The stories we tell help to shape the world we live in. Even in fields where objectivity is valued, the questions researchers ask are partly determined by how they understand the links between their research and the surrounding and encompassing cultural, economic, and natural systems in which they work. In our current era of environmental crisis, the need for new visions of human relationships with natural systems is increasingly apparent.

In conjunction with Professor Juan Carlos Galeano, a poet, folklorist, and filmmaker with expertise in and commitment to exploring the stories and lifeways of contemporary Amazonia, ENST 335 and CRWR 291/491 will explore the relationship between place, people, and story. Students in ENST 335: The Environmental Vision, will focus on how stories in various genres and mediums shape the human experience in natural environments. Students in CRWR 291/491 will develop their own creative approaches to how their ideas about Amazonia and their own home regions affect their lives and the lives of the people of the Amazon. The program will include virtual visits with Amazonian figures in indigenous philosophy and environmental policy, film showings, readings, and writing exercises and projects. Students are welcome to register either for one of the courses or for both.

These two courses will culminate in an optional two-week journey to the Peruvian Amazon. The trip is not required for either course, but is likely to provide students with a valuable, unforgettable highlight of their undergraduate experience. Based in Iquitos, the Peruvian Amazon’s largest city, students from MSUB and Florida State University will travel by boat to environmental reserves home to pink river dolphins, and to indigenous villages, where they will experience first-hand the lifeways and stories that have provided a fulfilling and sustaining cultural matrix for countless generations of Amazonian people and learn how those stories and lifeways are being adapted to today’s rapidly changing conditions.

CRWR 291/491: Story, Place, and Home: How the Stories We Hear and Tell Define Us.

The theme for this course is storytelling as a means of discovering our place, as individuals and cultures, in the wider world in which we live. The narratives we learn growing up help us form our identities and establish our connections to the world. We learn how to answer questions like “Where are you from?” and explore other questions that we might ask ourselves, such as “Where do I fit in this place I call home?”

Stories not only shape our individual experience, but also the life of our families, communities, nations, and of the world itself. Our world today is awash with problems and possibilities that relate to and spring from the stories we believe. Offered at both lower-division and upper-division levels, CRWR 291/491 will explore identity through story. Students will learn the stories of their places and create their own place-based narratives. Stories are “living things” adapting as the world and how we experience the world change. This course will also examine how long-established cultures both in Montana and in the Amazon Basin adapt themselves and their stories to address changes in the world around them.

A unique aspect of this course is that it is coordinated with an optional two-week study-abroad experience in the Peruvian Amazon, accompanied by an internationally respected expert on Amazonian folklore and culture. Students who elect this option will have time after returning to develop a final project incorporating their own Amazon story. The optional Study Abroad program is described below.
Amazonian Encounters will give students a chance to learn about the world’s greatest river system through a combination of virtual sessions (for students enrolled in CRWR 291/491 or ENST 335) 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.

A special feature of the program is participating in the holiday traditions of the Peruvian Amazon. We will spend Christmas and New Years Eve in Iquitos, learning about and participating in Amazonian seasonal practices.

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 Fall 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 and elsewhere. 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 Formabip Educational Research Center and interact with students and faculty there; and discuss course materials. Students will visit indigenous communities and learn about 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 Alpahuayo 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 Anguilla, sample 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 visit 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

For students who elect to participate in the Study Abroad option, 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. After returning to the United States, students will complete and submit a journal detailing their activities and observations, 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, projects in poetry and/or fiction, or travel writing expertise. Students are welcome to propose alternative formats (videotape, dramatic presentation, etc.) for the journal assignment.

Students will receive three hours of MSUB credit upon completion of the course requirements. Students from Florida State University or other institutions may confer with faculty at their schools, and tailor their projects to earn transferrable major or elective credits from their schools.

Preliminary Schedule

12/19: Sunday
Arrival in Iquitos. Orientation, welcome dinner

12/20: Monday
Morning (Prof. Gaeano):
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.
Visit to a “chocolatada,” a traditional community celebration of the coming of Christmas in Iquitos neighborhoods.

12/21: Tuesday
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.

12/22: Wednesday
Morning (Prof. Galeano):
Discussion of readings assigned prior to trip: *Folktales of the Amazon*.
*El Río/The River* (film and discussion).
Afternoon (Prof. Quetchenbach):
Nature Writing: Approaches to the natural world.

12/23: Thursday
Visit to the Quistococha Lake zoo and botanical garden.
Use and role of medicinal plants and spirituality in the Amazon basin (Lecture by Rafael Chanchari, Indigenous Philosopher from the Shawi Nation).

12/24: Friday
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.

12/25: Saturday
Christmas.
Participate in Christmas observances in the days leading up to the holiday as well as on Christmas day.

12/26: Sunday
Visit to Mercado Belen (Morning).
Visit to the community of Padrecocha: See community pottery project and have dinner at the Chakra Amazónica and return to Iquitos to the hotel.
12/27: Monday

Short trip to the Supay Chakra, a site of the Allpahuayo Mishana National Reserve. Travel by car and visit the folklore and ecotourism project at the station. Visit the Chakra of the Chullachaki (spirit guardian of the forest) at night and listen to storytelling from hunters and area residents.

12/28: Tuesday

Visit to the Urban Ecological Garden (Edgar Huacachi CoraI)

Afternoon

(Prof. Galeano):

*Fitzcarraldo* (film and discussion).

(Prof. Quetchenbach):

The aesthetics of experience. How to see.

12/29: Wednesday

Journey to Allpahuayo Mishana National Reserve (Visit the Yarana station, on the Nanay River) and learn about area forests.

12/30: Thursday

Journey by boat into a deeper area of the Allpahuayo Mishana National Reserve and visit the community of Anguilla on the Nanay River and learn about problems of deforestation, illegal mining and other current problems affecting the lives of animals and people.

12/31: Friday

Return to Iquitos

Learn about the local traditions for the coming of New Year

1/1: Saturday

Journey in the Itaya River to visit surrounding ports and communities near Iquitos.

Conclusion and farewell dinner.

1/2: Sunday

Return to the US.