Incredible evergreen trees towered over the trail as our sandals, covered in fresh DEET, sank slowly into the mud. The path, hardly visible at times due to overgrown shrubs and frequent pools of water, wound around brilliant lush green forest and seemed to never end. Frogs jumped out in front of us, thriving in the moist climate. We were heading through the Anamalai range on our way to Top Slip in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, our pockets full of salt and DEET. This was our defense mechanism against the abundance of leeches adamant on sucking our blood. We trudged along, our backpacks loaded to the brim with food, clothes, umbrellas, water, flashlights, and other tools ready for the unpredictable. There was a persistent fog lingering above the tops of the trees ahead of us, creating a mystical ambiance. For multiple reasons, I followed closely behind our guide, a short but agile, dark-skinned, forest-dwelling man. Firstly, I knew if I started to lag behind I would miss out on much of the information the guide was giving about the forest, even if it was a simple word or a pointing of the finger. Second, I knew that leeches could sense body heat, and the closer I was to the front, the less likely I would have dozens of leeches making their way toward me, or at least I liked to think. Lastly I was anxious to reach our destination. I knew that it was no less than 13-kilometers until we could rest for the night. We would have to make another 10 kilometers the next morning.

We could hear the rainfall making its way toward us as we all rummaged in our bags to find our umbrellas. Sometimes, as soon as we would open our umbrellas the rain would stop while other times it would pour intensely, but usually no longer than five or ten minutes. The air, mostly calm and quiet, every now and then would ring with songs of tropical birds and the occasional Nilgiri langur, a small and dark primate with a light-colored mane. I was torn between checking my feet, hoping to quickly flick off leeches before they bit, and looking at my surroundings. When I did, I was awestruck by the scenery. We were in a tropical paradise. Every time I looked up I felt I couldn’t tilt my head back far enough to see the tallest trees. I wanted more and more to absorb the history of the forest. I felt so much more connected to the earth. We were in a place where the only human interaction was with forest dwellers that live symbiotically with the forest.

The most amazing experiences of my life have been during my travels in south India. I cannot stress how wonderful of an opportunity it was not only to physically witness the magnificence of the Ghats Range, one of the biodiversity hotspots of the world, but also to learn so much about the species and their significance to the forest. One of the most amazing learning experiences was meeting the Soliga tribes. These people have lived in the forest for thousands of years and have incredible knowledge of the forest. Recently many scientists and conservationists have realized this and look to them for information and guidance. In the 1800’s the British came to India and exploited the forest and its resources.
In order to save the forest, the Indian government enacted the Forest Acts in the 1980’s and in these acts, human interference was forbidden. Unfortunately, this human interference included the Soligas people. They were kicked out of their forest homes and relocated. Left to their own devices, they were uneducated on how to live in civilization.

Our study abroad group was fortunate to work with organizations that are involved with conservation efforts and are actively involved in helping these tribal people gain back their rights, like Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment (ATREE). Some examples of projects they have started are the conservation by substitution projects. *Lantana camara*, a species native to the Americas has vastly taken over India’s landscape. Instead of using sugar cane or bamboo to make furniture, ATREE has helped many of the Soliga people to utilize *Lantana camara* as an effective substitute. This project not only helps maintain the forest by reducing the amount of this invasive species, but also gives the Soligas a way to make a living outside of the forest. Another example is honey-processing units that are run by the Soliga women. The honey is collected from the forest, processed and packaged for selling. It was a great experience to meet these generous, hard-working people and learn about their history.

The relationships we made with the tribal peoples were beautiful but brief. The relationships we made with the conservationists and organization representatives were more long-lived and inspirational. It was amazing to see organizations like ATREE make a difference. It has taken awhile, but the Indian government is finally paying more attention to the environment and the people who possess the knowledge necessary to help maintain it.

Siddappa, Kavitha, and many other members of ATREE were there to teach us about conservation and the sort of education and outreach vital to keeping these initiatives alive. Something unique about ATREE’s program was how they explored techniques used for thousands of years and also introduced new ones. We were able to learn first-hand about some of the biological and ecological research done by scientists, for example we witnessed and learned about rainwater harvesting. This kind of research is an important foundation for conservation efforts. We visited some biological parks as well as some field sites in which experiments and observations are taking place to better understand species and how they thrive.

Kavitha took us to a Montessori school where she works and we were able to see the learning environment of these village children. Montessori schools are an alternative form of education in which the children are in a more independent and self-directed learning environment. The age groups are all together in a community-like environment in which the older children help the younger children learn. The school we visited had boys and girls in dark red uniforms, all wearing ties, from an age range of about 5 to 11. Most of them were from agricultural families. The children welcomed us with enthusiastic singing and dancing. Each one handed a beautiful flower to the ladies in our group. The moment this little boy reached his small hand towards me with a beautiful pink flower in his hand, a huge grin on his face, my heart melted. These children were amazing. I was thrilled that they were learning how to take care of seedlings and learning about conservation at an early age.
Besides the encounters we had with the people, some of the most distinct memories are those of the amazing wildlife we were able to witness. In the Biligirirangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary (BRT), Mudumulai and Bandipur Tiger Reserves we saw an abundance of wildlife. A species we encountered often was the spotted deer, better known as chital, which resembles the whitetail deer that we are accustomed to seeing in the mid-west. The fauns of chital are not spotted but begin to gain spots as they mature whereas the whitetails are the opposite; the fauns have spots and lose them as they grow. In safari jeeps we drove through many types of forest, but the most wildlife we saw were in dry deciduous and scrub forest. Peacocks were beginning to lose their tail feathers, only to grow them back the next year. Sambar, large dark grey ungulates, made quick and rare appearances. Wild boars were always surprisingly fast and hardly let us get a picture. Gaur, a type of wild cattle, was one of the most stunning species with incredible muscles and large inward-curved horns. Primates included Nilgiri and common langurs as well as the lion-tailed and common macaques that would leap from tree to tree with ease. Macaques were primates that we became accustomed to seeing. We had to be careful because those little thieves will take anything they can get their hands on. One time a young macaque came through the window of our bus, took our mangoes and left. There was an incredible amount of wildlife we were fortunate to witness, from small kingfisher birds to massive gaur, but to me nothing compared to seeing the Asiatic elephants. The first time we spotted them, there were three adults strategically hiding an infant under their legs, no older than 2 months. Our entire group gasped then was silent in a split second; my heart beat so fast as we all quietly tried to get our cameras in focus.

The feeling I experienced from being in the presence of these graceful, enormous, and strikingly beautiful creatures was overwhelming. We were able to see many more elephants throughout the trip, and even a few tuskers. I felt complete after experiencing that, although I did have a sharp eye out for large cats the rest of the trip. Although we did not see any tigers or leopards, the amount of amazing things we experienced certainly soared above and beyond my expectations.

The Soliga people, the villagers, and researchers we worked with from ATREE were all absolutely wonderful to us. Not only did they treat us with kindness but also they were a huge part of our learning experience. From the spiritual aspects to the scientific, each one gave us something extraordinarily important to carry back with us. The amazing scenery and species we encountered in the jungle were things we had only vague ideas about or dreams of before, as we read about them in our simple home called Kansas. With its astonishing diversity and elements, India has truly been a life changing experience. The amount of knowledge I have gained and all the experiences we had have become a large part of who I am today, and I absolutely would do it again in a heartbeat.