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Costa Rica Service Learning

Reflection Paper

Cathy Becker

Costa Rica: The Real Thing – What I Thought vs. What I Now Know

Going into this trip to Costa Rica, I had heard a lot about how environmentally conscious the country is, and how it worked to preserve its biodiversity and practice sustainability. I have just undertaken a dual degree in public policy and environment and natural resources, so I was anxious to see these practices for myself. I also have a background in working for animal welfare causes. Before I started this graduate program, I worked for years in several local and national animal welfare groups. Locally, I sat on the Volunteer Leadership Committee of Capital Area Humane Society, helped to start an umbrella organization called SAVE Ohio Pets, and sit on the board of directors for Animal Cruelty Taskforce of Ohio. Nationally, I collected signatures for the HSUS humane farms campaign, lobbied to pass the Ohio Dangerous Wild Animals Act including testifying before the state legislature, and helped to organize advocates to pass the High-Volume Dog Breeders Act (aka, puppy mill bill). I am still a member of the HSUS State Council for Ohio. So with this background, going into the trip I was interested not just in questions of environmental sustainability, but also animal welfare, both for wild animals and domesticated animals including what we in the United States classify as farm animals and companion animals. Basically, I'm interested in it all. These various causes and concerns have a lot of overlap, but they are not all the same thing and can occasionally clash. I wanted to see how all these issues work together – or don't work together – in Costa Rica.

During our tours at Earth University, we toured their onsite organic farm, integrated animal husbandry, peri-urban agriculture, and banana plantation and packing. I was impressed by all of it. As someone who helped start a series of HSUS state agriculture councils made up of small farmers with high welfare practices, what I saw of the animal husbandry at Earth University was an animal welfare dream, and totally different from how animal science prescribes animals to be kept in intensive confinement on industrial farms. The egg-laying hens had a large coop with plenty of room, and were let out during the day. They had lots of dirt to scratch around in, plenty of bugs to eat, and nest boxes to lay their eggs in. The dairy cows had a large shelter and – amazingly – got to keep their calves. The pigs had a large grassy enclosure with big mud ponds to wallow around in. The nursing sows and their piglets were given large enclosures with floors of dirt and mud, and had access to a grassy area with shelters in the back. They didn't have to stay in gestation crates when pregnant or farrowing crates when nursing, and there seemed to be no problem with them crushing their piglets. The piglets did not have their tails or teeth removed, and had no problems with biting each other. As Mario explained, they lived stress-free lives as pigs have evolved to live, so the kinds of problems we routinely see on industrial farms in the United States did not occur at Earth University.

These are exactly the high welfare standards that I want to see on any farm where I buy meat, milk, or eggs, but it is very hard to find this in the United States. One option is to use a labeling scheme, but unless you are pretty well-versed in what the different labels mean, that can be incredibly confusing. Organic is USDA administered, but while it does have standards for inputs and feed, it does not say much about animal welfare beyond denoting some access to pasture. I like Animal Welfare Approved, with Certified Humane as a backup, but Humane Certified, which is actually a different label, is almost meaningless. Whole Foods has recently

launched a rating system called Global GAP, which rates welfare practices on a scale of 1 to 5, but 1 and 2 are not much different than conventional practices, and the system is not in widespread use. Another option is to visit the farm and see the practices for yourself, or talk with the farmer at a farmer's market. This is increasingly popular among consumers, as some farmers who may not have achieved a label certification still have great welfare practices. I have visited two of the farms on the HSUS Agriculture Advisory Council for Ohio – Snowville Creamery and Fox Hollow Farm. I love Snowville's pasturing and milking practices, but my understanding is they do take the calves away from the cows, which I have a hard time with. However, it's the best option for milk in Central Ohio. Fox Hollow is an absolutely wonderful farm, whose practices look a lot like what we saw at Earth University.

During our trip to Costa Rica, we experienced at least three different ecological regions – the lowland tropical wet forest at Tortuguero National Park, the premontaine moist forest of Earth University and the homestays, and montaine rainforest of the hot springs and villages we toured on our way to the airport. Each of these areas had its own climate and geography, which in turn impacted the kinds of agriculture and industry that operated there. The coastal area of Tortuguero National Park was marked by a series of networked rivers and canals – so much so that the only way to get to the park was by aircraft or boat. These waterways are all natural, and boating through them seems to be as second nature for the people who live there as driving our cars on I-270 is for us. The beaches we saw were made up of black sand, meaning the sand was formed by lava deposits from volcanoes rather than coral deposits from the ocean. This area is one of the hotspots for biodiversity for Costa Rica. Tortuguero is home to several species of endangered sea turtles who use its beaches to lay their eggs. It's also home to birds of all types, lizards and iguanas, wild monkeys, sloths, and other wildlife.

