A 3-WEEK, COLLEGE-ACCREDITED, HANDS-ON SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS OF THE WONDROUS CARIBBEAN ECOSYSTEM

LOCATION: Xpu-Ha Beach, Mexico. 1-hour south of Cancun along the safe & beautiful Riviera Maya Coast.

COURSE CREDITS: ENST 391-Caribbean Ecosystem Field Studies for 3 undergraduate semester transfer credits through the Environmental Studies Program of the University of Montana at Missoula and is open to students from any university or major. ***While over 190 universities accept EcoFS courses for transfer credit, students must confirm with their department concerning exactly how these credits will transfer for their degree.***

DATES: December 28, 2023 – January 17, 2024

CLASS SIZE: 18-22 Students

INSTRUCTOR: Steve Johnson, Affiliate Faculty of University of Montana Environmental Studies Program

CONTACT HOURS: Each day runs 8:00 am to 5:00 pm with two 45 minute breaks: Total contact hours = 142
(18 days of 7.5 hours, 1 day (Day 1) of 2 hours, 1 day (Day 9) of 5 hours)

DESCRIPTION: This course at Xpu-Ha Beach offers exceptional opportunities to study a healthy & diverse Caribbean ecosystem. Daily snorkels, SCUBA dives, hikes, and hands-on scientific investigations provide incredible coral reef & coastal academic learning experiences. Students will synthesize & apply information they have gained from their classroom & textbook context while actively studying & exploring a spectacular ocean environment.

To learn more & APPLY- visit

www.ecofs.org
Caribbean Ecosystem Field Studies is a hands-on, 21-day field class that provides incredible academic opportunities for experiential investigation of marine ecosystems. Ecological concepts & field methods that pertain to the Caribbean coral reef are examined in the greatest detail yet the knowledge & techniques gained are applicable to any ecosystem. Instruction is delivered with inquiry-based activities incorporating observation & data collection, small working groups, lecture, focused exploration through daily SCUBA dives/snorkels, hikes, guest speakers & off-site trips. During the second half of the course students create and implement an original ecosystem field research project. Upcoming summer-break students will have special opportunity to observe & study sea turtle nesting & hatchling activity.

Course Objectives:
Students will...
- Achieve a deep knowledge base of the structure & functioning of coral reef and coastal ecosystems of the Caribbean.
- Gain expertise in utilizing a variety of ecosystem field tools & techniques.
- Learn rigorous scientific research skills including observation, hypothesis formation, sampling, mapping & data analysis.
- Build proficiency in SCUBA diving/snorkeling skills & ability to conduct basic ocean/reef research.
- Participate positively in a safe, rewarding, & challenging group educational experience.

Course Location
Xpu-Ha Beach, Caribbean coast of Mexico
Xpu-Ha (pronounced Eshpoo-Ha & is a Mayan word for morning dew) is a small beach community along the tourist friendly Riviera Maya coast of Mexico approximately 50 miles south of Cancun, between Playa del Carmen and Tulum on an easy 1-hour drive. Xpu-Ha consists of a mile-long spectacular white sandy beach within a sheltered bay bordered by rocky points and with a vibrant coral reef directly offshore. The relatively undeveloped beach is an important summer nesting ground for green and loggerhead sea turtles. Xpu-Ha is a very quiet and safe location providing exceptional field learning opportunities.

The Caribbean EcoFS field site is on the private property of the La Playa Xpu-Ha Beach Club (www.laplayaxpuha.com). The course uses the Beach Club’s comfortable bungalow rooms and beach campground for our accommodations. The Xpu-Ha EcoFS Field Research Cabaña serves as our central meeting & studying area. Our classroom is the spectacular beach, coastline, coral reef & and ocean just steps away.

A Typical Day...
Instruction days begin with an exciting, academically focused SCUBA dive or snorkel
Our dives & snorkels involve a scientific focus that includes data collection with underwater slates & research equipment. Then we savor an all-you-can-eat brunch buffet at the La Playa Xpu-Ha Beach Club. We’ll finish the morning with analysis of our amazing marine & reef observations, typically in small group discussions. Lunches is typical American style fare & prepared by our group out of our Field Research Cabaña. Afternoons include lecture on ecosystem concepts & activities that we investigate with hands-on field work and data collection. Typically, afternoons include snorkels, 1–2-mile coastal hikes, field investigations & labs. There are 3 off-site visits to other amazing ecosystem locations such as coastal lagoons, cenotes and caves.

