

# Environmental

by Eva Hershaw

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When I arrived at Juan Luis' farm, I had a list of questions I wanted to answer. I sought explanations as to how this specific farmer, in the midst of a national pesticide epidemic, had been mindful enough to choose a farm without chemicals. I wanted to better understand what farmers like him added to the organic movement in Costa Rica. The majority of my knowledge in this area has been generated through readings on the various impacts of export agriculture. I have little hands-on farming experience. What I have learned since I arrived in Mastatal has rendered my surveys useless and dropped my naïve optimism into the red soil.

The first night I slept very little; the flutter of bats kept me clenching my covers until I was too exhausted to be scared. I went out into the fields yesterday morning with Juan Luis and his neighbor Carlos, collecting plantain seeds to be replanted in other fields. We left before the sun came up and spent the day sweating in the acute Central American sunshine. Those men work hard. Last night may have been the best night of sleep I will have in Costa Rica.

Juan Luis' farm is sustainable by most standard definitions. He works his own land manually with the help of willing neighbors and two reliable horses. No chemicals are added to any of his crops. When I asked Juan Luis why he had made the decision to remain organic, despite the apparent advantages of pesticide-sprayed produce, I was met with a long pause and a kind smile. From beneath his sweat stained shirt Carlos offered a chuckle. That night we ate a simple dinner of black beans and rice, not to be complicated with any condiment or garnish. There is no place for pesticides in the budget of this family.

But what life this family has! The Luis family: Juan, Lidiedt

Eva Hershaw graduated in Summer 2005 from the Program on the Environment. She went to Costa Rica to study organic agriculture in the rural village of Mastatal, population 150.

and their four children Mariana, Jorge, Vinnie and Ray. I admire the love of life they share with one another. Their lifestyle is not one defined by convenience or comfort. They survive off the land, farming with a knowledge that experience has given them. They each play an integral role on a very devoted team. I can tell that they enjoy each other's company more than anything else that they have, which isn't much.

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Jump to billion dollar multinationals from foreign countries. Chiquita, Dole, Del Monte, and other foreign investors have historically had a stronghold on the agricultural commodities of Costa Rica. As these companies bring jobs to an eager workforce, they also come with unpleasant baggage in the form of environmental, social and economic instability. The profits of these companies are not seen in Costa Rica.

In Costa Rica, bananas are perhaps the best known of exploited cash crops. The history of banana plantations has been one of politically guided, profitable decisions in the name economic growth but at the expense of economic sovereignty. While government officials argue that corporations such as Chiquita, Dole, and Del Monte have brought a successful market to a country in need of jobs and debt relief, small farmers have seen the presence of these corporations suffocate the local economy.

From an environmental standpoint, plantation development has slashed lush rainforest, demolished biodiversity in regions known for immaculate flora and fauna, and invited toxic chemicals that find their way into rivers, oceans, and into the bodies of Costa Ricans. Plantations create unstable jobs with generally unhealthy conditions, leading to disease, asthma, and sterilization among workers exposed without protection to potent chemicals. Costa Rica lacks the labor and environmental standards we take for granted in the United States. Workers are forced to accept conditions that we would not allow in our own country.

With money and politics so closely allied, and power placed ultimately in the hands of foreign consumers and industries, change seems a long ways off. In Costa Rican agriculture, change would be on the scale of governmental land reform, the revision of trade agreements and a shifting paradigm for an entire nation. Where does an American environmentalist begin to define the problems of another country in terms of what she can do in her own?

The environmental movement in the United States has become a special interest, a hobby afforded by those who do not directly experience the effects of environmental injustice. I think that most American environmentalists would undoubtedly list agriculture on their list of environmental concerns, but far fewer would include Costa Rican agriculture as an issue landing on their green radar. In order to begin

to grasp the complexity of the environmental movement and the range of topics that it spans, we shall follow in the sentiment of Dana Alston, a social change activist speaking of a newly defined environmental movement: "We refuse narrow definitions."

I no longer value educational material in the way I did before my trip. I used to think that filling my brain with written knowledge experienced by another person would lead me down a path of environmental enlightenment. Now I see that this type of learning can only explain so much. In order to give body to text, I encourage students to actively seek experience on the ground, immersing themselves first-hand in the issues they are concerned with in order to better approach a solution they can stand behind.

In Costa Rica, truth existed in tangible realities. It existed in the skin of Adriana, a surfer plagued with skin cancer traced to chemicals emptying into the Caribbean Sea. It existed in the frightened faces of plantation workers who refused to answer my questions until their supervisor granted them permission. It existed in the small classrooms filled with tan students in white uniforms and muddy shoes.