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CIEE – Tropical Ecology & Conservation in Monteverde, Costa Rica
Study Abroad Statement of Purpose

When I was little, I wanted nothing to do with Barbie and Ken. Too bad for birthdays and special occasions however. I would always uncover that nauseating pinkness under gift wrapper and then feign my gratefulness with a well-mannered grin. Afterwards I might decapitate the Mattel darlings and discard their picture-perfect-rubber remains. For play time, I preferred reverting to the Jurassic period, where my favorite dino figurines, Brontosaurus, T-Rex and Stegosaurus, held center stage. Houston's Museum of Natural Science has fossil replicas of these warm-blooded giants and I never tired of an up-close look. Peering up at the enormous but gentle Bronto display and then glancing at the fierce T-Rex physique, I wanted to travel 65 million years back and see these fascinating creatures in action.

Since I was a child, I have always taken an eager interest in the natural world and its diverse life. This summer I traveled to Puerto Rico for an REU internship with the Institute for Tropical Ecosystem Studies (University of Puerto Rico). For two months, I lived at El Verde, a tropical research station nestled within "El Yunque," Puerto Rico's largest area of protected rainforest. As an independent undergraduate researcher, I performed a biodiversity survey, focusing on the variety of spider species occurring in different forest types and also studying the impacts of disturbances on their populations. After catching a couple of thousand specimens using different techniques, I then had to identify them down to species. I enjoyed working through and learning spider taxonomy, which required that I examine the specimens under microscopes, focusing on their morphology and reproductive parts for identification. I now even have a few favorites. One is *Corythalia Gloriae*. Family Salticidae. With a black body spotted with iridescent shades of purple green and blue, this pea-sized spider occurs only in the misty cool cloud forests and reminds me of the marvels of science and species diversity.

Because I am pursuing an Environmental Studies degree, studying in a field-based environment will be a helpful and insightful supplement to courses I have already taken in this area. The CIEE program in Monteverde, Costa Rica covers "Tropical Ecology and Conservation," two concepts I am eager to delve into with the hopes of one day working in this field. Students will work on an independent study project and in addition to gaining the raw experience of performing my own research and compiling data, results, etc, I will try to develop research ideas for my Environmental Studies senior thesis.

Ideas like ecology, biodiversity and conservation have gained spotlight in the last decade and I want to help maintain this global awareness with my own academic contribution. My main interests include ecosystem dynamics and how they shape biodiversity and I want to continue studying ecology to better understand these relationships. Successful conservation movements require us to understand the basics of biodiversity science and with a bulk of background biology, I hope to add to these initiatives in any way I can. The options really are endless in this field of science and I believe the CIEE program will allow me to explore many of them. The tropics also tend to have huge concentrations of biodiversity compared to other regions and Costa Rica, with its several tropical parks and reserves, makes it an ideal place to study these subjects.

I am also eager about the home stay portion of the program. While for most of the time I will be immersed in the studying environment, in the outdoors and on related field trips, there will be an opportunity to stay with a Costa Rican family for approx. one month. I would hope to gain an inside to Costa Rican traditions because it is a country I know little about. I love Hispanic culture, in every shape and form, and believe that being both in the tropics to study science and among a Latin community will provide an amazing setting for a semester abroad.