Our academic day ends at 5:00 pm and dinner is prepared by an amazing local chef and enjoyed oceanside. The remainder of the day is for homework, independent study, & personal time. Summer nights at Xpu-Ha offers ample occasion to observe and study nesting sea turtles. Independent study is phased in during the second half of the course & individual research projects become our focus. Days are very full & academic expectations are high so do not expect “vacation-like” time.

Accommodations: EcoFS’ accommodations at Xpu-Ha are in beach bungalow triple occupancy rooms with full beds, air conditioning, & hot showers or in our beautiful beach campground under the palm trees in spacious, private tents with access to showers and the cabana. Wi-Fi is available, and all accommodations and facilities are steps from beautiful Xpu-Ha beach and ocean.

A few words regarding safety: The Xpu-Ha area and the Riviera Maya is an extremely safe & friendly place for tourists. Xpu-ha is a private location with secure access. There is a major medical clinic & United States Department of State Embassy office in Playa del Carmen (15 minutes from Xpu-Ha) and a major hospital in Cancun (1 hour from Xpu-Ha). All students are covered with a comprehensive international health/medical insurance through the University of Montana. EcoFS has safely taught this class in this area 15 times in the past 10 years.
Course Schedule of Topics & Activities:
Each day runs 8:00 am to 5:00 pm

Day 1: Arrival & Welcome to the Course & Mexico!!!
Settle into accommodations, orientation to area, safety, dinner

Day 2: Xpu-Ha Bay Snorkel & Caribbean Ecosystem Overview
Lecture/discussion topics:
- Course introduction- personal introductions, course syllabus, daily overview
- Safety overview- health, environmental & social concerns, emergency procedures
- Climatology- global climate processes, coastal weather factors, measurement
Field Activities:
- AM- Snorkel in Xpu-Ha Bay- snorkel skills overview, coral reef investigation
- PM- SCUBA/snorkel review training- safety, skills, logistics, equipment overview
- Coastal walk- investigate Xpu-ha beach, discuss global ecosystem influences

Day 3: SCUBA/Snorkel Skills & Beach Topography Investigation
Lecture/discussion topics:
- Reef topography- types of reefs, coral reef importance, formation & structural characteristics, field observation & measurement techniques
- Beach Ecosystems- erosion & deposition patterns, species of interest, human influence, Xpu-Ha topographical characteristics
Field Activities:
- AM- SCUBA dive/snorkel- skills reviews, coral reef scientific observations
- PM- Xpu-Ha beach hike & analysis- investigate beach topography, ecology, erosion & deposition patterns, sea turtle nest patterns and distribution
- Conduct geographic survey of Xpu-Ha beach- measurement & data collection of beach topography including layout, profile, slope, angle, aspect, composition, current

Day 4: Reef Topography & Yucatan Hydrogeology
Lecture/discussion topics:
- Geologic overview- processes, geologic features, Yucatan Peninsula characteristics
- Water quality- chemical & physical properties, human influence, impacts to reef
- Stony corals- ecological role for reefs, physiology & ecology, Caribbean species of interest, ecosystem impacts to corals & reefs, identification skills
Field Activities:
- AM- SCUBA dive/snorkel- analyze reef structure & topography
- PM- Coastal hike- geologic investigation of spectacular Yucatan limestone coast
- Intertidal zone community exploration- investigate fascinating tidepool species
- Water quality field analysis- perform chemical/physical tests of ocean, brackish & tidepool water. Measure temperature, ph, salinity in various locations.
- Snorkel/swim in unique freshwater output to ocean (caleta).
- Explore “secret” Mayan ruin on coast- Mayan culture and ecosystem connection

Day 5: Stony Corals & Soil/Sand Analysis
Lecture/discussion topics:
- Reef Fish- identification, Caribbean species of interest, importance to reefs, behavior opportunities, species interactions, research methods
- Soil/Sand- formation, composition, classification, ecosystem importance & connection to reef & coastal organisms
- Sea Turtles- ecology, behavior, population status, & conservation efforts, nesting process, connection to sand
Field Activities:
- AM- SCUBA dive/snorkel- stony coral analysis, identify and describe stony coral species, analyze distribution & health
- PM- Soil/sand field & lab analysis- dig soil/sand pits, identify horizons, measure infiltration rate, moisture, temperature. Classify soil/sand type, sorting, composition

