I have recently returned from a two-month adventure in India, and let me tell you it feels great to be back in the United States. After landing in the Minneapolis Airport, the first thought that ran through my mind when I saw U.S. Customs was, “everything is in English first!” Everything seemed normal after returning until the day after, I realized that I was experiencing culture shock. I returned home and was surprised to see what was going on around me- it was weird. I also did some reflecting back on the entire trip and realized that it was impossible to do in one sitting. The following, however, is a brief synopsis of what I learned in India.

The very first fascinating thing I recall learning about was the Big Banyan Tree (*Ficus benghalensis*) in Bangalore. I saw this tree and was amazed to see how it survived, how it spent its days alive. After germinating like any other plant, Banyan trees extend their branches to make new roots and grow by spreading out around the original sprout. This process is called vegetative propagation. I thought this was the most interesting plant behavior I had ever seen at the time. A few days after seeing the Banyan tree I got to witness a Touch-me-not plant (*Mimosa pudica*). This plant closes its leaves when it is touched. It is fascinating to see that a plant evolved in a way to imitate movement for survival. The only other times I saw plants move were the Venus Flytrap (*Dionaea muscipula*) and in the movie “Avatar”. As time went on I grew an interest for invasive plants. Something about plants and their ability to invade intrigues me. The plant that grabbed my thoughts most of all was *Lantana camara*. It just looked like an ordinary plant but it was not. After studying the plant I understood that Lantana was resistant to fire, its leaves are toxic to animals, produces allelopathic substances in the roots and shoots, increasing its ability to compete with other plants, and grows pretty much anywhere. The only spots that I did not see Lantana growing were at high altitudes; where I compared the Western and Eastern Ghats to the Himalayan Mountains. Lastly, I would like to talk about the tree *Feronia elephantum* or *Limonia acidissima* or the wood-apple tree. This tree is fascinating because the fruit, the wood-apple, is a favorite fruit of the elephant. The unique thing about this plant and animal connection is after the elephant consumes the fruit, it is eaten as a whole round fruit and when excreted it comes out as a nearly-whole round fruit with the fruit on the inside fully digested.

Elephants were one of the many animals I observed on my travels. I saw the following animals in the wild: various owls, eagles, peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*), other birds, wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*), chital (*Axis axis*), sambar deer (*Rusa unicolor*), common langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*), sloth bear (*Ursus ursinus*), dhole (*Cuon alpinus*), stripped neck
mongoose (Herpestes vitticollis), Indian flying fox (Pteropus giganteus), Indian giant squirrel (Ratufa indica), monitor lizard (Varanus albigularis), cobra (Ophiophagus Hannah), Nilgiri tahr (Nilgiritragus hylocriss), Nilgiri langur (Trachypithecus johnii), bonnet macaque (Macaca radiata), the lion-tailed macaque (Macaca silenus), and many more. I got to see lions (Panthera leo) and tigers (Panthera tigris) also but only confined to a zoo, unfortunately. The animals that I saw were amazing in their own ways and it was always exciting to see animals in the wild. I was continuously reminded of my South Africa and Namibia safari adventures whenever I was out on safaris seeing the animals of India. Some of the sightings were actually random coincidences. For example, once while travelling with my study abroad group we stopped for a sightseeing break and coincidentally spotted several Nilgiri tahr (or mountain goat). Another random spotting was the cobra that I saw. Again I was out on a safari with my study abroad group and there was a cobra basking in the sun. Unfortunately I was not fast enough to chase after it to take a picture of it, but I did try. The animal that I got to observe extensively was the Indian elephant (Elephas maximus indicus). Elephants are very intelligent animals with a tremendous memory. They are also powerful animals and even camp elephants should be handled with care without a mahout or elephant caretaker. The connection between the mahout and an elephant is astonishing. The understanding between the two is the same connection you would find between two best friends.

As I travelled with my study abroad group we were introduced to an organization called Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE). They are an NGO (non-government organization). Before this trip I did not know what an NGO was. ATREE was started in 1996 with a mission to promote environmental conservation and sustainability in India. They are very involved with the community and go out to schools to promote awareness by providing small research projects for students to participate in. ATREE also participates in conservation by substitution especially with the invasive plant Lantana camara. They provided training to local communities on how to harvest the plant and turn it into furniture. This is a sustainable approach because it helps control Lantana population, provides income for locals and also affordable furniture for lower economic classes. Our group worked extensively with ATREE and their welcoming staff. During a 10-day period several resource people came out to Forest Trails (adjacent to Bannerghatta National Park in Karnataka, India) to teach our study abroad group field techniques and methods such as how to work with transects; how to identify and catch frogs, insects, and bugs; how to start a herbarium; how to recognize plants by observing leaf and bark patterns, colors, shapes, and structures; and how to observe animals in the natural world. The ATREE resource people taught me many techniques that I am ever using in my everyday life.

ATREE also introduced us to the Soliga tribals. They are a tribe in Southern India which has been affected by relocation, live amongst nature, and
are a current group that ATREE works with in the Education and Outreach programs. I have lived with villagers during previous trips to India but this was the first time I learned alongside them. The Soligas are a very peaceful and grateful people with simple lifestyles. They live in the forests and have about 14 settlements. Their way of life and culture was explained to us by Dr. Siddappa Setty, who currently works for ATREE and with the Soliga people. He told us that they are mainly farmers and grow about 150 varieties of plants. Soligas also are known for collecting NTFPs (non-timber forest products) such as honey, gooseberry, bamboo, and lichen. About 50-60% of the Soliga income comes from NTFP collection. Whenever we travelled the forests that the Soliga inhabited we always had at least one Soliga villager who was our guide. They know their land better than anyone. More interaction with the Soliga is needed in order to progress conservation and sustainability of the forests of Southern India.

Apart from my travels with the study abroad group I travelled also to Northern India in Himachal Pradesh. I went specifically to McLeod Ganj/Dharamshala, where the current Tibetan refugees and government reside. I am also fortunate to have met these people. Tibetans are humble people, kind, and always well-meaning. It was nice to see the story of the Chinese occupation from the Tibetan side and learn how they have coped with it. Regardless of Chinese oppression, not once did I see any negative feelings about the Chinese. It is impressive to see an entire group of people not showing oppressive toward a very emotional event in their past. Their story is sad and I hope to see Tibet free someday.

Overall this trip has taught me a lot, including things about myself. During the trip I learned to understand myself better based on my behavior and personality, I came to understand my extremes of comfortability, and became accustomed to a variable and structureless schedule; which I found out after I returned to the United States was very beneficial. This very briefly goes over the things that I experienced and learned in my India adventure. I would strongly recommend visiting India to anyone who is interested in travel as well as a study abroad opportunity. It was a life changing experience regardless of travelling there before and I would consider visiting again in the future.