

**RLND Class VI International Seminar to Costa Rica/Panama**

**February 2015**

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- Jerry Doan: Chair**
- Melissa Beach**
- Chris Boerboom, Ph.D.**
- Tim Bryan**
- Steve Edwardson**
- John Jacobson**
- April Jepson**
- Janel Lee**
- Barry Medd**
- Pam Musland**
- Michael O’Keeffe**
- Scott Stofferahn**
- Keith Trego**
- Kathy Tweeten**
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Rural Leadership North Dakota (RLND) Class VI participants recently experienced a 10-day study tour in Costa Rica and Panama learning about the country’s agriculture, trade and culture. The 17 participants flew into San Jose where they met their Costa Rican guide, Vinicio. The group’s first experience was a walking tour of San Jose, the capitol of Costa Rica. San Jose is an old city dating back to the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The group had lunch at a local restaurant and had their first of many meals with rice and beans.

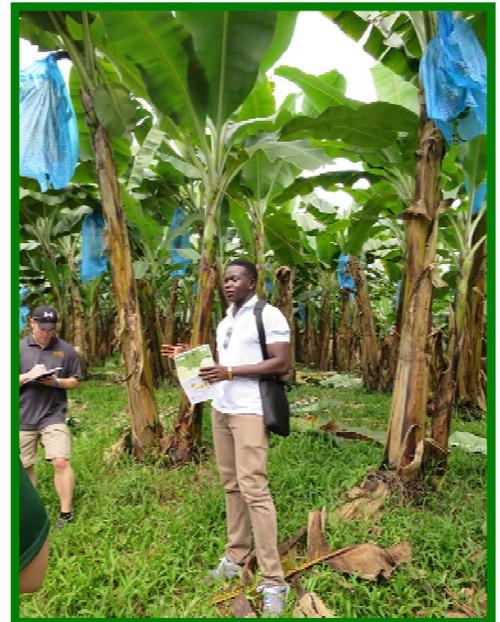
Later in the day the group heard about the history of Costa Rica and how the US has been involved in that history from Julio Fernandez Amon, a history teacher who owns and operates Sibú Chocolate outside of San Jose. The evening concluded with a wonderful meal at Sibú Chocolates with Julio and George Soriano, his business partner, sharing the history of cacao (cocoa plant) as the group sampled various chocolate treats made at Sibú Chocolates.



Sibú Chocolate tasting

Day three, Monday, was a travel day to Earth University located on the Caribbean side of Costa Rica near La Argentina. Earth University started in 1990 and has been preparing young people from across the world in a rigorous four-year undergraduate program in agricultural sciences and natural resources management. Class VI participants toured the Urban Prairie gardens with a senior Earth University student. We heard about the practice of gardening with various gardens beds (raised beds, hydroponic beds, and

layered beds) that allow people with small spaces to grow food for themselves.



Banana Plantation tour guide

The banana plantation was very educational. We learned the banana “tree” isn’t really a tree, it’s an herb. Profits from selling the bananas to the company Whole Foods goes back into the university. Our last tour was about managing waste at the university. Our tour guides were students at Earth University and were from Equator, Senegal and Uganda.

Tuesday was our day at a local farm. Class VI participants were divided into five groups and taken to the five farms near La Argentina. The farm hosts provided a tour of their farms where we observed raised beds for various plants (lettuce, tomatoes, various herbs, etc.), cacao plants, bananas, pineapple along with cattle, chickens, hogs and tilapia. The day was spent doing things on the farm with our host families and spending time getting to know them and their families.

Class VI participants learned a lot about Costa Rican farms and how similar and different they are from North Dakota farms. Wednesday morning the participants thanked their farm hosts for their wonderful hospitality and boarded the bus for a trip to Carara National Park.

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The group traveled from the Caribbean side of Costa Rica to the Pacific side where they spent the next two days in the national park. The group experienced a jungle crocodile safari tour and hiked in the rain forest. Costa Rica, about the size of West Virginia, has 50% of the land in national parks or private preserves.

The next experience was crossing into Panama from Costa Rica. The group had a 2 ½ hour experience leaving Costa Rica and entering Panama. The long process made them appreciate how easy it is to travel between the US and Canada. The next destination is the cloud forest.

Friday night found the group in Boquete, Panama which is in the cloud forest bordering Panama and Costa Rica. Saturday morning the group experienced the "Best of Boquete". Jason Lara was the tour guide for the day in Boquete. Jason led the group on a hike into the cloud forest where beautiful flowers, plants, waterfalls were seen and watchful eyes kept a "look out" for monkeys. Participants traveled to Casa Centenario, a coffee plantation started in 1917, in the higher elevations of the mountain. Participants observed, first hand, how labor intensive harvesting and drying the coffee bean really is. Native Panamanians come to the coffee plantations to pick the coffee bean to earn money for their families.

On average, a coffee picker earns \$24-36 a day, \$2 per bag they bring down from the hills where the coffee plants are. The coffee bags can weigh from 80-120 lbs and the men carry them down the hill on their backs. The women pick the ripe, red beans and put them into the bags. The coffee beans take up to four months to dry and be ready for the market.



Locks opening on Panama Canal

The next experience in Boquete was a walk around their fair grounds to see the beautiful flower arrangements that were planted there. The final experience was a visit to the hot springs about 30 minutes' drive from Boquete. Participants enjoyed the hot springs after a full day of walking in the mountains.

The last bus trip was to Panama City, about eight hours by bus from Boquete. Participants saw the countryside of Panama as the bus drove on the PanAmerican Highway. Once the group was in Panama City the group had a walking tour of the old city and learned about the history of Panama City.



Class VI with tour guide and driver

The evening dinner was at the Casa Blanca Restaurant in old town Panama City.

The last day in Panama City was spent learning about and experiencing the Panama Canal. The tour of the canal started at the Gaillard Cut where the Chagres River flows into the canal. The Gaillard Cut was carved through the Continental Divide and has a lot of historical significance as the canal was built. The French started building the Canal in 1881 with around 40,000 people working on the canal.

In the first seven years of building the canal, 1881-1889, over 22,000 workers died due to diseases such as yellow fever and malaria. The US Government took over the building project in 1904. The Panama Canal opened for business in 1914. The group went through three lock systems on their tour of the Panama Canal ending in the Bay of Panama.

Tuesday morning the group left their hotel for the Panama City-Bay County International Airport and their journey back to North Dakota.