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Alumnus Creating Bridges to Conservation with Web Site

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois Wesleyan University alumnus Jeffrey Klemens is, in many ways, a translator. Not only does the 1998 biology graduate help coordinate and translate during an annual May Term course to Costa Rica, he also is the president of a conservation organization that helps researchers from different fields understand each other's work.

"Researchers are a highly independent group," said Klemens, who founded Investigadores del Área de Conservación Guanacaste (iACG) several years ago with the aim of helping to coordinate research work done in the Área de Conservación Guanacaste (ACG), a national park in the northwest part of Costa Rica. "All of us speak our own language, and it's the language of highly technical academic publications. It's currently very difficult for conservation managers who want to extract information from the primary literature to do so, unless they've had fairly extensive scientific training." Enter iACG, a Web site and database helping researchers working in the ACG. "I hope iACG can serve as a bridge between the community of researchers who work in the ACG and the rest of the park," said Klemens.

Klemens' interest in travel stems from his time at Illinois Wesleyan, where he took field courses that took him to Guyana in South America and to Australia. He first journeyed to Costa Rica in 1998 before beginning his doctorate program at the University of Pennsylvania under world-renowned tropical ecologist Dan Jansen. "On that trip I conducted a study that was an extension of what I had been doing at IWU with migratory birds and pesticides," said Klemens, who published his work along with Illinois Wesleyan Professor of Biology Given Harper, Professor of Chemistry and Associate Provost Jeff Frick, and several Illinois Wesleyan undergraduates, who conducted the lab work on campus.

His time in Costa Rica sparked an idea for Klemens. "I realized that it would be a great place to do a tropical biology field course. So I proposed the idea to Given, and he came down in 1999," Klemens said. Harper agreed, and the two developed the May Term course, which began in 2000.

"Jeff and I co-teach the class, and he is a great guide and mentor for the students," said Harper. Each year, Klemens coordinates all of the logistics for the trip, including hiking trips to park stations along the side of an extinct volcano. "I also serve as general natural history guide to the flora and fauna, give three or four formal lectures on topics, ranging from the history of Costa Rica to whatever my most recent research results are, and translate another several lectures that we get from ACG park staff," said Klemens, who is fluent in Spanish and also teaches biology part-time at the University of Pennsylvania.

According to Klemens, the ACG serves an important role in Costa Rica, working toward habitat restoration and acting as a living laboratory for conservation. His work developing iACG is helping researchers and citizens discover the full potential of the park, as well as communicate with one another. "So far our major contribution has been getting some information out in a public space that was not previously available, specifically some map and weather data," as well as beginning to publish research data, said Klemens. "The hope is that if researchers communicate more effectively with one another and with the conservation professionals who run ACG on a day to day basis, there will be less duplication of effort and researchers and managers will be able to identify areas of common interest," he added.

During his dozens of trips to Costa Rica – both as a researcher and as a co-teacher of the Illinois Wesleyan May Term course – Klemens said he has seen the rapid development of the country's economy. "From a conservationist's standpoint maybe it's been too rapid," he said. One of his hopes is to ensure the

continued protection and enjoyment of the ACG, not just by researchers, but by Costa Ricans. “Having a park that is nothing more than an attractive set-aside is a luxury that really only applies to very wealthy places,” he said. “In the tropics, these places have to be productive parts of the society as well.”

Klemens said iACG is in the early stages, but anticipates its growth and assistance for the national park and for conservation. “ Right now iACG is an early idea. A seed. We’ll have to wait and see how it grows.”

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