

Students get hands-on learning in Belize

by Kat Pecora - Monday, February 21, 2011

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It is not an everyday occurrence that students get to apply their classroom knowledge to real life experiences like University of Wisconsin Oshkosh students did recently on their trip to Belize in Central America.

Students and faculty from the Approaches to Resource Management of Tropical Ecosystems course stayed in Belize Jan. 3-23, to study the culture and environment with tours, lectures and hands-on experience.

UW Oshkosh sophomore Sarah Fink said the trip allowed her to apply classroom knowledge in the real world.

“It was a great chance to put all that knowledge toward something more tangible,” Fink said.

The study abroad trip, led by anthropology lecturer Pete Brown and geology lecturer Maureen Muldoon, was made of primarily environmental studies and anthropology field studies students but was open to anyone.

Brown said the trip gave students perspective into the natural environment of Belize and to analyze the different regulations in place to protect those environments. The class kept field journals of their observations and notes, and it was one of the primary forms of the grading for the class.

Samantha Teal, environmental studies major, explained that the study abroad group was in constant motion and went to a different area each day.

“It was go, go, go every day,” Teal said. “It went really fast, but it was good to reflect each day through our journals.”

Fink explained her favorite parts of the trip were working with the trained scientists in the field and the work the students did at the Tobacco Caye Marine Station. A small island next to the Belize Barrier Reef on the Caribbean, the Tobacco Caye provided a chance to explore the reef ecosystem, mangrove lagoons and the sea grass beds.

“It was amazing,” Fink said. “I may be a bit biased because it was my first time snorkeling, but it was one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen.”

Teal said that one of the most interesting parts of the trip to her was staying at a jaguar sanctuary, which is the only one in the world. She went on to explain that the group went on a night walk with care givers at the sanctuary but didn't get to see any jaguars.

“It was kind of sad it’s the only one, but it was cool to get to stay there,” Teal said.

Brown said for many students this was the first time they had been outside of the U.S. and their first chance to experience another culture. He also said the trip gave students insight into the differences but also the similarities between cultures.

“We encouraged them to ask questions, not just of us but of everyone they met,” Brown said. “We wanted them to learn how other people live and how our lives are interconnected.”

For more information about study abroad programs, visit <http://www.uwosh.edu/oie>.