Sustainability and Conservation at local level in Costa Rica

LE-803

4 credits

Updated Autumn 2023

I- Course Content

Based on theory and field experiences, this course explores at local scale how different actors in Costa Rican society (local governmental institutions, rural communities, indigenous groups, women cooperatives, community-based organizations, NGOs, activists) attempt to achieve sustainable transitions which benefit society and the environment. Students will learn and experience local practices which focus on resilient food systems, the protection and restoration of tropical ecosystems, climate change adaptation and the enablement of rural areas to develop economically in the present while envisioning an eco-friendlier future. The syllabus and the excursions also analyse Costa Rica's deepest paradox: behind its reputation and extraordinary credentials as an environmentally conscious nation, there are many unsolved social-environmental issues. Already, more than 95 percent of Costa Rican energy is produced from renewable sources, and its forest cover now stands at more than half part of its territory, after having reverted decades of deforestation. This biodiversity-hotspot nation has also adopted one of the most consistent and ambitious plans to achieve a zero net emissions economy by 2050, in line with the Paris Climate Change Agreement. On the other hand, Costa Rica faces many social-environmental challenges. Particularly, the overuse of agrochemicals in agricultural rural communities is among the highest in the continent and creates a serious public health problem in rural areas. This contradictory background places Costa Rica as the perfect laboratory to learn through the lens of sustainability the local possibilities and challenges while exploring its impressive biodiversity and getting immersed in its pluricultural society.

II- Learning outcome

Students will get insight into Costa Rican economic activities, environmental policies and social dynamics at local level to better visualize emerging trends and future directions for sustainability and conservation, with specially focus on the study of resilient food systems and the regeneration of tropical ecosystems. The student will also be able to discuss and explain some of the most important socio-ecological challenges for Costa Rican societies in the present, especially in rural communities. Students should be able to present, describe and analyse the topics covered in lectures and syllabus. The readings and the excursions will be selected to help students actively understand the complex interplay between environmental, social, and economic factors at local level. Students who satisfactorily complete this course will be able to:

- Define sustainability and conservation and understand the interconnectedness of social, economic, and environmental dimensions in the Costa Rican rural context
- Gain knowledge about the different stages in reforestation and regeneration in tropical ecosystems and examine the impact of human activities on these ecosystems and species conservation

●Describe successful community-led conservation initiatives and assess the role of NGOs and community-based organizations in environmental governance
●Study how citizen initiatives make possible sustainable transitions and the localization of the SDGs in Costa Rica
●Describe some elemental sustainable farming practices and the principles of the integration of agriculture and forest conservation through agroforestry
●Analyse some Costa Rica's environmental policies and their effectiveness in the agrarian sector
●Examine best and innovative practices in sustainable tourism, circular and solidarity economy and community engagement at local level
●Recognize the value of women empowerment in sustainable development
●Explore the integration of traditional practices, the co-creation of knowledge and conservation of the agrobiodiversity of Costa Rica.
●Learn some strategies for climate change mitigation and adaptation at the local level related to the promotion of agrobiodiversity
●Identify the main social-environmental conflicts that arise in rural areas of tropical countries and analyse the contestation and adaptation processes in the quest of responsible governance
●Discuss emerging trends and future directions for sustainability and conservation in Costa Rica, with specially focus on resilient food systems and the conservation of tropical ecosystems

III- Teaching

The course is divided into two sections. The first section consists of a self-study period (6 weeks). The second section consists of a teaching period in Costa Rica (16 weeks) with obligatory attendance to lectures, seminars and several academic day excursions and overnight field trips.

Self-study section. This part of the course aims to provide a broad overview over fundamental topics for understanding Costa Rican agrarian past and deforestation history. Students must read some selected chapters/ articles and submit a reflection text based on this reading.

Study at campus in San Isidro, Costa Rica. This section includes 40 instruction hours of academic seminars and lectures, and 40 instructions hours of experiential environmental learning through several day excursions, and overnight field trips (five nights). Students must participate both in lectures, seminars, day excursions and in the overnight field trips. At least 80% attendance in all teaching activities is compulsory to qualify to the final exam. Students will get a study guide with the detailed program each semester.

IV- Evaluation

Exams and other submissions must be written in English.

Self-study assignment	Approved / Not approved
Participation in field excursions	10 %
Academic day excursions video-report	25 %
Academic overnight field trip group presentation	25%
Final Home Exam	40 %

Evaluation scale:

90 - 100%	A	Excellent
8 0 - 8 9 %	B	Good
70 - 79%	C	Fair
Less than 70%	Failed	

Self-study reflection text

The specific instructions and reflection questions are found in the self-study guide document. The reflection text must be an individual work written either in Spanish or English. Submission deadline and other submission details: Look at the self-study guide document. The self-study reflection text is a compulsory activity and must be approved.

Academic day excursions

Students will write a report on three different communities/ projects we will be visiting. These communities have different biocultural backgrounds (migrants, indigenous, women cooperatives from rural areas and landless peasants). These visits will allow us to better understand the cultural dimension of sustainability and development in rural areas in the tropics. Prior to these visits, we will issue in a seminar how to best write an academic field trip report. More instructions are found in the study guide document.

Overnight field trip

The overnight field trip (four nights) combines a practical and theoretical approach. Students will stay in a rural village which has some special local policies on economy, land tenure and conservation. This community is in the middle of the municipality in Costa Rica with the lowest income per household and the most unequal land distribution, whereas most inhabitants work in the pineapple plantations. However, this small community attempts to achieve sustainable development by incentivizing the preservation and restoration of forests, while promoting economic growth and social welfare of its population through agro-cooperatives, organic agriculture practices and community-based tourism. There are several academic goals for this trip. First, students will study the extraordinary biodiversity in this area. Among other activities, several guided walks and workshops will be organized to explore the tropical rainforest and learn how to conduct small-scale farming making use of agroecological and agroforestry methods in tropical ecosystems. All these learning activities will provide a ground to understand how small communities can diversify livelihoods and enhance resilience by being better prepared to anticipate and adapt to natural disasters, economic shocks and climate change. Students will complete a group work and write a report based on this experience (Detailed instructions can be found in the study guide document).

Final exam

During the final seminar students will get instruction and guidance about the final exam. In this 2-days take-home exam, students will answer two general questions that cover the learning outcomes for this course. Date: Last week of the course. (Detailed instructions can be found in the study guide document).

V- Syllabus

The detailed reading list schedule will be updated each semester.