor, if necessary. This field studies program gives credit in three courses:

ESCI 497T, Environmental Wildlands Studies (5 quarter credits/3.35 semester credits)

ESCI 497U, Environmental Field Survey (5 quarter credits/3.35 semester credits)

ESCI 497V, Wildlands Environment and Culture (5 quarter credits/3.35 semester credits)

Students will be evaluated on the basis of: 1) active participation in our learning process and activities; 2) examinations; and 3) implementation and presentation of two independent research projects.

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. We ask all students to read the Student Program Manual before joining the project on-site.

#### **IV. Team Logistics**

Participants will fly into San José, Costa Rica and meet at the San José, Costa Rica Airport. Halfway through the project, we will travel by bus to Río Sereno, Chiriquí, Panamá. The project will conclude in Panamá City, Panamá. If you are traveling in advance of the program, you can arrange to join the group in Costa Rica when the recommended flight arrives at the airport. At the end of the program, you can decide whether you want to fly home on the scheduled date or remain on your own in Central America before using the return portion of your ticket. 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 cool nights inland.

All reasonable efforts will be made to follow the activities outlined above. However, please understand that on our project in Costa Rica and Panama, travel arrangements can remain tentative until the traveling actually takes place. 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 Costa Rica and Panamá, 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.

#### **V. Accommodations**

Primarily camping, backpacking, youth hostel or rural lodge.

#### **VI. Official Documents/Visa**

You will need a current passport that does not expire until three months after you depart the region. Entry visas are issued by each host country upon arrival.

#### **VII. Language**

This program is taught in English, although many of the research stations and locations we visit will speak Spanish. The ability to speak Spanish is not a course prerequisite. The Instructor and other staff will translate as needed. Of course, it is always helpful to speak Spanish, and if you have the chance, please practice or brush up on your Spanish speaking skills before the project initiates.

#### **VIII. Pre-Program Mailings**

Detailed information regarding travel and visa information, equipment requirements, food costs, meeting plans, group expenses payment, medical and vaccination recommendations, and academic preparations will be sent to all team members in a logistics letter emailed about 8-10 weeks before the project initiates.

## IX. Project Leader

CARLOS GARCIA: M.S in Forest Conservation, University of Toronto, 2005. Carlos is a Central American native with a personal and academic interest in conservation science, landscape ecology, socio-economic barriers to conservation, and natural history education in the Mesoamerican region. In addition to many years instructing field based courses, Carlos has held appointments with community based groups, environmental organizations, international development agencies and academic institutions. Carlos has worked professionally in Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Guatemala, México, Nicaragua and Panamá. He has taught our Costa Rica/Panamá Project since 2011.

## X. Project Costs

Program Fee: SPRING 2017: \$4000 plus \$150 Application Fee. Program fee due February 1, 2017.

SPRING 2018: \$4150 plus \$150 Application Fee. Program fee due February 1, 2018.

Enrollment on a space-available basis after the fee due date until the program is full.

Estimated In-country Expenses: SPRING 2017: \$2700 per person

SPRING 2018: \$2800 per person

This includes in-country accommodations, travel in-country, camping costs/permits, logistical support, group supplies and materials/research costs.

Food in Costa Rica/Panamá: \$500-600 (varies according to taste, dietary preferences and exchange rate)

Personal Spending Money: \$300-400 (varies but don't be caught short)

Estimated Airfare: \$1000

Students should inquire at the financial aid office of their home campus regarding the use of their loans or grants for this course. 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.

## XI. Contact Information

Email: [wildlands@wildlandsstudies.com](mailto:wildlands@wildlandsstudies.com)

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