

NSF Research Experience for Undergraduates: Studying Ecology in Ghana

I really began to get excited when we all met in Gainesville for the first time. Carmen had flown in from UC Fullerton, Angela from James Madison University and Jon from the College of the Atlantic. These were the students I would be working with for the next six weeks on various research projects at the University of Cape Coast in Ghana. We were all selected for the highly competitive National Science Foundation's Research Experience for Undergraduates through the University of Florida, or UF-UCC REU for short. Although there are literally dozens of NSF REUs to choose from, this particular program in Ghana is tailored towards research in ecology, environmental science and conservation biology. I was about to start my last year in Environmental Engineering Sciences and was eager for some international research experience.

We flew out in late May and arrived in Accra to see our new home for the next few weeks. We stayed in the Sasakawa chalets, an on-campus guesthouse with AC, refrigerator and a hot water heater. On our second day in Cape Coast we met our project mentors, a team of professors in the school of biological sciences who take an REU student each year and help them conceive and follow through on a research topic of their interest.

I was assigned to a veteran professor who had graduated from the same department years ago and spent his life researching aquatic ecology in the area.

Carmen studied pollination efficiency in the cocoa plant, a project of direct application, as the cocoa bean is one of Ghana's primary exports. Jon studied egg-laying behavior of a local butterfly, trying to discern any preference in the plant



species that this butterfly lays eggs on. Angela studied traditional medicine, interviewing local herbalists and patients about common ailments and their respective treatments. I studied algal populations and associated epifauna ecology on a nearby section of rocky shore.

Everyday, we woke up, ate breakfast, went to the lab, met up for lunch and returned to the lab before going back home to our humble chalets. On the weekends we would go into town and browse through the various markets, occasionally trying to bargain with a merchant for some uniquely Ghanaian product. On one occasion we made it to Accra for a World Cup qualifier match, Ghana vs. Gabon, that Ghana won 2-0. Throughout our stay in Ghana we made wonderful friends who brought us into their homes and offered their help with all of our acclimating needs. They made us kenkey, fufu, jolof rice and yams. In the end, we presented our work to fellow students and professors and said goodbye to all of the friends we had made throughout campus. It was an extremely rewarding experience that I will continue to benefit from for years to come.

—Benjamin Lee Branoff

