Hawaii: Searching for Sustainability

How do you feed a million people – not to mention plane loads of tourists – in an archipelago, a group of islands that is 2,500 miles from everywhere else? Professors David Koetje and Crystal Barrett led a trip to Hawaii to explore how global and local forces have intersected in Hawaii over the past two centuries and how sustainability, preservation and diversification have become today’s most pressing concerns. This Calvin group visited the “Big Island” Hawaii for 10 days, then spent three days on Maui and three days on Oahu. Activities included trips to sustainable homesteads, farmers’ markets, cultural centers, historic sites and nature preserves.

David Koetje mentioned that highlights included “a horseback tour of Waipi‘o Valley, going to a remote community of people living off the grid on the Big Island. Waipi‘o is an example of Ahupua‘a, a traditional Hawaiian agriculture system emphasizing a watershed-based community ecosystem that maintained native Hawaiians until Western contact in 1778.” Visiting a farmer’s market to sample tropical fruits at their peak of freshness was another high point. Another was when he and two of the students, Dan Strbich and Paige Wiers were interviewed on “Eco Talk with Holly Algood” on 96.1FM KNKR Kohala community radio.

Student Paige Weirs says, “Personally, my favorite experience was the bike ride down the summit of Haleakala National Park. We were able to take in the spectacular views of the sunrise around 7 a.m. and then were able to bike down to the coast of Maui while looking down on the vast ocean.” In addition to the bike tour, she was fascinated by the Algood’s sustainable farm: “Holly [Algood] lives almost entirely off the grid by way of solar and wind energy, as well as her use of hydroponics. We were able to finally see action taking place in utilizing Hawaii’s resources like their year-round sun and strong winds. Holly serves as a prototype for the rest of Hawaii to follow in harnessing the island’s resources.”

By Matthew Schepers, with assistance from David Koetje and Paige Weirs

Eye Care in Mexico

Calvin students traveled to Tijuana, Mexico to provide eye care to impoverished people along with Professor John Ubels and Dr. Larry Gerbens. Services such as eye examinations and glasses fittings, allowed Tijuanans to receive tests and prescriptions they otherwise may not have had access to. Local Mexican churches showed hospitality to the interim group, providing food, shelter and drinking water. Pre-optometry student, Jonathan Ismond, details some of his duties on the trip: “I spent the majority of my time using an auto refractor, a machine that is capable of measuring the prescription that is needed in order to counteract visual difficulties present within patients. I was able to see the joy and graciousness on the faces of each individual that we were able to provide with glasses.” When they weren’t busy in clinics, students were able to tour the Mexican State, Baja California, eating local cuisine in restaurants, visiting natural areas and dancing. I can honestly say that choosing to leave my comfort zone in order to have this experience in Mexico was one of the best decisions that I have ever made in my life. It was clear to see that the love of God is clearly reflected in each individual that was involved.”

This trip would not have been possible without donations from the Calvin community. During the fall semester, boxes for donations of glasses were scattered around campus. The donated eyeglasses were used on this trip, giving impoverished Mexican people the gift of clear vision that many of us take for granted.

By Matthew Schepers, with assistance from Jonathan Ismond
Engaging Development in Cambodia

Cambodia, located in the southern Indochina Peninsula, is a country in development. Many Cambodians do not have access to clean water, proper nutrition and medical care, education or fair work. Governmental corruption is high. These problems are not exclusive to Cambodia and are shared by many developing countries. Calvin students on the Cambodian interim had the opportunity to examine these problems first hand, and look at ways the Cambodian people are confronting them. A collaborative trip between Calvin’s engineering, biology, international development and education departments, allowed students to look at development problems in Cambodia from many viewpoints. The faculty for this course were Leonard DeRooy, David Dornbos and Penny Dykstra-Pruim.

One of the huge problems Cambodia faces is water use during the region’s dry season. Because water safe for drinking or agricultural use is scarce in Cambodia, care must be taken to ensure none is wasted. NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) have a large presence in Cambodia, educating native people on proper water use. One of the examples Calvin students got to see while on the trip was a farm watered almost entirely by drip irrigation. Student Josh Auyer shared this about the farm, “An organization called EDI has taught farmers farming techniques which helps make water use more efficient. They use drip irrigation, which runs a tube under a tarp at the base of the plant. This prevents most of the water from evaporating, meaning less water will be used.” Josh noted that despite this new farming system, the area they visited had only a week before its water source dried up– highlighting just how urgent water availability problems are in Cambodia.

Clever, inexpensive solutions are required to help solve huge issues facing a developing country. To help provide safe drinking water, many NGOs are working with Cambodians to come up with solutions that are effective and affordable. Students were able to see one of these solutions in action when they visited an NGO making clay pot water filters. Pots are made using clay that has rice husks mixed in to create microspores in the clay, allowing for filtration of particulates. Pots are baked and painted with silver nitrate, an inexpensive and safe antimicrobial agent that sterilizes water filtered through the pot.

By Matthew Schepers, with assistance from David Dornbos, and Josh Auyer

Medicine, Bioethics, and Culture in China

Professor Anding Shen led an interim to China, taking students to learn about her native culture and the world’s most populous country. China features some of the world’s oldest and richest cultural traditions, which students were able to examine while visiting Beijing, Zhangjiajie, the Hallelujah Mountains and villages of local minority groups, the Great Wall and more. Students learned about many traditional Chinese medicines (like acupuncture) from a viewpoint that helped students understand these practices and their relevance today, while dispelling Western stereotypes about traditional Chinese medicine and Chinese culture.

Student Amy Spencer had many positive things to say about the trip and some interesting observations about Chinese culture, “Besides the obvious changes in food, local terrain and language, the biggest difference was the importance of not wasting anything. This priority permeates many aspects of daily life including travel, eating, working, the way space is used and many others. Overall, the importance of not wasting brings a great many positives when it comes to efficiency and food and other aspects of life. However, not all was as pleasant. Not wasting spaces usually meant that elevators were packed very tightly, with people standing shoulder to shoulder if not closer. In general there is a lot to love about the Chinese culture, for me this especially means the value that is placed on family and food, which often go together. Families in China tended to make meal time together one of the times in which they slowed down and enjoyed each other’s company. It makes me grateful that my family and I always ate dinners together at home”.

By Matthew Schepers, with assistance from Amy Spencer and Anding Shen