Tinker Foundation Field Research Report

Field Research:

For my field research project, entitled “Ecology, Exploitation, and Education: Examining Costa Rica’s Conservation Ethic Through the Lens of National Parks,” I visited four conservation areas in Costa Rica: Santa Rosa-Guanacaste National Park, Cahuita National Park, Monteverde Biological Reserve, and Santa Elena Biological Reserve. My research sought to examine the intersection of land conservation, environmental education, and historical patterns of foreign exploitation and imperialism through the lens of Costa Rica’s Sistema Nacional de Areas de Conservacion (SINAC). More specifically, my research was guided by a series of basic research questions: To what extent are Costa Rica’s conservation areas engaged in education—both of the visitors and of local schools? What methods and resources do these conservation areas use to impart environmental education and advance the country’s conservation ethic? How do the conservation areas impart an appreciation and awareness of Costa Rica’s conservation history and its connection to resource exploitation and land degradation?

My primary research methods for the project were participant observation and document analysis. The bulk of my research was performed at Santa Rosa-Guanacaste National Park. During my time there, I observed three days of formal educational programming with local schoolchildren. Two of those days were with local groups of 5th grade public school students, who—as part of their environmental education curriculum—spend three days each school year in the park with a licensed park guide and naturalist. These two days consisted of shadowing the group and observing the classroom portion of the day, during which students learned some basic
ecological concepts that would be emphasized. I also observed the group’s nature hikes through the park, as well as their visit to the historic Casona and museum marking the area’s historical significance as the site of the Batalla de Santa Rosa, during which a group of Costa Rican nationalists defeated American invaders from the north, termed los filibusteros. For the third day of observation, I shadowed a local biologist who was conducting a bird-watching tour with ten local students, ages 8 to 15. The day consisted of traveling around the park and learning about local birds and their feeding habits, migration patterns, etc. All the students were equipped with binoculars and digital cameras, and—as I learned—all of them were participating in the program as a punishment for having engaged in behavior related to animal cruelty.

I was also fortunate enough to take part in a presentation and round-table discussion with the park’s educational staff and several graduate students and faculty from the University of Costa Rica’s environmental education program. During the presentation, the park’s educational team described the standardized environmental education curriculum, through which every student in the Guanacaste province, grades 3 through 8, learns about the park’s history and biodiversity. The presenters also distributed several documents, both official documents explaining the park’s educational mission, as well as worksheets, books, and other resources for the students. The round-table portion of the day was mostly a discussion about different environmental education philosophies and how they are applied in the Santa Rosa-Guanacaste National Park. The remainder of my time in the park was devoted to visiting the Casona, the visitors’ center, and the park museum, which gave me the opportunity to view and analyze historical documents and photographs, and to gain a better understanding of the historical legacy of the region’s imperial threats.
The research I conducted in the three remaining conservation areas was less extensive, but fruitful nonetheless. In Monteverde Biological Reserve and Santa Elena Biological Reserve, I spent time at the visitors’ centers, learning about the histories of these private reserves, as well as some of their educational programming. I also observed private tours in each site, mostly with groups of international tourists. In Cahuita National Park, I visited the park’s facilities and visitor center, but was unable to participate in any of the park’s educational programs.

During the course of my research, I ran into a few obstacles. First, I had intended to do some semi-structured interviewing, specific to the area’s history of imperial control, in Santa Rosa-Guanacaste National Park. Unfortunately, the park was virtually empty of local visitors. I was also unable to visit one of the parks which I had intended to study, Manuel Antonio National Park, because the person I was traveling with had his passport and wallet stolen.

**Research Findings:**

My research in Costa Rica, particularly the research I did in Santa Rosa-Guanacaste National Park, yielded some very useful findings. With regard to environmental education in the parks, my research revealed an education system that clearly prioritizes environmental education, imparts an ecocentric understanding of environmental issues and concerns, draws from several educational philosophical traditions, and represents an integral component of Costa Rica’s national identity. My participation in the presentation and round-table discussion allowed me to better understand the particulars of the country’s environmental education curriculum, and to draw connections between this curriculum and the University of Costa Rica’s environmental education program. My field research in Santa Rosa also allowed me to gain a better historical understanding of the region’s history of imperial imposition through document analysis in the
park’s museum. Moreover, I observed that the educational programming in the park emphasized this legacy and made meaningful connections between it and land conservation in Guanacaste. The park’s education team made several references to the impact that that legacy has had on Costa Rica’s national identity, sense of sovereignty, and conservation ethic. Finally, the time I spent with the student groups in Santa Rosa revealed the extent to which young people in Costa Rica have been inundated with environmental education. The students were knowledgeable, attentive, and seem to think that the environment was genuinely “cool.”

The research I conducted in Monteverde and Santa Elena was considerably different. Both are private reserves, and both were established by outsiders. In this way, they do not represent a form of resistance to imperialism, but are rather, themselves, a form of imperialism. As such, their environmental education programs are less pervasive, less oriented towards local students, and less focused on park history, focusing instead on the reserves’ biodiversity. Cahuita National Park, alternatively, had very minimal infrastructure and almost no environmental education programming.

Overall, the exploratory research that I did in Costa Rica was incredibly valuable to me. It provided me with first-hand look at the environmental education programs and philosophies that have shaped the country’s conservation ethic, and exposed some key findings about the way that this conservation ethic is related to the country’s imperial history.