Day 6: Reef Fish & Cenote/Jungle Exploration
Lecture/discussion topics:
- Animal Behavior- animal observation skills, pros & cons of behavioral studies, ethogram usage
- Yucatan Cenotes- geologic/hydrologic formation & features, connection to ocean and reef system
- Yucatan Jungle- ecosystem characteristics, plant and animals species of interest
Field Activities:
- AM- SCUBA dive/snorkel- fish observation & identification
- PM- Off-site trip to Rancho Santa Cruz, a private cenote/cave in jungle – explore Yucatan jungle hike & swim through a dry spectacular dry cave & cenote (submerged areas of caves, open to sunlight), discover beautiful cave formations & features, underground hydrogeology
Day 7: Animal Behavior & Coastal Lagoon Investigation
Lecture/discussion topics:
- Soft coral & Sponges, identification groups, major species of Caribbean, interactions with other species
- Coastal communities- mangroves & lagoons
Field Activities:
- AM- SCUBA dive/snorkel- animal behavior observation & analysis, create and utilize ethograms
- PM- Off site trip to Yal-Ku Lagoon- snorkel in a beautiful coastal lagoon, investigate mangrove community ecology, observe fish populations

Day 8: Soft Corals, Sponges & Biodiversity Sampling
Methods
Lecture/discussion topics:
- Marine Macro-algae- types, role in ecosystem, interactions with corals & other reef organisms, phase shift towards macro-algae dominated reefs
- Biodiversity- types, indices, ecosystem importance
Field Activities:
- AM- SCUBA dive/snorkel -soft coral focused analysis. Identify physiological groups & soft coral relationship with abiotic factors & other organisms, observe polyp behaviors
- PM- Biodiversity study in intertidal zone- calculate species richness & abundance

Day 9: Marine Macro-algae & Other Invertebrates
Lecture/discussion topics:
- Invertebrates (other than corals)- major relevant phyla, Caribbean species of interest, observation skills, research methods
Field Activities:
- AM- SCUBA dive/snorkel- algae types and coverage assessment, algae vs. living coral analysis, species of concern
- PM- Prep for Book discussion group

Day 10: Ecological Research Design
Lecture/discussion topics:
- Research Design- scientific method detailed analysis
Field Activities:
- AM- SCUBA dive/snorkel- invertebrate diversity investigation
- PM- How to Do Ecology Book discussion activity- relevance and application to Independent Research Projects

Day 11: Independent Research & Night Snorkel
Lecture/discussion topics:
- Nocturnal reef species- adaptations and observation
Field Activities:
- AM/PM- Dive/snorkel/land research option
- PM- Independent research- process scientific observations, devise hypotheses, create initial methodology & research design
- Individual consultations- advisement for research projects
Evening:
- Night snorkel- shallow reef in Xpu-Ha Bay using lights, investigate nocturnal species

Day 12: Independent Research
Field Activities:
- AM/PM- Dive/snorkel/land research option
- Independent research- process observations, refine hypotheses & experimental design, begin data collection

Day 13: Independent Research & Cenote Hydrologic Mapping
Field Activities:
- AM/PM- Dive/ Snorkel/land research option
- Independent research- intensive data collection
- PM- Guest Speaker from Cenote Hydrologic Mapping Dive Base: Sam Meacham, cave-diver extraordinaire, on cenote exploration and mapping.

Day 14: Independent Research & Casa Cenote Exploration
Field Activities:
- AM- Off-site trip to Casa Cenote- SCUBA dive or Snorkel in a safe and spectacular open cenote, explore mangrove community
- PM- Dive/ Snorkel/land research option
- Independent research- intensive data collection

Assignments
+Percentage of Overall Grade
- 35% = Daily homework assignments (Homework is given nightly for the first half of course to synthesize & apply data & observations from the day.)
- 15% = 10-minute presentation on the research topic & project
- 30% = 10-page written paper expanding on the field research project (Due two weeks after course ends)
- 10% = Course participation
- 10% = Final (take home) written exam (Due one week after course ends)

