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Atlantic Coast: Same Country, Different World

Arriving at Pearl Lagoon

After an exhausting 8 hour bus ride we eventually reached our primary destination, the small port city of Pearl Lagoon. There we had our first discussion with Wesley Williams, a local leader of the primarily Creole community. William's great-grandfather was from Jamaica, an example of what an influence, which that former colony has on Atlantic Culture. He spoke about the history of the town, which dating back to 1767 was the oldest Mayangna (Sumu) indigenous community. The Miskitios came at the end of the 18th of the century and established themselves there.

The Caribbean Culture prevails which is a mixture of the slave trade, the multiple colorizations and indigenous roots. We saw this in the music we heard, the dances we saw and especially the food which contrasted greatly with Managua. Instead of chicken every single day, there was a bountiful selection of shrimp and fish cooked over a wood grill and a hint of coconut in all the food. The people in Pearl Lagoon live off of whatever fish they catch and family remittances due to the lack of jobs and governmental aid. These remittances are sent by family members working in the tourist industry in places like Belize, Jamaica and Costa Rica.

Pearl Lagoon has changed significantly over the years. While there are still wooden houses, concrete homes have become more popular due to the lack of wood resulting from deforestation and natural disasters. Life continues to get harder for the natives as natural resources continue to disappear. Therefore, selling of drugs has become a common source of income. The Atlantic Coast is situated along a major route of international drug trafficking, and Colombian boats often throw drugs overboard while evading U.S. frigates. Thus, fishermen have begun looking for treasure troves of drugs instead of food. This of course has become a major problem in local society. Fortunately, more emphasis is being put on environmentalism and sustainable education as a means to empower the poor people of the community.

"Everyone said that the Atlantic Coast would feel like a totally different country, and they were right... I'm so intrigued by the language here."
 -Anna Robertson

Our New Guide and Friend, Rosa Woods

Throughout the trip we were lucky enough to be accompanied by a fantastic guide named Rosa Woods who knew just about everyone on the Atlantic Coast and the rich history of the autonomous regions. She herself had experienced Nicaraguan history from a very interesting perspective, from both sides of the country. She was a teen when the revolution triumphed and recalls seeing young teachers coming into her town as part of the literacy campaign. She decided to seek an education herself and went to Managua where she fine-tuned her Spanish and earned a degree in geography at the UNAN. When returning for break one December, she was caught in an attack by Contra troops in her home town of Pearl Lagoon. Thirty people died in that attack and it was soon followed by another in May. This experience inspired her to take up arms as a tracker for the Sandinista Army, which she remembers as the most exciting time of her life. Having such a person be our guide in the Atlantic Coast was a great experience, as she possesses great passion and commitment for the common good.



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Side Note:

- Quotes included in this issue have been taken from the group reflection journal that was kept on this trip.
- Two students wrote about each day's activities and their reactions to all of the new experiences.

A Brief History

Mr. Johnny Hodgson, secretary general of the S.A.A.R. (South Atlantic Autonomous Region) for the FSLN political party, talked to us about the history of the autonomous regions and the situation we find it in today. In summary, the Miskitia indigenous persons have always lived with a sense of autonomy on the Coast of Central America and were overlooked by Columbus because of their migratory lifestyle.. England, however, created an alliance with the Miskitia, and the region became a British protectorate from 1634-1870 during which they governed their own people, preserving the native culture and language while receiving protection from the British crown in exchange for raw goods. During this time, the people of coast had good relations with Great Britain and U.S.A. but were enemies of Nicaragua. However, when the U.S.A. began threatening Great Britain over a canal in Central America, Great Britain ended the protectorate and handed the region over to Nicaragua, as an autonomous region, and withdrew completely from the region.

But what does autonomy really mean? We kept asking. The tension between the autonomous region and Nicaragua resulted in much conflict over the course of the following decades. Much controversy prevailed iover the concept of sovereignty and rights to natural resources between the Miskitia (rights to natural resources) and Nicaraguan state (rights to enforce national laws). With the help of U.S. Marines, Nicaragua declared martial law in the Miskitia and exiled all the leaders. The coastal region lost autonomy and became private land of the Somoza family up until the FSLN triumphed in 1979, and guaranteed Miskito representation in the government. Despite granting autonomy, there is still racism and discrimination towards indigenous and Creole (African/Jamaican descendants) peoples prevalent in Nicaragua.



