As student enrollment reaches 10-year high, program sets priorities for the future

Message from J. Christopher Brown, Director

Classes at KU are well underway, but the sense of excitement at the start of a new semester is still in the air, along with a recent hint of fall weather. Interest in our major continues to grow, evidenced by a 10-year high of 228 declared majors. We begin this year ready to begin tackling a number of priorities identified in our recent strategic planning process and an external review of our program, and I want to share a few of those priorities here.

Through promoting inter-disciplinary team teaching, we’ll put professors from different disciplines across the University together in the classroom. This will allow them to engage with students and each other on the ways interdisciplinary understanding of environmental issues leads to more effective action to solve environmental problems. Several of our students are back fresh from an unforgettable study abroad experience in India, and we’ll be providing students with even more international exposure in coming years. Our outstanding faculty, from across campus, continue to distinguish themselves in both individual and interdisciplinary research, and environmental studies will lead in efforts to hire new faculty in “clusters” to build new teams of researchers from diverse units on campus. Finally, we’ll be moving forward with plans to improve the way we prepare students for productive environmental careers. It will be a priority to help students see earlier on in the major the various paths they can take toward developing their environmental career. We’ll continue to support undergraduate research experiences and encourage student engagement in interdisciplinary environmental research.

Read on and you’ll see a program catalyzing the kinds of personal, institutional, local, and global connections required to build teams of students and researchers focused on addressing environmental challenges.
Environmental Studies launches new study abroad program to India

Author: Geetanjali Tiwari, Program Director

After a productive scouting trip to India last summer, I took 11 undergraduate students for a six-week study abroad trip to the jungles of south India this summer. Along with Lisa Rausch, graduate teaching assistant for the two courses (Field Ecology and Environmental Issues in India), the dozen of us met in Bangalore and travelled to several protected areas in the mountains from the Eastern to the Western Ghats in the states of Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. We hiked in diverse forests from the open dry deciduous to dense evergreen to the high altitude shola forests and even sacred forests. The students saw wild elephants, gaur (a local Indian bison with white stockings), hundreds of cheetal (spotted deer), Nilgiri Tahr (an ungulate that lives on cliffs), the Giant Malabar Squirrels, Lion-tailed Macaques, and much more all in its natural habitat. In each area we were guided and educated by a wide range of local experts: they ranged from illiterate people of the Soliga tribe to senior scientists in renowned non-governmental organizations (such as ATREE, NCF, SCONH, IISc, FRLHT). Our teachers were both brilliant and dedicated conservationists. Equally diverse were the accommodations that we stayed in: a beautiful campground, comfortable hotels, dorms with bunk beds, a forest lodge deep inside a Tiger Reserve, and even a home-stay in a village.

The variety of experiences the students had included: watching how tribal people convert the worst weed of India (Lantana camara) into furniture, partaking in cooking a traditional meal under a tamarind tree, venerating a 2000 year-old sacred tree, dancing with the Soliga, hugging camp elephants and watching each mahout bathe their elephant, visiting village schools, bringing breakfast to an anti-poaching squad deep inside a forest, and eating wild dates and savoring wild honey.

This was the first time for ten of the 11 students to visit India; the only student who had been to India multiple times said that this was his favorite trip. I believe that each student had enriching experiences. On the following pages are some excerpts from the papers that the students wrote that illustrate their intellectual, ecological, and personal growth in South India.
“I spent six weeks in Southern India. Six, in fact, of the most meaningful weeks of my entire life. There mainly to study field ecology and environmental issues, the whole experience encompassed so much more than that. Not only did I travel and bond with an amazing group of people whom I’m sure will all be lifelong friends, I also plunged headfirst into a wonderfully different culture I previously knew absolutely nothing about. Some mornings I woke up to the upbeat hustle of a massively crowded city, while others I arose to mist rising from the serene jungle floor. I witnessed the work of life-changing non-government organizations and learned from some of the most brilliant and esteemed minds in the country. I took tea with people kind enough to bring those they’ve never met into their home, and walked through the villages of the Soliga, the people of the bamboo.” – Bradley Barton

“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.” – Monica Melhem

“While in India, I learned from three organizations, NCF, SACONH and ATREE, the need to address environmental and conservation issues locally with solutions appropriate to each place. Sometimes solving environmental problems requires a creative approach. It requires sensitivity to the needs of the local community and an understanding how the people are part of the environment.

Conservation efforts that are made without sensitivity to the human element will not be a success. The groups we studied with in India during the University of Kansas Study Abroad program offered models of conservation that placed the role of community and respect for life at the heart of their work. The work these groups are doing is done with an attitude of reciprocity. Scientists and NGO workers educate local communities about conservation issues and local people share with them their local ecological knowledge. I agree with Kavitha at ATREE that education is the key to transform our ecological problems.” – Melissa Forester
“I had applied for the brand new Environmental Studies Study Abroad program for the Summer of 2010 in India during the early winter months of 2010. Then, India’s exotic flora and fauna existed to me merely in books, pictures, and movies. Only after being accepted into the program and having a few meetings with the group of students and instructors who would also be on the trip, did the enormity of the task I was about to undertake set in. I was to travel out of the country (United States) for the first time, survive with almost none of the amenities I had grown accustomed to throughout my life, participate in educational field work/studies, and all the while remain open, enthusiastic, and accepting towards the sights, sounds, and smells of India.

What seemed, at the time, to be one of the biggest and most difficult challenges I had ever faced became the most rewarding, fun, and eye opening experience of my entire life.”

– Andrew Pierce