During spring break, I had the amazing opportunity to study abroad in Costa Rica with People-First Tourism and the NC State Sustainability Office. I was truly excited to go and wanted to see first hand how Costa Ricans live such a sustainable lifestyle.

While in Costa Rica, I got to work with People-First Tourism, which was truly an eye-opening experience for me. I learned just how much of an impact a single tourist can have on a country's tourism market and economy. The trip challenged me to leave my comfort zone and experience something far greater than what I ever expected. In Costa Rica, I got to meet real people, hear their stories and see their talents, which made the trip even more impactful and allowed me to understand their culture better.

My favorite part of the trip was when the group stayed in the Iroquois community. The landscape was insanely beautiful and the people showed us such hospitality. They invited us into their homes and showed us their kitchens and gardens. It was obvious to me they were proud of who they are, where they live, how they live and wanted us to experience their lifestyle. I will never forget this experience and the people I met because of this opportunity.

Since visiting Costa Rica, I can’t imagine traveling and not visiting authentic communities and seeing how people really live. This trip made me question where the products I buy come from, especially since there is an extreme disconnect between products made and products consumed. I returned to campus with a new passion for micro eco-tourism and a new outlook on sustainability.
When I started at NC State, I never thought I would go on a study abroad trip. I love living in the United States and never imagined stepping foot outside the country's borders, not because I hate other countries, but because of all the stories I hear on the news about students studying abroad and never returning. I was worried that traveling just wasn’t safe, but I was so wrong. I traveled to the Galápagos Islands with a group of fellow students and safely returned, even if there were some mix-ups with our flights. The only thing I regret now is that I waited until my senior year to experience the best time of my life!

The Galápagos Islands expedition gave me a chance to observe a culture very different from mine. The people showed me a greater appreciation for life and my background. It was obvious they take pride in their country as we do in the US, but they move at a more leisurely pace to really enjoy every moment. I was given the opportunity to see an array of species, such as sea lions, giant turtles, finches, iguanas, penguins and even the profound blue-footed booby, which calls the Galápagos home. I hiked one of the top five biggest calderas in the world, visited Floreana Island, also known as the mystery island - because its first inhabitants went missing and were never found, and went snorkeling with sharks. Being in the water with sharks was something I never thought I would do, especially since I don’t know how to swim, but it was my favorite part of the trip and a big accomplishment for me. While in Galápagos, I was also able to establish life-long friendships with the peers in my group and I will never be more grateful and thankful for that.

For all those who are worried about studying abroad my advice to you is to go for it. You don’t want to graduate and wish you had studied abroad.