Costa Rica: *Land Use Issues in Rainforest Conservation*

**1. Why is this Program a Good Fit?**

As an intended marine biology and physiology double major, I can honestly say that there is nothing that excites me more than biology. I am fascinated by the processes of life, from the molecular to the population scale, and the classes required for both of my majors allow me to explore how life functions across many different levels. My time at UW often consists of me, in Suzzallo, reading about some of the most beautiful places in the world and learning about the life that can flourish there.

   However, images can only reveal so much, and with summer approaching I am excited for the potential opportunity to visit a site with an incredible amount of biodiversity while exploring ways to promote conservation of these fragile and complicated ecosystems. I spent the previous summer taking courses on San Juan Island at Friday Harbor Laboratories. This opportunity allowed me to realize that I am passionate about field work and I would rather be learning about organisms while observing them in their natural habitat as opposed to in a lab setting or reading about them in a book because I enjoy examining the interaction between the organism and their environment first hand.

   As a senior in high school, I was initially attracted to the UW Honors program due to the interdisciplinary nature of the classes. Science is fascinating on its own, but I am especially interested in the connections between communities and the natural world. Specifically, I want to find ways to preserve as much biodiversity as possible in a world that is rapidly evolving to a become place that often prioritizes profits rather than a respect for nature and endangered species. Now, as a sophomore, I feel like I have put honors to the side as I become increasingly immersed in science classes taught by professors who are conducting cutting edge research in their fields. I want to prioritize honors courses, and this program is the ideal opportunity for me to get hands-on experience to learn about an incredible ecosystem from an interdisciplinary perspective from professors who are incredibly knowledgeable in their fields.

   This program is a valuable test-run of what a career in environmental conservation would be like someday. When studying biology, it feels like there are endless avenues that a degree in biology could lead me down, so I would like to experience as many different potential careers as possible so that I can narrow down the directions that I am highly interested in before applying to a graduate program. I would be honored to have the opportunity to interact with the people who rely on the rainforest to survive, and I want to learn more about what would change about their community structure if conservation is not deemed as valuable as potential profits that companies can gain from exploiting this invaluable resource.

   I am currently an interpreter at the Seattle Aquarium, and it is my responsibility to explain the importance of protecting the health of our marine environment to the thousands of guests who visit the aquarium each year. This experience has taught me that many people care deeply about the health of our planet, but they do not know an efficient way to get involved and make a difference. I often feel the same struggle, and I believe that experiencing Costa Rica and listening to the stories of the people who live in the rainforest would be an important step that I could take to better understand how a rainforest functions and what would motivate people to protect the life that exists there.

**2. Adaptability**

Describe a time when you had to adapt to a new environment and/or interact with people who were different from you (here in the U.S. or abroad). How has this experience prepared you for studying abroad? (maximum 250 words)

This past summer after my freshman year, I had the opportunity to spend ten weeks at UW’s Friday Harbor Laboratories on San Juan island. I enrolled in two courses, and the majority of my fellow students were earning credits to complete their PhDs in marine biology.

My first night at FHL, I felt entirely out of place. I initially had trouble connecting with people who seemed so much more experienced than me. Our dinner conversations consisted of discussions of their independent research projects and cutting-edge scientific discoveries, and I longed to contribute to the world of science like my peers proudly had. My life soon began to revolve around marine biology, and I studied as hard as I could so that I could keep up with what was going on around me.

By the end of the summer, I felt like I had progressed a considerable amount. I was contributing regularly, and I felt like I had been accepted in the world of science by my peers. I believe I learn best when I am in a brand new place and my only priority is to gain knowledge about a new topic. I gained lifelong friends this past summer, and I was able to conduct and publish my own research project successfully. I also learned that I thrive when I have the chance to do hands-on research in the field, learning side by side with experts, rather than trying to gather information from the pages of a textbook.

**3. Group Dynamics**

The success of the program can depend on the ability of the group to live and study with one another in harmony. Describe a prior experience with a group situation and how you navigated the social dynamics. (maximum 250 words)

When I was 17, I had the opportunity to spend my summer volunteering in Huyro, Peru — a rural town in the Andes mountains. When I arrived in Huyro, I was shocked by the lack of amenities; the village lacked clean, running water and electricity. I went to Huyro with a group of other young volunteers from around the world, and we all came from places where these amenities were nearly guaranteed, and we found that we had been taking them for granted our entire lives. Without running water, it is difficult to access sanitary places to use the restroom, food preparation and sanitation becomes difficult and often inadequate, and minor injuries may become lethal if wounds cannot be rinsed off by clean water. All of the volunteers ranged in age from 17 to 20, and we had never been faced with questions such as “who will be in charge of going to get the water today,” or “how will we prepare food with no electricity in the middle of the rainforest?” We were forced to become a team very quickly because a miscommunication could lead to a day with no water or no food. All of the 12 volunteers came from different countries, and many of us spoke different languages but were united by the goal of wanting to help a rural community. We took turns doing the most difficult tasks each day, and it became possible for us to conquer challenges together that we had never faced before.