Student search Amazon for clues to cure ills

By Hallie Cayne
Lantern staff writer

Researching causes and cures for strange sicknesses lurking in jungles where many people have never seen a doctor, was the working summer vacation for some Ohio State students and researchers.
They were part of a group who made a two-week trek through the Amazon Basin in July.
Such research trips benefit indigenous peoples of the region, since many have inadequate diets and health care, which makes them easy prey for many of the unfamiliar and unknown diseases, said Dr. Hilton F. da Silva, leader of the expedition.
da Silva, a third-year doctorate student in medical and biological anthropology at Ohio State, led the group of 16 scholars, researchers and students from around the United States on the trip to the Amazon in July.
The trip was organized by Conservation Education Human Adaptable and Bio-diversity, a non-profit organization based at Ohio State.
CEHAB's goal is to organize programs that are linked to the Amazon Basin to aid in developing research.
da Silva's expedition focused on developing future research programs at the Ferreira Penna Scientific Station, located in the lower Amazon Basin in Caxiuanã, Brazil.
There are 39 research projects being conducted at the station, which has been open since 1986.
di Silva is interested in assessing the health problems unique to the Amazon region and developing a health education program for the native Caboclo population, located in this area of the Amazon.
"We work mostly with rural populations," da Silva said. "They suffer from problems that are common to rural populations world-wide, such as intestinal parasites, infectious diseases and a high rate of infant mortality and malnutrition."
"Most of the problems are far beyond what people in the United States perceive as being health problems," he said. "What are normal things here, like electricity and clean water, people don't have access to. They are really isolated."
CEHAB plans to educate people in the villages about the most serious health problems in the area and train them to teach their own community health education programs, da Silva said.
"The villages were very receptive," he said. "They were happy we were there to help them. For many of them, it's the first time they've seen someone from outside Brazil, so it's a new experience for them, as well as for us. We had a very nice exchange."
The participants had many new experiences while on the trip.
To get to the research station, the group had to take a twelve-hour boat ride, then another nine-hour overnight boat ride on a much smaller craft.
They traveled by small planes to spend three days on Marajo Island, where they examined the ecosystem and water buffalo, which are not native to Brazil.
"What was really interesting about the trip was we get to use all forms of transportation," da Silva said. "For many people, it was their first time traveling this way."
A hike through the natural swamp land, or igapo, was one of the trip's highlights, he said.
"When you think about Amazonia, you think of something that's homogeneous, you think of the huge green cover of the forest," da Silva said.
"On the hike, we had a clear view that Amazonia is many ecosystems," da Silva said. "We saw how diverse, yet how fragile, all the ecosystems are."
da Silva also helped to make a significant scientific contribution by making the first videotapes of a hurricane in Brazil.
The footage made the national news in Brazil and will be used for research purposes, he said.
da Silva, who plans a similar trip for next year, is working with Ohio State and the Office of International Education to develop an official exchange program between OSU and Para State University, in Belem, Brazil, which is about 1,500 miles from the research station.
"I see the exchange program as being mutually beneficial," da Silva said. "There's potential for people from Brazil and the United States to exchange experiences. All levels of people, from teachers all the way to undergrads would be able to participate in the program."
da Silva would like participants in this exchange program to go to Brazil to study Portuguese and possibly help develop a research program at the station.