Two days after turning in my last final paper, I boarded a plane to Ecuador to spend a month doing conservation work in the Amazon at the Jatun Sacha reserve. I discovered this remote program through the U.S. volunteer organization UBE Long, based out of Washington D.C. A one hour bus ride from the nearest big city, Tena, and a 20 minute taxi ride to a small city with Wi-Fi, Misahualli, made Jatun Sacha one of the most isolated places I have ever been. Thanks to the Latin American, Caribbean, and Iberian Studies Department at UW-Madison I was able to participate and grow from this unique volunteer opportunity.

My first day on the reserve, the director took me to my open-air cabana through the trees and calls of birds. Already I thought that this was the most incredible looking place that I had seen. It was the rain forest that I expected, wet and humid with the greenest trees imaginable, but now seeing it, the forest was wetter and greener than I ever could have thought possible. That night I met the other volunteers from different parts of the U.S. and Britain. The next day would be my first full day of volunteering at the CCPA, Centro de Conservación de Plantas Amazónicas.

At the CCPA, there is a nursery for new trees, a classroom to teach volunteers and community members, a botanical garden, and plots of food grown for volunteers and staff of Jatun Sacha. The goals of the reserve are based in reforestation, teaching the community about sustainable farming practices, and maintaining our own farm. A couple of days a week we would bring back yucca, bananas, or plantains to the kitchen. I learned how to use a machete to cut down weeds in the garden, planted trees from the nursery to reforest, and diverted a stream that had started to suffocate the roots of some trees. Every day was different and I only found out
when I woke up what our supervisor wanted to work on that day. My supervisor, Jonas, was full of jokes, had incredible machete skills, and endless knowledge about the plants on the reserve. The labor that he had us do was tiring and I found myself taking a nap in a hammock everyday after lunch before starting afternoon work. Besides the work that we were doing everyday, Jonas and others at the reserve taught us so much about the culture, plants, and changes to the area.

Although the area felt remote to me, I learned that the road that my bus came in on had been paved within the last two years. It used to be a dirt road and over time this area had seen a lot of destruction. Some words that stuck with me were those of the director, Alejo, he said “roads mean deforestation.” While the land owned by Jatun Sacha was protected, I learned that many people in the area were selling their land to move to cities. This sold land would not be protected.

Jonas and the forest guards (kind of like park ranger, but also there to make sure outsiders to not come in and destroy the forest) taught us the importance of protecting the forest by teaching us to recognize plants. Jonas would test us in the field, pointing at a tree and asking the name. One morning I got to tour some of the land with a very knowledgeable guard who showed me the medicinal plants and their uses, sharing his success stories. Another day, we delivered some signs we made for a farm run by women who taught us about the plants they were harvesting. I was so fortunate to be surrounded by these kind people so willing to share their knowledge and teach us the importance of the land.

Thanks to the LACIS grant and to UBELOWNG for connecting me with Jatun Sacha, I was able to be a part of a community for a little while and learn more about my own beliefs while I volunteering in the Ecuadorian Amazon this summer. I learned a new card game. I ate my weight in yucca, some of which I had pulled from the ground. I learned to use a machete. I got the worst
mosquito bites I have ever had and had them treated with plants by a shaman to reduce the swelling. I made great friends and had interesting conversations. I got to speak to taxi drivers and locals and learn about the changes to that part of the Amazon. I learned some kichwa. I had an incredible experience and would recommend volunteering at Jatun Sacha to anyone interested in trying a completely different lifestyle for a little bit.