Readings
Day 15: Ecological Data Analysis
Lecture/discussion topics:
Data analysis - basic analysis methods, statistics overview
Field Activities:
AM/PM - Dive/snorkel/land research option
Independent research - intensive data collection
Independent advisement consults on data analysis

Day 16: Coral Reef Restoration
Lecture/discussion topics:
AM - Guest Speaker on local Coral Restoration Projects, Dr. Ania Banaszak, Coral Reef Biologist, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM),
Field Activities:
AM/PM - Dive/snorkel/land research option
Independent research - intensive data collection

Day 17: Independent Research & Night Dive
Lecture/discussion topics:
Night diving overview
Field Activities:
AM/PM - Dive/snorkel/land research option
Independent research - final data collection, data analysis
Evening:
Night Dive - shallow reef dive using lights to observe incredible nocturnal reef species

Day 18: Presentation Prep
Lecture/discussion topics:
Presentation techniques - effective public speaking, displays & presentations
Field Activities:
AM/PM - Dive/snorkel/land research option
Independent research - data analysis, presentation prep

Day 19: Student Presentations
Lecture/discussion topics:
AM/PM - Student presentation of field research projects

Day 20: Student Presentations & Ecosystem Restoration
Lecture/discussion topics:
AM - Presentations (continued)
PM - Ecosystem restoration - goals, methods, challenges
Field Activities:
PM - Coastal trash clean-up
Closing
Evening: special farewell dinner fiesta!!!

Day 21: Departures
Shuttles to airport throughout day

For all further course info including details on costs, credits & application please visit: www.ecofs.org
Caribbean EcoFS Past Research Topics

2023
Classification of Organisms Inhabiting the Azure Vase Sponge
Differences in Grazing Behavior Between Stoplight and Yellow-tail Parrot fish
The Common Sea Fan Conditional Preferences Of The Flamingo Tongues
Behaviors of Great-Tailed Grackles Based on Time of Day
Impact of Macroalgae Coverage on Fish Abundance and Biodiversity
Determining Sea Turtle Nesting Preferences on Xpu-ha beach
Distribution of Blue Crust Coral Across Reef Flat Zone
Evidence for Soft Coral Induction Based on Sediment Composition
Behavioral Differences Between Species and Phases of of Parrotfish
Depth-Dependent Investigation on Sea Urchin Abundance and Grazing on Green Algae
Abundance of Fish Diversity in Relation to Patch Reef Size

2022-23
Difference in the Diurnal Behavior of Sharpnose Pufferfish
Dynamics of Tide Pool Size, Algae, and Invertebrates
Temporal Behavioral Difference of Four-eye Butterflyfish
Reef Topographic Complexity Effect on Fish Diversity and Abundance
Determining the Topographical Factors that Correlate to Long Spined Sea Urchin Residence
Abiotic Determinants on Sediment Channels Within Coral Reefs
How do Abiotic and Biotic Factors Influence the Levels of Aggression for Dusky Damselfish?
Cleaning Station Success Dependent on Frequency of Visits
Influences on Occupancy of Giant Barrel Sponges
Effects of Abiotic Conditions on the Shannon Diversity Index of Rocky Tidal Pools
Does Life Stage Affect Intraspecies Group Feeding Size in Parrotfish?
Habitat Complexity and its Effect on Abundance of Sharpnose Pufferfish

2019-20
Factors Impacting the Abundance of Sea Urchins in the Intertidal Zone
How Density, Depth, and Size Affect the Severity of Disease in the Common Sea Fan
Abiotic Soil Components in Relation to Varying Locations
Reef structural rugosity correlation with coral & fish diversity
Cleaning Symbiosis of Juvenile Blue Head Wrasse
Sargassum Algae Effect on pH levels in Ocean Water
Spatial Distribution of Microplastics in Terrestrial Surface Sands and at Ocean Depth
Parrotfish and Damselfish Relationship to Overgrown Algae
Sediment Type and Distance to Ocean
Fish behavior in the presence of a visual stimuli
Stony Coral Disease Prevalence in Relation to Depth
Relationship Between Turf Algae on Christmas Tree Worm Tubes and Overall Host Coral Health

