Everyone’s yard

Costa Rica’s conservation issues come home with UWGB group

When photographs of Costa Rican children exploring Carara National Park recently arrived on Daniel Meinhardt’s desk, the carefree smiles probably shouldn’t have resonated as much as they did.

After all, with the wildly popular tourist attraction only 2 miles from the Costa Rican schoolhouse, the April trip to see scarlet macaws and American crocodiles would seem to be a natural part of the curriculum.

But for Costa Rican students, getting a first-time guided tour isn’t like local schoolchildren wandering over to the NEW Zoo in Suamico for a class trip. For one, the 2-mile trek isn’t a straight shot, which means having a national park in your “backyard” is an hour-long trip through winding mountain roads, some impassable depending on the season.

in the national park while learning about biodiversity.

“Our goal was to ask the park, ‘What do you need?’ instead of ‘us coming down there and telling them what to do,” said Dornbush, a professor of natural and applied sciences.

A poaching problem

The overall objective was to provide the park with resources so it could curb poaching of macaws — the park has one of the last, most significant breeding populations — and valuable trees while educating area schoolchildren to see value in their natural surroundings.

On the open market, macaws to be sold as pets can fetch thousands of dollars. Dornbush said. Wood from trees can bring in a similar amount. Because fines are minimal, for a family that might

Costa Rican schoolchildren holding gift bags gather with their new friends from UWGB.

How to help

For information on the Costa Rica conservation tour or to help with fundraising for next year’s trip, contact Daniel Meinhardt at meinhadad@uwgb.edu or Mathew Dornbush at dornbusmd@uwgb.edu. Staff members are gathering data and thinking about future initiatives.
Trip/Park home to threatened species

From D-1

only have an annual income
in the low thousands, what’s
the incentive not to look out
for themselves?

“The people that are
aware of what they have,
you’re in the park, near the
visitor’s center. They’re in-
credibly proud that people
from all over the world
come to visit and see what
the country has,” said Mein-
hardt, a professor of human
biology.

“But the ones on the back-
side, all they see is a big
wilderness out their door:
Birds to sell. Wood to sell.”

Located on Costa Rica’s
Pacific coast, Carara Na-
tional Park is about 11,600
acres of transitional tropi-
cal forest containing criti-
cal watersheds and threat-
ened species, yet two
rangers staff the park,
 Meinhardt said. Only one
percent of trails are open to
the public, which leads a
wide expanse of forest to
cover. Rangers often have to
patrol the park at night for
poachers, and with few
funds at their disposal, con-
servation efforts are an
uphill battle, Dornbush said.

“Even cleaning supplies
to maintain buildings are
donations from cruise
ships,” he said. “And Costa
Rica is one of the richest of
these developing countries.
It actually has one of the
best conservation programs
for (Central America.)”

The bigger picture

The travel course was
started by a former UWGB
professor in 2004 and has
been picked up by the sci-
ence department as a way to
bring exposure to biologi-
cal, geological and socioe-
nomic issues. Past trips al-
dready have resulted in the
construction of biological
stations, a visitor’s center
and bridges. They’ve also
installed water systems and
helped maintain trails.

Beyond infrastructure
work, the real task is look-
ing beyond Costa Rica as an
opulent travel destination
and connecting it to the
larger landscape, including
starting conservation ef-
fports in Green Bay.

“It’s a global world today,
and people need to be aware
of that,” Dornbush said. “A
lot of people vacation in
Costa Rica, and I think
more (Americans) need to
be aware that when they are
in vacation areas, there’s
another side to these coun-
tries. It’s not just the rich,
tourist part. Think about
the economics of the place
you’re going to visit.

“And it’s really not that
far away. A lot of our migra-
tory birds live there in the
winter. So it’s all connect-
ed.”

Deforestation issues also
come to the forefront when
global warming enters the
picture, but Dornbush and
Meinhardt said the rangers
were motivated most by
molding a different mindset
among younger Costa Ri-
cans. Just hearing a group
of strangers from Wiscon-
sin speak about the value
of protecting their famous
macaws was an eye-opener.

“It was like, ‘Well, if these
people care about what we
have in our country . . .’”
Meinhardt said. “It sounds
like a really simple thing.

For the $350 or whatever we
gave them, it allowed the
kids to see the park in the
same way that people from
all over the world see it. And
they live right next to it.

“They’re the ones faced
with the decision. Is this
something we’re going to
save or not?”

Starts at home

Teresa Arnold, a UWGB
junior who made the trip,
said she hopes to bring
that same philosophy back
home.

“I think the more we got
out there, the more the lo-
cals began to realize what
was important,” she said.

“The park appreciated it,
but the locals have limited
resources, and the govern-
ment sets up a lot of limi-
tations, as well, so it’s
tough for such a different
culture.

“It gave me a different
perspective, though. The
conservation end is a lot
more than I can grasp
sometimes. It takes a lot of
different roles to make a
difference.”

Planning for next year’s
trip already has started,
and Meinhardt said efforts
are under way to partner
with the NEW Zoo to bring
more exposure to the pro-
gram. But as the recent
field trip photos prove, it
starts with locals identify-
ing that their backyard is a
lot bigger than they could
possibly imagine.

“The money’s here, the
diversity is there,” Dorn-
bush said. “If you’re try-
ing to conserve biodiver-
sity, you know, I guess that’s
the disconnect.”