Interestingly, we did not see any agriculture at Tortuguero. Instead, the primary industry there was ecotourism, and it was booming. The boat ramp where people catch a boat to go into Tortuguero is in a remote location that took us two hours to reach over back roads that seemed to have more potholes than asphalt – and yet the place was packed with boats and tourists waiting to get on them. The next morning we took a wildlife tour by boat at 5:30 a.m. – and yet again the area was packed with boats and tourists. Fortunately, there are so many rivers and canals at Tortuguero that once the boats set off, it was easy to find our own area to look for wildlife without competing with other boats. We saw wild birds, reptiles, and primates everywhere, including a troop of capuchins getting into a bucket of food someone had left out on a dock to be picked up. The rivers of Tortuguero were lined with small villages also accessible mainly by boat, most of which seemed to cater to tourists through bars and small discos. The food at the lodge where we stayed was delicious, but it all had to be brought in by boat, just as the people did. I could see why ecotourism is such a major part of Costa Rica's economy.

Earth University and the home stays were at the next higher elevation of the premontane moist forest. Roads were windy and went up and down in elevation but were serviceable, and in fact being widened in some areas. Although the air was more humid than I'm used to in Ohio, the landscape was not dominated by water as it is in Tortuguero. Rather, it seems to be used mainly for agriculture. The farms we toured were all sustainable and organic, from the organic and peri-urban agriculture and animal husbandry at Earth University, to the small-scale agro-ecology practiced at the farms where we did home stays. These farms were located on rugged hilly land, though not at the high mountain elevations of the country. At Laureles Farm where I stayed, we had to climb down into a ravine, cross a creek, climb back up, then walk down the other side of the small mountain to get to the area where the cattle grazed. It was a fairly intense

hike for me and even seemed to wear out Fernando who lives there. The landscape was truly beautiful, and we could see a volcano (Arenal?) in the distance. These were all small family farms. The Laureles family told us they go to the market once a month, which amazed me – I go to the grocery store once a week and still run out of stuff to eat midway through. But once we were there for a day, I could see why. They have a good sized vegetable garden, and when it came to meal time, they usually picked food directly from the garden to eat. They milked their own dairy cow, drinking or cooking with milk straight from the cow. They had their own chickens and eggs, as well as their own fish pond. Basically, they didn't need to go to the grocery store more than once a month, because all they got there was staples like rice and beans that could keep for a long time. All the fresh food they grew themselves.

Although the farms we stayed at and toured were all small-scale, sustainable and organic, we did see other types of farms as we were driving through the area. The banana farm at Earth University was what Mario described as semi-organic because it had to use a few low-toxic chemicals to keep insects off the bananas. But the large-scale banana plantations we saw used what Mario called “one really toxic chemical,” followed by another “really, really toxic chemical” on the banana trees. Hearing about that, as well as learning about fair trade, made me glad I get my bananas at Whole Foods which sells them from Earth University.

We experienced the highest elevations of the trip when we went to visit the hot springs toward the end of the trip and stopped at two mountain villages on the way back to the San Jose airport. Here the landscape was positively rugged – we gave the gears of the van such a workout that I wasn't sure they would actually last for the whole trip. At one point we turned off the air conditioning and opened the windows so the van could get more power to climb up the mountains we were crossing. This was fine as the temperature was not as hot as anywhere else

we had experienced in Costa Rica. The other days I found myself covered in sweat the moment I walked out the door in the morning, but in the mountain area that didn't happen. The mountains were also touched by fog even in midday, something we didn't see at lower elevations.

This area again was full of agriculture, but that was not the original use of the landscape. The mountain area had once been covered in rainforest, but in the 1970s McDonald's and other corporations deforested thousands and thousands of hectares for use as grazing area for beef cattle. This area still has not recovered. We saw a lot of cattle grazing, some practically on the side of a mountain balanced precariously like a mountain goat. They didn't appear to be part of a large corporate farm of any sort – it looked like small-scale ownership – but the land was still being used for grazing rather than forest. Another use of the land was for terraced agriculture. We saw coffee, sugarcane, lettuce, and other crops grown up the entire sides of mountains. The roads were also frequented by transport trucks packed with sugar cane – we were even stopped in one place for about half an hour because a sugar cane truck had been rear-ended by a work van, and no one could get by until one side of the roadway was cleared. Hopefully at some point more of this montaine land can be returned to its original state of forestation. However, the deforestation inflicted on Costa Rica a generation ago may be part of what has inspired the country's environmental consciousness now.