“I feel sad how their autonomy on the coast is restraining the chances of Nicaragua being united... I’m happy to see that they are working together, to have a lot better chance of improvement.”
 - Eva Witt



“From the ethnicity to the language to the history to the customs, I feel so far away from my life in Barrio La Luz, but it’s been such a great experience and I’ve learned a ton!”
 - Karyla Neal



The Fight For Land Rights

Mr. Hodgson also spoke about the current situation of the continuing struggle over land rights of indigenous communities in the North and South Atlantic Coast Regions. Over the last five years, 17 of 22 territories that were possessed by Pacific peasant migrants have been demarcated and titled, re-defining them as communal lands in the hands of the original owners: indigenous communities. They still face an uphill battle; although the autonomous regions cover 52% of Nicaragua’s land, the population only represents 10% of Nicaragua, giving them less leverage in the attempts to repossess their lost homeland.

So far, only 50% of the autonomy laws have been implemented and enforced, and the communities continue to fight for 100% implementation with a well-defined strategy. A diagnostic has already been carried out, mapping and titling the land to the communities. The next step includes recovering the land from peasants who have illegally exploited the resources. This conflict is especially troublesome because it essentially pits the poor against the poor.



Good-Bye Trees, Good-Bye Food

The Atlantic Coast regions of Nicaragua have suffered much environmental damage over the years, due to the abundance of natural resources. Many valuable wood grows in the region, including Rosewood and Jispero, two of the last hard woods used for hard wood, furniture, and houses. Also, because of the demand of cattle ranches, much of the forest has been depleted to establish these farms. The Pacific peasants that migrated to the Atlantic region logged much of the area without restriction, and this has affected the region and people tremendously.

With fewer trees, the climate has changed dramatically. While we were there, we observed several rain storms, and this is during the dry season.

That means that the fruit in the rain burns, and there is less fruit. Fewer trees also leads to a change in the water, a huge part of coastal life: transportation, food, daily chores... One of the women we spoke with expressed with much pain, "Less trees means less water and less water means less fish and less fish means we don't eat."

Communities have been working to focus on reforestation of the region by collaborating with different NGOs, learning that most of the deforestation was done by the government. With new efforts, and a fuller conscience about the importance of reforestation, there are high hopes for the betterment of the region's environment.

S environment.



Environmental Focus in Education

We visited a Environmental and Agro-forestry Education Center, a technical school that trains young people from surrounding communities carpentry, or afro-forestry. 145 students live on the campus and attend basic theoretical classes in the morning and practical classes in the afternoons (fieldwork). All of the education focuses on sustainability and development, never failing to find a use for all products and bi-products of the school.

Examples of some aspects of the agro-forestry programs including forestry

training in the use of naturally fallen wood, production of coconut oil, water purification, agriculture, production of organic fertilizer, farm management, and recycling. All of these skills can be integrated into the lifestyles of the students and their families, which essentially empowers the students to support their families. An emphasis on gender equality also prevails as an important aspect of breaking cultural expectations and moving toward a more just outlook. The carpentry classes also teach in sustainable ways, keeping in mind the absence of electricity

"I often see gender equality efforts exclusively focused on empowering women... this center presented the opposite case as well, teaching young men "light" work... that holds great importance in the struggle to diminish the machismo attitudes."

-Brooke Eastman

and machinery in the students' houses, and thus they learn how to make products by hand. This school is impressive, teaching environmental awareness and provides the students with sustainable job opportunities.

The Moravian Church

While in Pearl Lagoon we went to an interesting Moravian Celebration in a woman's house. There we sang along as a large group of people sang hymns, most being "special hymns" which people in the audience picked to sing. Our own Anna Robertson and Juan Vargas picked one such song and led the congregation for a brief moment.

Later in the city of Bluefields, we visited the first Moravian Church in Central America, where we met Bishop Oliver Hudson. He spoke to us about the Church's establishment in Czechoslovakia and the path it took to come to Nicaragua. German Missionaries began the first

Christian Church on the Atlantic Coast on March 14th, 1849 which soon grew to become a multilingual, multiethnic congregation. In 1974, the entire program was turned over to the natives of Nicaragua, making way for the first indigenous bishop, Oliver Hudson being the 4th. Since then, it has been progressing consistently into the fields of education, building primary and secondary schools all around the region. Today there are 96,000 communicant members and 7 congregations in Bluefields alone. While most are Creole-speaking, there is one Spanish and one Miskito congregation.



