

## ECOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA



### STRATEGIES FOR ECOLOGY EDUCATION, DIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABILITY



#### **SEEDS REGIONAL FIELD TRIP TO PUERTO RICO**

**October 3-6, 2013.**

**Host: Para la Naturaleza (Puerto Rico Land Trust)**

**Location: Fajardo, PR**

This was the first SEEDS Regional Field Trip that the program has organized. The idea for the Regional Field Trip is to give SEEDS Chapters that are near each other the occasion to organize and implement our programs flagship opportunity – a four day field experience to explore and experience what a career in ecology can provide. In Puerto Rico we have four very active SEEDS Chapters at the following institutions; University of Puerto Rico – Rio Piedras Campus, UPR – Bayamon Campus, UPR – Humacao Campus and at Universidad Metropolitana. Each of our SEEDS Chapters selected four students from their institutions to participate in the trip, one upper level classman and three freshman or sophomore. The event was planned with all four SEEDS Chapter Faculty Advisors.

The original plan for this unique event was to be hosted by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service at the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge on Vieques Island, PR. But due to the federal government shutdown for these days there was a last minute effort by SEEDS Staff and Dr. Concepcion Rodriguez (UPR – Bayamon) to change the entire agenda – three days before the event was set to begin! Canceling the event was not an option, we were not going to leave eager students empty handed. With such a short notice we were able to pull it off and host one of the best trips that SEEDS students have participated in.

The day by day report was written by the student participants. Each day is described by a group of four students using their SEEDS journals as reference to the weekend's activities. Enjoy!

## DAY 1: October 3, 2013.

Thursday was the start of a great adventure; the SEEDS Regional Field Trip, finally in Puerto Rico. We left early in the morning towards Las Cabezas de San Juan, where we were going to stay for the next three days. We were stunned by the location, our bunk rooms were inside the second oldest lighthouse on the island, meticulously renovated by Puerto Rico Land Trust (PRLT), a non-profit organization that conserves numerous tracks of land in the island.



Students from all four SEEDS Chapters in PR were present; the University of Puerto Rico in Humacao, UPR in Bayamon, UPR in Rio Piedras and Universidad Metropolitana. As soon as we arrived and settled in, we received an orientation where we learned about SEEDS and Joseph 'Joe' Fail. We learned Joe's legacy in SEEDS with the importance of journal writing in science and how he started the practice with SEEDS students. We realized that it's our job now to keep up with his legacy and to maintain SEEDS journal writing experience.

Dr. Carlos Lopez, an archeologist from the Puerto Rico Cultural Center was the first to talk to students about the cultural significance of our locations. He talked to the group about the special discoveries in Playa Jayuya, a very interesting place in Las Cabezas de San Juan. He said how they discovered the remains of the Tainos, the native tribe on this island; we even got to see part of the bones that were still attached to a piece of stone. We learned that Playa Jayuya's name was based on the fact that the archeological deposits discovered on that area are similar to the ones in the center of the island, especially to the town of Jayuya. After Dr. Lopez orientation we helped classify and clean many sea shells and artifacts recovered from Playa Jayuya.

Later that afternoon we went to main offices of the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER), where we had a career panel with different professionals in the ecological science field. They talked to us about the future and how we should not be afraid to take chances. The talk was quite supportive, because as future ecologists we can't be afraid of new opportunities. Aitza Pabon (ecologist for the DNER), Elvira Rodriguez (Faculty at UPR-RP) and Ray Rodriguez (PRLT) and Jose Salguero (ecologist, private company) told each of their stories on how they ended up where they are now. Those stories gave us strength, because we understood that we should never give up.

Elvira Rodriguez mentioned something very important about being a scientist; she said that to be a scientist is fifty percent using your brain and fifty percent observation. She taught us to always take things to a higher level and to never be afraid of an open door. When we arrived at the lighthouse Professor Alex Sloane (UPR-Bayamon) told us his story about how he became a professional. It was a very exciting plot and we really admired him after the story, because he never gave up on anything and he wasn't scared of the future. While we talked with Dr. Sloane a fellow student from our group, Yenuel Charriez, said something that attached to our minds through the whole trip. He said: "Are you one of the ones that talks about doing something or are you the one who takes the actions to do it?" As the leading generation we don't want to be the type of people that stay in just words; we want to be the people who actually do something for the future of this world, helping in any way preserve our nature.

### **DAY 2: October 4, 2013.**

The 4<sup>th</sup> of October of 2013 started hilariously when the girls came into the boy's room with a loud wake-up call, frightening Franco (a participant) to death – may we say, not the best way to wake up someone at 5 am-. In charge of breakfast was our very best cuisine expert/ SEEDS education coordinator Fred Abbot. We had a great day ahead of us! Next stop: The Río Encantado system, the second longest river in the world that is navigable by men and a very important part of what is the Northern Karst Region of Puerto Rico. There, we would join the crew from the environmental organization Fideicomiso de Conservación (PRLT) Para la Naturaleza unit: Ricardo Rodriguez and Manuel Sepúlveda.

Now, what were we doing in such a place you may ask? Well, we would take part as volunteers for a native and exotic species tree planting that's part of the effort to enrich the the sapo concho (*Bufo lemur*) habitat, threatened species recently introduced to that region. When we arrived to our destination, Ricardo and Manuel welcomed us and described their project's purpose and how we could help them by planting the four tree species we would be planting : the Almendrón (*Terminalia catapa*), Matabuey (*Goetzia elegans*), Jaguey blanco (*Ficus citrifolia*) and the Abelluelo (*Colubrina feruginea*) while walking through the forest. Here, we also learned how to properly plant a tree and demystified some popular planting traditions.