2019
The Effects of Depth and Distance From An Existing Reef on Distribution, Health, and Surface Area of Elkhorn Coral
The Effect of Time of Day on Male Great-Tailed Grackle Vocalizations
A Comparison of Infauna Biodiversity of Azure Vase Sponge and Giant Barrel Sponge
Quantifying Microplastic Concentrations by Ocean Depth
Parrotfish and Macro-Algae: How their Relationship Affects Reef Health
Algae-Induced pH Fluctuations: Sargassum and Marine Water Quality
Behavioral Differences Between Longfin and Sergeant Major Damsel Fish
Diversity of Tidepools During Day vs Night
Effect of Karstic Freshwater Outputs on Salinity Levels and Algal Species
Parrotfish and Macro-Algae: How their Relationship Affects Reef Health
Sargassum Effect on pH, Salinity and Temperature in Tidal Pools

2018-19
Reef Fish Reaction to Visual Stimulus in Relation to Predatory Behavior
Organism Activity within Lettuce Coral
Abiotic Factors Affecting Species Distribution in the Intertidal Zone
Foraging Success of Brown Pelicans Using Two Different Strategies
 Compared Invertebrate Abundance and Richness Between Brown Algae Species
 Percentage Coverage of Stony Corals as Compared to Macroalgae with Increasing Depth
Abiotic Factors Affecting Species Distribution in the Intertidal Zone
Sexual Dimorphic and Temporally Independent Vocalizations of the Great-Tailed Grackle
Correlation Between Green Algae and Common Periwinkle
An Assessment of Algae, Coral and Fish Abundances to Analyze Coral Reef Health
Trends and Correlations Between Marine Sponge Species and Marine Motile Organisms
Sand Sorting in Relation to Wave Energy
Social Behavior of Juvenile Bluehead Wrasse at Cleaning Stations

2018
Influence of Water Movement on Substrate Distribution in Xpu Ha Bay
Effects of Sargassum on Sea Turtle Nest's Frequency and Location
Biodiversity In Sargassum Found In The Ocean vs On The Beach
Parrotfish Diet Variation Between Species and Life Stages
Dusky Damselfish Pathway Usage and Behaviors at Different Coral Reef Depths
Microclimate Fluctuations in the Intertidal Zone and their Impact on Biodiversity Levels
Dusky and Longfin Damselfish Interactions at Varying depths
Effects of Snail Density and Algal Competitors in an Intertidal Community
Relationship Between Osculum Area of Pink Vase Sponges and the Organisms that Inhabit Them
Disease Prevalence of Star and Brain Coral
Red and Green Algae Abundance and Coverage Dependence on Depth
Influence of Grouping Behavior on Blue Tang Feeding Time
Terminal Phase Male Bluehead Wrasse Behavior in Relation to Initial Phase Female Bluehead Wrasse Presence

2017-18
Depth vs. Age of Giant Barrel Sponge
Abundance of Caribbean Yellow Band Disease in Lobed Star Coral
Retraction Rate of Christmas Tree Worms in Relation to Colony Health
Brain Coral Health in Correlation to Colony Position on Reef
Fish Diversity and Abundance in Relation to Tide Pool Characteristics
Sanderling and Sandpiper Foraging Competition on Xpu-Ha Beach
Territorial and Behavioral Patterns within Algae-Farming Damselfish
Sea Fan Coral Colony Size Preference of Flamingo Tongue Snails
Tide Pool Phylum Diversity in Relation to Distance from the Ocean, Salinity, pH and Temperature
The Effects of Depth and Flatworm Parasite on the Size of Adult Atlantic Blue Tangs
Correlation between Algae Density and the Distribution of Carnivorous and Herbivorous Fish
On and Off-shore Aspects in Topography Correlation with Abundance of Common and Venus Sea Fan

2017
Spatial Location of Green and Loggerhead Sea Turtle Nests and the Influence of Vegetation
The Effects of Light Pollution on Nesting Sea Turtles
Barrel Sponge Size in Relation to Depth
Disease Prevalence Based on Depth of Star Corals
Relation of Algae Coverage on Abundance of Thin Leaf Lettuce Coral
Wind Speeds and Magnificent Frigatebird Activity
Demographics and Behavior Changes in Bluehead Wrasse with Presence of Terminal Male
Basic Patterns in Wave Behavior
Sea Fan Variance Based on Location and Orientation
Diver Approach Affects on Damselfish Behavior
Soil Composition’s Influence on Sea Turtle Nesting
Stony Coral Abundance in Relation to Depth
Lionfish Effects on Reef Head Populations