The core of our trip to Costa Rica was centered on the home stay farm visits and service project in the farm village. We painted a church and installed a biodigester. Painting the church was not difficult and a lot of fun, and with 14 people working, we were able to get a lot done in a short amount of time. In fact the limiting factor was not the amount of labor, but the amount of paint, which was watered down to make it go farther. The parts of the church we painted came out looking very nice. Installing the biodigester was a little more difficult because we had to

follow an exact procedure that wasn't necessarily intuitive, and it required people to take on specific tasks throughout the process. Still, we were able to get it done. We had guidance not just from Mario but also from a faculty member at Earth University who functioned much as agriculture extension agents do in the United States. It was pretty amazing to see this project come together using just a set of large plastic sheeting and a series of items we would have thrown away in the United States such as old buckets and bicycle tire inner tubes. All of this can be put to use if you think creatively, but I was still very glad to have the guidance of people who knew what they were doing. The students really jumped into the project, and I was able to get a lot of great photos when I wasn't working on a specific task myself.

The home stays were equally enlightening. The setting was idyllic, and it was so interesting to see how the family at Laureles farm lived on a day to day basis. There are things I liked better than how we do things in the United States, and things I didn't like as much, with my list of the former being longer than my list of the latter. Among the things I liked better were the natural lifestyle and reliance on the land and the earth. As mentioned previously, parts of most meals came right from the farm, whether it was vegetables picked directly from the garden, washed, chopped and put on our plates, or milk, eggs, chicken, or fish directly from animals on the farm. The food was absolutely amazing – you simply do not get that kind of freshness in the United States. The land and the setting were absolutely beautiful, and the farm co-existed with wildlife in the area including tropical birds and howler monkeys. Never before have I woken up to the sounds of a rooster followed by the sounds of howler monkeys, taking turns as if they were holding a morning conversation to greet the dawn. That's something I will never forget. The welfare of the farm animals was also as high as the best farms I've seen in the United States. I would call it a tropical version of Fox Hollow Farm, a member of the HSUS ag council in Ohio.

There were also a couple of things I didn't like as much as living in the United States. First, the bugs. Mosquito netting was an absolute must, and the only thing that saved me from attack by an insect the size of my hand during our first night at Laureles. The farmhouse was not built with sealed walls like our houses have in the United States, and after dark bugs are drawn to the lights in the house. That means you have to be very judicious how you use light after sunset. On the one hand, this is great for reducing your carbon footprint, if your electricity comes from fossil fuels (though Costa Rica has used 100% renewable electricity so far in 2015). On the other hand, it is horribly inconvenient if you want to read or write at night as I am doing now. And because Costa Rica is so close to the equator, its nights are almost as long as its days. It also takes a lot more effort to prepare for night time in such a setting, as you have to be sure to get your showers and personal routine done before it gets dark and put everything in mosquito netting at bedtime. Perhaps this becomes routine and seems like second nature if you get up with the sun and work on the farm most of the day, but it seems like a big inconvenience to me.

The other thing I had a hard time with at the home stays was with how they treated their dogs. In the United States, dogs are considered members of the family and kept mostly indoors though taken out for daily walks. But every farm we saw in Costa Rica kept their dogs tied up alone in the back. These dogs had jobs to do at the farms such as guarding the tilapia pond or guarding other areas from local wildlife. But seeing them tied up alone like that made me really sad. Dogs are pack animals, evolved to be social, and if they don't have other dogs to be with, then humans become their pack. The dogs I saw all got very agitated when people approached, lunging at the end of the chain begging for attention. When I gave them a little petting, they clearly did not want me to leave. Yet the people who had these dogs didn't seem to notice this aspect of their behavior at all, and seemed to consider them only in terms of the job they were

brought in to do on the farm. In other words, while the welfare of what we call livestock, food, or farm animals was much better at our home stays than on most farms in the United States, the welfare of what we call companion animals was worse. Certainly there are people in the United States who keep their dogs tied up in the back, but here that is not considered good welfare, and if the dogs do not have shelter or are not fed, it is grounds for humane agents to take the dogs. The dogs I saw at the home stays in Costa Rica did have access to shelter and food, so if they were in America, they would not likely be taken by a humane agent. But most people here would not consider it good welfare, and a humane agent might have a conversation with the owners about what constitutes good welfare, and try to get them to bring the dog in, or at least take him off the chain, give him a fenced-in yard, and take him on regular walks. But such a thing wouldn't cross the mind of people there. I didn't see cats at all at the home stays in Costa Rica, but my guess is they would likely be even less welcome in the house than dogs.

This is all simply reflective of different norms for animals in Costa Rica than in the United States, and these norms are themselves a reflection of the history of the country as a developing nation. Intellectually I understand that just because Costa Rica is concerned about biodiversity and the environment, and much of its agriculture is small-scale agro-ecology, that doesn't mean it's going to have ideal practices in every arena. But in my heart I wanted the practices I saw in Costa Rica to be ideal in every aspect, and I was a little disappointed to find out that in some aspects they were not. However, that is the world we live in. No place is going to be perfect in every arena, not even a country like Costa Rica which is such a model for the world in so many other ways. Perhaps someone like my friend Steffen Baldwin who provides humane agent services for rural counties in Ohio will move to Costa Rica and bring in new ideas about companion animals, so that their welfare becomes something people start to think about.