

# **Bio-Diversity Studies in Honduras' Cusuco National Park**

**Angel Hertslet**

Dear Class of 1964,

It is with great gratitude and appreciation that I write to you about the opportunity your class has provided. Last summer I traveled to a small, farming community in the hills of Honduras to conduct research for my senior thesis. I spent the first part of my stay enrolled in a language school in order to revive my Spanish abilities and prepare myself for my field work. The first week was quite hard because I was traveling alone and unfortunately someone broke into my hotel room and stole nearly everything. This meant I suddenly had no money, no passport, no credit cards, not even a flashlight anymore. I was able to work it out with the embassy and despite all of the headache, I was able to continue with my original plans. The Spanish school was quite instrumental in refreshing my conversational abilities and so, after two weeks of brushing up, I headed to the rural community of Santo Tomas.

Santo Tomas is located in the northwestern corner of Honduras and on a clear day you can see both Guatemala and the Caribbean. It sits within the buffer zone of Cusuco National Park, which means there are many regulations stipulating what kinds of activities, such as harvesting trees, are allowed. Just above Santo Tomas is the core zone of Cusuco—a beautiful cloud forest complete with howler monkeys—which has been gaining status as more species are documented each year by Operation Wallacea, the NGO with which I was affiliated. The community itself is composed of roughly thirty households, all of which rely on agriculture to get by. The main cash crop is coffee and each family also grows beans and corn for subsistence. Fruit trees are plentiful (meaning I ate coconuts, pineapple, mangoes every day) and combined with root crops, constitute an important supplement to the daily diet. Many households also keep cattle, as well as chickens, dogs, cats, horses, ducks, geese, and more. The cattle serve as a four-legged bank account; when times get tough one sells a cattle to pay for much needed medicine or building materials for one's house. While there is some unequal distribution of wealth, nearly all the families owned their own land which carries with it a sense of autonomy, propriety, and dignity.

I spent my time in Santo Tomas conducting household interviews. The subject matter covered in the interviews was diverse and varied with the interviewee, but in general terms I inquired about household economics, land use and ownership, family composition and family history, religious perspectives, perspectives on the national park and the NGO within the community, and value systems. All of this data will then inform my senior thesis, which will essentially be an ethnography of livelihood strategies. That is to say, I will focus not only on the economics of getting by, but also on how local culture, kinship ties, and belief systems affect the livelihoods of people of Santo Tomas. This work will be important in that it will be my first academic endeavor on such a big scale—it will allow me to apply theory and method learned in the classroom to my field

work, and then my field work and observations back onto my academic understanding of the situation. I believe the senior thesis will also be useful for the NGO as they plan their future involvement, and to what scale that involvement may be, within the community.

On a personal level, my summer has truly changed me. Concepts I know about in theory, such as that the poorest are perhaps the most generous, come to life before my eyes. I was touched by how kindly and wonderfully the community treated me. In fact, I will be traveling back to Santo Tomas over the winter break to continue my research, focusing especially on the coffee harvest, and to see everyone again. My eyes were also opened to the world of development, both its merits and its downfalls. I have my personal misgivings about the NGO I worked with and I will use my experience as a way to inform how I approach the development world and who I choose to work with in the future. Santo Tomas has found a way into my heart, and though perhaps it seems so bittersweet when I think of the poverty and the lack of opportunity there, I also remember how cheerful and resilient everyone is. My opinion is that it was not all bad, not all good, but that like everything else in life, somewhere in the middle. I have joined a group on campus that focuses on reducing world poverty, encouraging fair trade, and creating consciousness about ethical consuming and the global market. While these were all causes I believed in before, I can say that my time in Honduras this summer is without a doubt the catalyst for launching my personal convictions into action today. So thank you, class of 1964, from the bottom of my heart. It means the world to me.

Sincerely,  
Angel Hertslet