

Caitlin Brodmerkel

CWIL: Reflection

Environments of Ecuador

2 October 2006

The Experience of a Lifetime

This past summer, I was given the unbelievable privilege of traveling to Ecuador as a part of Saint Mary's Study Abroad Program. The opportunity of learning in another country had always been a dream of mine. Finally, when I became a student at Saint Mary's, I knew that I had to take advantage of one of their wonderful programs that was offered in order to make this dream a reality. Right away, the Environments of Ecuador caught my attention. I knew it was a program perfect for me because of my appreciation of the outdoors and my excitement for new and unique adventures. I quickly decided that I had to go. One school year later, I boarded a plane with my professor and eight other peers that I barely knew and flew south to Quito, Ecuador. With me, I carried big expectations for my future experiences, expectations that turned out to be not large enough.

The first environment in Ecuador that my group and I had the opportunity to study was the Andes Mountains. The natural beauty of this area was more spectacular than anything I had ever witnessed and we had plenty of time to enjoy breathtaking views throughout our trip. For example, we hiked around the top of a volcano, studied plant and animal life in the cloud forests, and watched humming birds fly swiftly past our faces. We noted how Ecuadorians made trout farming their livelihood and incorporated a major use of livestock despite living on the steep mountainside.

The gorgeous pictures I captured of the incredible views were definitely not all I took from the Andes, however. These mountains hold Ecuador's capital, the city of Quito, which is where we spent much of our time, along with smaller villages on Quito's outskirts. It was here that I gained a whole new insight to the enormous differences in Ecuador's standard of living compared to my own American lifestyle. Men and women lived in one room shacks built high into the mountain side. They were seen walking miles in shabby clothes along the thin dirt roads leading down the Andes. Also, in the city, young children were left alone begging for money or trying to sell small items to people passing by. These means by which people existed in Quito captured a new reality for me and put my own lifestyle into a completely different perspective.

After visiting cultural sites, like the Otavalo Market and an equator museum, we left for a new Ecuadorian environment, the Galapagos Islands. These days in the Galapagos contain many of the best experiences of my life. The atmosphere here was like that of no other in the world. Humans and animals coexisted here in peace. This allowed us the opportunity to snorkel alongside a pack of 20 sea lions and stroll right by a variety of iguana species. These unique surroundings presented me with the image of how life is supposed to be lived, in companionship with the environment, not in the destruction of it.

Besides strengthening my love of nature, my time in the Galapagos Islands also opened my cultural views. We lived on a small boat with people from three other countries besides the United States. I learned an amazing amount about their lifestyles, including the simple comparisons of language and mannerisms. The Saint Mary's group I was with, along with the other passengers and crew, grew incredibly close during our adventures together in the Galapagos.

After we sadly departed the Galapagos and said our goodbyes, we awaited our third environment of Ecuador, the Amazon Rainforest. On the bus ride from Quito to the Napo River Valley, where we were going to be staying for the next five days, we spoke with a young Ecuadorian woman, Gabbie, about her thoughts on the Ecuadorian culture. I found her remarks interesting, especially her feelings on the oil industries and their work in the rainforest. She explained that the oil was the second largest money-maker for the poor country, but it is not predicted to last much longer. She believes that instead of destroying the rainforest with the drilling of oil, Ecuador should use it and the other amazing environments it holds as a way to bring in money through tourism.

When we finally arrived in the rainforest, I completely agreed with Gabbie. There was an endless amount of attractions and products that come from the rainforest besides oil. My group and I learned a tremendous amount of information from our guide, Lennie, a native who grew up in the rainforest and was the grandson of a Shaman medicine man. Like Indian cultures living in the rainforest, we smeared leaves on our arms for mosquito bites, sucked on moss for stomach aches, and ate lemon ants from a nut as a treat. This experience really immersed us in this unique culture.

On the final day in the Amazon Basin, we visited a Quichua community and had the opportunity to interact with the people for a day. They spoke a native language, but I was able to communicate a little in Spanish with the children who were learning it in their one-room school house, which they attended for five years. We played soccer with the children, danced with the adults, and ate a traditional lunch served on a banana leaf. Then, we were welcomed into a typical house in the village. The house was on stilts and consisted of one room, two walls, and no furniture. Twelve people lived in this house. I,

along with the rest of my peers in the group, was overwhelmed at seeing these people live in such poverty.

Witnessing extreme poverty in the Ecuadorian culture among such beautiful environments caused a complete tumble of emotions for me throughout the 15 days. The experiences really affected my life. Today, I compare many of my blessings with that of the Ecuadorians and it makes me more grateful for them. Reality has a new meaning for me because I am aware of the completely different lifestyles that exist throughout the world. Earth as whole seems much bigger now; my small place on it has been put into perspective by thinking of the larger problems that other people face and issues with the environment. I feel that if more people had similar opportunities like mine, the world would move in a positive direction. They would learn that the similarities and differences among people throughout every culture are equally important, and that we all have something to teach each other.