CRWR 491: Amazonian Encounters: Forests, Rivers, and Spirits
Instructor: Dr. Bernard Quetchenbach
406-896-5927
bquetchenbach@msubillings.edu

CRWR 491: Amazonian Encounters will give students a chance to learn about the world’s greatest river system through a combination of virtual sessions and a two-week journey to the Peruvian Amazon. The experience will be individualized to focus on student needs and interests. Possible focus areas will include creative writing, environmental studies, folklore, natural history, and outdoor leadership. Students will have the opportunity to work with Dr. Juan Carlos Galeano, a poet, translator, folklorist, and filmmaker who grew up in the Amazon Basin, and who has led numerous trips to the region. Students will experience first-hand the lifeways of the contemporary Amazon, as well as the unparalleled biodiversity of rainforest and riparian environments, and the significance of the region to planetary systems and health. Dr. Quetchenbach will direct a series of writing workshops and assignments designed to help students articulate reactions to and conclusions from the experience while developing skills in various genres and forms of creative writing.

The course will be based in Iquitos, a cosmopolitan center and gateway to the rainforest. Iquitos is a major center for Amazonian arts and research, and a gathering place for people from across the basin. Students will travel by boat on the Amazon River and major tributaries including the Nanay River.

Language

The course will be conducted in English. While familiarity with Spanish would certainly be an asset for students, it is not necessary or expected.

Goals

1. To introduce students to Amazonia, providing them with an individual experience tailored to their interests.
2. To familiarize students with the processes by which indigenous and traditional societies adapt to changing circumstances that affect both the physical and spiritual underpinnings of their lives.
3. To develop a sense of global citizenship and environmental ethics through direct exposure to the beauty, power, and complexity of nature.
4. To explore parallels and distinctions between regions and cultures. Billings and Iquitos are near the upper end of two of the world’s major freshwater systems. The Amazon is the largest of the world’s rivers. The Yellowstone at Billings is nowhere near as expansive, but it is a major tributary of one of the world’s great river systems, the Mississippi-Missouri watershed. Students will explore how, despite differences in climate, latitude, and altitude, common concerns and loyalties link river-based communities across the globe.
5. To explore the cultures of the Amazon basin.
6. To explore the diverse ecosystems of the Amazon, with guidance from the people who know the area best, having gained knowledge from long experience and regionally embedded beliefs and lifeways.
7. To examine first-hand how different regions conceive of the relationship between nature preservation and human cultural traditions, and how those different concepts affect conservation and contemporary life.
8. To use journaling to reflect on and analyze experience, to record natural history details and knowledge, and to communicate insights gained through the experience.

Course Description

Throughout the spring 2021 semester, students will prepare for and orient themselves to their journey to Amazonia through a series of readings, film showings, and “live by computer” discussions with philosophers, artists, shamans and cultural figures on-site in Peru. The two-week travel experience will begin with a week in Iquitos, the largest city in the Peruvian Amazon. Students will explore the city and its markets, museums, and neighborhoods; visit the National University of the Peruvian Amazon and/or Formabiap Educational Research Center and interact with students and faculty there; and discuss course materials. Students will visit indigenous communities and explore cultural and language preservation initiatives in the region and will travel outside of the city to riverine communities.

The second week will feature an excursion on the Nanay River, a major Amazon tributary, to the Alpahuallo-Mishana National Reserve, noted for rare forest types, endemic animals, and the world’s greatest density of butterfly species. Guided by master navigators, the class will continue on the Nanay past the reserve and stay at the riverine community of Anguila, exploring the region’s arts, spiritual beliefs, cultural practices and traditions, food sources, and lifeways, which, while deeply integrated into forest and river ecosystems and histories, are being adapted to reflect contemporary situations and conditions. Students will explore with a biologist and park rangers, and share in some of the practices developed and wisdom earned by local and indigenous people with centuries-old connections to the area.

Course Requirements

The experience will occur in May 2021 and will be credited in the spring 2021 semester. Some course work will be completed during the semester before travel, with a reflective assignment due after return. Students will be assigned a grade of “I” at the trip’s conclusion. During the summer, students will complete and submit a journal detailing their activities and discoveries, and reflecting on what the experience has meant to them. The journal will demonstrate understanding and active engagement with the region, its people, its natural communities and systems, its cultures, and course materials. Journals will vary with student needs and interests—some may focus on natural history details, for example, while others may use the opportunity primarily to develop cultural connections, outdoor leadership skills, or travel writing expertise.

Preliminary Schedule

4/30 Friday
Orientation, welcome dinner
Activities in Iquitos, and rivers and forests near Iquitos

5/1 Saturday
Morning (Prof. Galeano)
Discussion of readings assigned to students prior to arrival in the Peruvian Amazon.

*The Trees Have a Mother* (film viewing/discussion. This and other films may actually be shown before the trip).

**Afternoon  (Prof. Quetchenbach)**

Capturing first impressions

5/2 Sunday

Visit to San Rafael community butterfly garden
Visit to the Primary Forest of San Rafael on the Amazon River and learn about medicinal plants on site.

5/3 Monday

Morning  (Prof. Galeano)

Discussion of readings assigned prior to trip: *Folktales of the Amazon.*

*The River* (film and discussion)

**Afternoon  (Prof. Quetchenbach)**  Nature Writing: Approaches to the natural world

5/4 Tuesday

Visit to the Quistococha lake, zoo and botanical garden. Return to sleep in the hotel
Use and role of medicinal plants and spirituality in the Amazon basin (Lecture by Rafael Chanchari Indigenous philosopher from the Shawi Nation)

5/5 Wednesday

Morning  (Prof. Galeano)

Discussion of readings assigned prior to trip

*The Green Wall* (film and discussion)

**Afternoon  (Prof. Quetchenbach)**

People in place: Connection vs. Appropriation

5/6 Thursday

Morning  Prof. Galeano

*Fitzcarraldo* (film and discussion)
Afternoon (Prof. Quetchenbach)

The aesthetics of experience. How to see.

5/7 Friday
Visit to Mercado Belen (Morning)
Visit to the community of Padrecocha See community pottery project and have dinner at the Chrakra Amazónica and return to Iquitos to sleep in the hotel.

5/8. Saturday
Short trip to Irapay a site of the Apahuayo Mishana National Reserve. Travel by car and visit the project folklore and ecotourism at the Irapay station. Visit the Chakra of the Chullachaki (spirit guardian of the forest) at night and listen to storytelling from hunters dwellers from the area.

5/9 Sunday
Return to Iquitos
Afternoon (Prof. Quetchenbach)
Translating the journey: Travel and adventure writing

5/10. Monday
Journey Alpuallo Mishana National Reserve (Visit the Yarana station) and learn about forests of the area.

5/11. Tuesday
Journey by boat into a deeper area of the Alpuallo Mishana National Reserve and visit the community of Anguila learn about problems of deforestation, illegal mining and other current problems affecting the lives of animals and people.

5/10. Wednesday
Visits the water ecosystems of the community of Anguilla and learn about the life of fish and pink dolphins.

5/11 Thursday
Return to Iquitos.
5/12  Friday
Day in Iquitos, Conclusions and farewell dinner

5/13  Trip back to the US