

TCD Practitioner Grant Report: Field Course for Latin American Students in Colombia

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As conservation issues such as climate change and deforestation continue to span political borders, there is an ever-increasing need for international scientific collaborations. Much research takes place in developing countries, and in many cases research projects in Latin American countries provide opportunities for local students to improve their field-techniques, by training students in specific data collection methods. Much less frequent is the involvement of these students in the development of the questions, analysis and data interpretation of each project. Thus, our objective has been to close the loop by instructing local students who have leadership potential and the motivation necessary to conduct their own research.

We first developed the *Field Course for Latin American Students* in 2009 to train and recruit student assistants who were not yet qualified to fill positions on our field crews in Peru. After working with the students for a few days, it became apparent that these promising students had no training in the process of scientific investigation. We therefore decided to have the students develop a hypothesis-driven independent thesis project. The following year the scope of the field course was broadened, and eight students from Peru and three from Colombia spent 10 days in a peer learning environment about scientific inquiry that included research design and critical reading of journal articles as well as training in basic tools and techniques of ecological research. The students subsequently used these tools and techniques to design and execute small pilot projects with structured peer group feedback on all components of their project including their hypotheses, methods, and interpretation of their results. In 2011, we broadened the recruitment process yielding a massive response with more than 100 applicants from Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. In 2012, Judit Ungvari-Martin (PhD student, Biology) received a TCD Practitioner Grant to help support the 4th version of this field course. This time around, 21 students from Colombia, Peru and Bolivia attended the course that took place at the *Centro Forestal Tropical Pedro Pineda* in Colombia. The students received hands-on research training in a variety of fauna groups and also learned about research design. They also participated in a workshop about preparation of curriculum vitae and letters of intent for future prospective jobs. At the end of the course, the students presented results from their independent studies in a mini-symposium.



Ultimately, we expect this educational program to have a long-lasting positive impact by enhancing capacity building for future conservation leaders and by helping them to prepare for their studies and research. For more information about the course and pictures please go to:

http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/ordwaylab/judit/Curso_de_campo/Curso_de_campo.html