Exploring Puerto Rico: The Place and Its People

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EXPLORING PUERTO RICO: THE PLACE AND ITS PEOPLE

After two days of hacking at vines and grasses, the rainforest didn’t look noticeably different. The forest floor was still a lush mat of greenery, and clusters of vines still drooped between the trees. But the sixteen college students had helped to re-clear paths used to collect sustainable timber from a patch of second-growth forest. The students had left their mark on Puerto Rico.

In May, students from nine majors explored the environment and culture of Puerto Rico in a three-week off-campus study adventure. The trip, led by Spanish Professor Rikki Heldt and Biology Professor Dr. Jeff Ploegstra, gave students the chance to study Puerto Rico in a hands-on, transdisciplinary manner.

Prior to the trip, each student completed a research project about an aspect of Puerto Rican culture or its environment that related to their area of study. Sophomore biology major Katerina Meybaum studied some of the flora and fauna they would encounter in the rainforest during their three-day visit.

“The variety of majors helped give us a more holistic perspective on what we were seeing,” says Heldt. “I see beauty in people working together to see how what you do in your area of life impacts other areas of life.”

The group covered a lot of ground in 21 days, touring Old San Juan, exploring El Yunque Rainforest, volunteering at an orphanage and foster home in Hogar Manuel Fernández Juncos, and hiking at the Cabo Rojo National Wildlife Refuge.

“It was incredible to see how God can make such a diverse ecosystem on a 100-by-35-mile island,” says junior Covey Jackson. “You get to experience the ocean, a rain forest, pure humidity, absolute dry heat, mountains, mangroves—all on this little section of land. You get a feel for how incredible God is, making these different ecosystems come together to work for the people of the island.”

Group members agreed that one of the trip’s highlights was the sunset swim in a bioluminescent bay. Senior Nathan Spaans, who researched bioluminescence and taught the group about the phenomena prior to their swim, explains that “bioluminescence is simply the emission of light, created by biochemical reactions within a living organism.

“Researching bioluminescence could never fully prepare me for what I experienced,” says Spaans. “Until I was in that water, surrounded by a living, glowing galaxy, I would not be able to fully understand bioluminescence and its beauty.”

The group rode a ferry to an isolated bay, then swam under the boat where it was darker and easier to see the glowing microorganisms.

“When we splashed the water, we could see what looked almost like glitter or confetti that was bluish green and glowing,” recounts sophomore Kylie Van Wyhe. “When we had to leave the water and climb onto the boat, the water dripping from us was still glowing. It felt as if we were swimming with the stars.”

“It is easy to see God’s beauty in a new environment,” says Heldt. “By admiring creation in a new place, we are trained to see the beauty in the place we live.”

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“It is easy to see God’s beauty in a new environment,” says Heldt. “By admiring creation in a new place, we are trained to see the beauty in the place we live. It helps us see the beauty in a cornfield or in the color of the sky.”

Immersive experiences in a novel environment “shape people’s dispositions toward creation,” says Ploegstra. “We take on the role of observer when we’re in an unfamiliar location, and that helps us think more broadly about our values and view of creation.”

—Dordt Spanish Professor Rikki Heldt

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