9-15-2009

Press release : 2009 : 09 : 15 : Honors Student Researches Ecotourism Impact in Mexico

Melanie Marquez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.usfsp.edu/usfsp_news_press_releases

Recommended Citation
https://digital.usfsp.edu/usfsp_news_press_releases/785

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the University Advancement at Digital USFSP. It has been accepted for inclusion in USFSP News and Press Releases by an authorized administrator of Digital USFSP.
Abby Bennett Interviews in Mexico (St. Petersburg, Fla.) September 15, 2009 – Motivated by her desire for more Spanish immersion and intrigued by ecotourism programs in the Yucatan Peninsula, USF St. Petersburg senior Abby Bennett researched her Honors Thesis for three weeks this summer in Mexico.

A majority of residents in the coastal villages Bennett visited depend on fishing for their livelihood, but with the industry's viability in decline, Bennett aimed to learn how ecotourism could provide a supplemental or alternative livelihood for coastal residents and how ecotourism affects the environment. The Environmental Science and Policy major studied in Mexico the summer of 2008 with USFSP's study abroad program in Merida and longed to return to the country. Her thesis topic allowed her to return to Mexico and stay with the same host family. Bennett received a USFSP Honors Program research travel grant, outlined her interview questions and had support from USFSP professors and advisers, but beyond that her success depended on what she would find once on her own in the towns she wanted to explore.

"I didn't know how I was going to find fishermen and whether they would participate in the interviews," Bennett said. "It turns out I was able to find tons of fishermen who were so helpful."

She interviewed 80 fishermen in Spanish, approaching them at the village ports as they returned from a day of work. She toured a fish house where large boats bring catches later distributed to Miami, Tampa and other parts of Mexico. She interviewed ecotourism program directors and met government officials working on plans for sustainable practices and collaboration. Bennett visited the library of Merida's Center of Investigation and Advanced Studies of I.P.N, a center focused on studying marine resources, human ecology and applied physics, where she researched articles and theses not available elsewhere.

She asked the fishermen, many of whom barely earned enough each day to pay for the gas for their boats, if they had participated in an ecotourism program. Some fishermen take tourists bird watching, kayaking or snorkeling, using resources they already have to earn income. If fishermen had not conducted ecotourism, Bennett asked why.

"If they didn't participate many expressed it was because those who do are in an exclusive group and it wasn't an accessible opportunity for them," she said.

Ecotourism often helps indigenous people of an area and fosters environmental education for the community and tourists. Bennett first witnessed ecotourism's impact in Mexico during her first summer there when she took a weekend excursion to a coastal town for a day of kayaking and snorkeling.

For her research, Bennett focused on Celestun and Chuburna, two Gulf Coast towns useful for comparison because Celestun is located in a biosphere reserve through UNESCO's Biosphere Program and has a large, well-developed ecotourism program while Chuburna is not in a protected area and has a fledgling program. She researched community-based ecotourism programs implemented by the Global Environmental Facility's Small Grants Programme and state government programs, which focus more on financial mitigation. The Small Grants Programme targets maintenance and conservation of biological diversity.

"This is original, high-quality, international research," said Thomas Smith, Honors Program Director and associate professor of government and international affairs. "Abby's initiative and hard work really paid off."

Bennett will sort her interviews as she completes and defends her thesis this semester. Her thesis adviser is Joseph Dorsey, assistant professor of environmental policy. She plans to graduate in December and will apply to joint graduate programs in law and environmental policy.