"I see signs of hope in how the URACCAN is an affordable school that supports students and also gives them a chance to become part of an intercultural community."

- Juan Vargas



"I felt that the Moravian Church had a unique community feel, because it was such a small group. There was also an interesting mix of young and old."

-Abby Anderson

URACCAN

The University of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast Autonomous Regions is an intercultural community-based university. The mission of the university reads "With science and technical skills, we create human resources to strengthen the autonomous region." The foci on the value and meaning of autonomy, and collectively strengthening the region, resurfaced many times

throughout the trip.

The URACCAN promotes these foci with an educational structure that matches the culture of the region, revitalizing the roots and traditions of all the different ethnic and cultural groups co-existing in the region. With 2 universities and 7 campuses, it is able to attend to

many students in the area, and offer scholarships for students of afro descendent roots and good grades.

The director, Cheryl Thomas, seemed very optimistic about the potential of the education system; yet looking still for improvement and strengthening of the Atlantic Coast.

"Overall, it was really interesting to see the intercultural workings in Bluefields. First, with the goals of the University, and then with the traditions of the Moravian Church. I just find it so interesting how the different groups interact."

- Katie Wiggins

Xavier University



Paradise

Our final day was a fantastic voyage to Pink Pearl Island, a private little abode in the Caribbean Sea. A British gentleman and his mother lived there, giving us the opportunity to spend the morning there, gratis. We bathed in the sun (mostly burned) and played amongst the starfish in the ocean. Drinking from a fresh hand-picked coconut hardly quenched our thirst in the Caribbean heat. Life there seemed so tranquil yet distant from the daily struggles of the average Nicaraguan.



"As we left, my sunburned skin boiling like a lobster, I thought, 'How does it make sense that some British guy and his mom could own an entire island, but the indigenous on land can't get their basic communal rights in full?'"

-Zeke Solomon

Don't forget to come see our presentation this Friday, April 29, at 4:00 in Kelley Auditorium! For more information regarding ASLS Nicaragua, contact Dr. Irene B. Hodgson at contactasls@xavier.edu. Be on the lookout for our fifth and last issue!

HIV Prevention

A representative from Acción Médica Cristiana (Christian Medical Action), Donna Hammond, visited us at the hotel one morning to talk to us about the work of this organization. The main goal and thread that ties all their work together is HIV prevention, but the structure of the organization focuses on support groups for men and groups for women in educating them about health, sex, gender equality, environment, and water purification. Statistics have shown very successful results in controlling HIV in the coastal regions of Nicaragua, especially compared to neighboring communities.

Like most organizations in the autonomous regions, the work offered by AMC focuses a great deal on the culture and reality of the needs of the citizens in the area. With this, they teach and offer services, such as midwives, congruent to the traditions and desires of the people. Once again, the sustainability of such an organization, by putting responsibility in the hands of the community members as the main fighters for change.

"What a cool organization! It has done a crackerjack job at implementing community based development by asking the people to get involved at all levels to create real change— no wonder they're so successful!"

- Liza Magley



A Note From The Authors:

The trip to the Atlantic Coast challenged our perceptions and stimulated our interest in this unknown region, a whole new world away from Managua. We hope the information in this newsletter does the same for you.

- Zeke Solomon and Brooke Eastman

"It was sad to leave Casa Blanca and to say good-bye to Miss Dell. She was a really great host and all of the people there were so nice and I just all around good people... I can only describe what we saw and learned as *amazing*."

- Ryan Goellner

Getting Around

One thing that made the Atlantic Coast a completely new experience was that we traveled by boat as the primary mode of transportation. There are few roads in the Atlantic Coast but almost all the cities and towns connect to the water. The waves varied depending on where we went and on the way to Pink Pearl Island they were monstrous. Juan was almost thrown overboard! On our way back to Managua, a man named Reggie made an interesting remark: "While people like you tend to get sick on boats and feel uncomfortable there, they are like a second home for me; cars however are real trouble... especially on these roads!" We didn't agree at first, but after two popped tires and three police checkpoints, we knew what he was talking about!