After planting 40 trees we continued to walk up the mountain to a cave, one of the most beautiful, impressive and important structures of the Northern Karst region, while the crew shared some facts about it. On the way back everyone was somehow tired and although the amazing scenery helped, the burning sun did its part on getting most of us tired... most of us except Yanuel and Professor Sloan which gave us a good laugh racing to get to the van (it was hilarious to see the professor beat a student). This was not the end to our adventure on the region; we were headed to an enriching historic tour at Hacienda la Esperanza in the town of Manatí.

One of the great things about SEEDS is that it not only gives us the opportunity to enrich ourselves with ecology but also leaves an important part of the experience to culture making us rounder and more multifaceted future ecologists. There, interpreter and tour-guide Zuleyka Rivera ("yes, as the Miss Universe") took us on a journey to the past as she described everything about its history, from its founder Fernando Fernández to his' slaves' misery and the estate's economic success and fall. After that we returned to Fajardo where we got ready to go kayaking at the magnificent and unique Laguna Grande, very popular for its bioluminescence activity. Once there we all paired up and embarked on the journey from Las Croabas beach into the mangrove canals and finally landing at the vast body of water where we paddled under and over a starry skies and ended up in the middle of the storm that helped us develop the research we would work on the next day.

### **DAY 3: October 5, 2014.**

Friday was very exciting because we were in El Corredor Ecologico del Noroeste (Northeastern Ecological Corridor) making a small research project with Colibri Sanfiorenzo, the founder of GAIA, a nonprofit organization that helped in the efforts to designate the area as an ecological preserve. Colibri is also a past SEEDS Fellowship student. We met Colibri next to the site we were going to do the research; the site also shares lands with the governor of Puerto Rico beach house. When we got there she noticed that most of us were wearing short pants and we had to go back for long ones because of all the thorns and thick vegetation in the area. This was a lesson for us because many of us were not prepared to do a research in the forest (it was our first time!), so now on we know we have to dress safely for any future research.

When we finally entered the forest, we sat on the ground and started arguing about the methodology and the possible hypothesis for the research. It is interesting how we could perceive the passion everybody had for what we were doing there very focused on the topics. Everyone was suggesting good ideas and sharing their knowledge. We were separated into groups and started collecting data. We were very organized and worked very well in groups. When we finished we were very happy and so excited because we had learned so much. Colibrí was always with us answering questions, making us think, and explaining everything we don't understand.

Then we got to the lighthouse and started analyzing the data with Colibri, Fred, and Dr. Sloan. They were very helpful and we learned so much more about how to analyze and interpret data. When we finally finished most of the data analysis we had our social event - all of us went to the top of the lighthouse to

talk and have a nice night. We were looking at the stars that were very bright and awesome. They were all over the sky shining, many of us had never looked at something that pretty, that is an example of what we are losing because due to light pollution in our island. We met each other and this is a great experience because you meet very nice people that liked the same things as you, had the same interest, and you could notice that in SEEDS you had a family. We encourage you to be part of this family; you are more than welcome here!



#### **DAY 4: October 6, 2014.**

It felt so good to not get up at 4:00 a.m. again. We slept almost to 10:00 a.m. We took a bath, ate our last breakfast there, and then we started discussing the charts we made the night before for the research presentation this afternoon. Then at 12:00 pm. Alberto Mercado (PRLT) came for us in one of the trolleys for our last field trip.

We went to Playa Jayuya. By went, we mean that we had to run up a mountain and run down it to get there, because it was the only way to get there and we didn't have a lot of time, we had to be back at the lighthouse by 2:00 pm. So we ran, technically, and when we were up in the mountain we saw the view and it was... wow! It was really impressive to see our whole surroundings. The sun was burning our skin lightly, the salty wind, the beautiful waves rushing to the shore - It was perfect. We stood there for like 2 minutes, and every one of us agreed that the view was outstanding. There, Alberto explained to us that we were seeing a population only of white mangrove trees. Don't worry, we will show you pictures later. We kept walking (running) down the mountain until we reached the beach. There, Alberto showed us the archeology excavation where they had extracted the artifacts that we had washed and classified the first day we came. We also saw other final resting areas for Tainos encrusted in Elionita (Beach Rock).



We walked by all the rock and through the sea water to see this, and we also had the chance to see other marine animals that lived there, like Quitones, fishes, and many other sea creature remains.

We would have loved to stay longer but we had to come back to pack our things and get ready to leave. We got to the lighthouse, packed our belongings at lightning speed and we went to the final reception, where the presentation of our research project took place. When the activity started, we had Fred welcoming our guests and he also welcomed Ricardo and Alberto who talked about “Para la Naturaleza” and the PRLT. Then Estella, Maria, Yanuel and Franco were the ones that presented the project. They were really scared and nervous. We all watched and listened to them anxiously, in the end they were great! Everybody applauded and we were all very happy that it was a success.

Then the sad part of the story came - the end... We hugged each other and said good-bye. We exchanged our phone numbers, e-mails, and facebook. Four days were enough to get to know each other deeply, and to like each other. We really became like a family and we are very glad we came. We're sure that we'll carry the experiences and memories we had here, for the rest of our lives.



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