



RAMAPO COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY

Office of Marketing and Communications

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Ramapo College Students Winter in Costa Rica for a Cause

MAHWAH, N.J. – Twelve Ramapo College students spent their winter break in Costa Rica, but the trip was hardly a relaxing two weeks on coastal beaches. Working with Ramapo’s local partner in the Central American country, the students developed wildlife enrichment projects, constructed building and moving enclosures for rescued animals and supported educational programs, among other tasks at Santuario de Lapas, NATUWA, a not-for-profit animal sanctuary that rescues animals that were captured through the illegal pet trade and provides a place of refuge for them.

The College began its relationship with NATUWA during Spring Break 2012 and has offered nine individual trips with more than 100 students and six staff members participating. This trip was supported through the Community and Civic Engagement Center and the Ramapo College Foundation.

"Ramapo College is uniquely privileged with the opportunity to support an important cause through service to the NATUWA Macaw Sanctuary," said Ben Levy, Director of International Education at Ramapo, who accompanied the students along with Linda Diaz, the College’s Director of Residence Life. "Ramapo's students gain a transformative experience through challenging their comfort levels, whether that is living in simple conditions, conducting manual labor or interacting with a different culture and in a different language. Students embrace these challenges with eyes and hearts open."

Levy said a typical day begins with a call from nature’s alarm clocks – howler monkeys and screeching macaws. Students, who reside on-site in a dormitory for volunteers, are assigned a variety of projects that include building pools for tapirs and jaguars; general maintenance, leading guided tours for visitors to the sanctuary and much more.

"I think that I can speak for the group when I say that it was an experience we will treasure for the rest of our lives," said Harper Patsko '19. "As a child, I wanted to be an ornithologist, so in a way, being surrounded by beautiful birds and other animals has fulfilled a lifelong dream of mine. Even though my career goals have shifted, I was absolutely elated to be there."

Levy added, "It is a mutually beneficial experience where the support that students provide allows swift progress on important initiatives that would normally take the project much longer to achieve."

NATUWA, created in 1994, began with the reproduction of the native, endangered Scarlet Macaw and Great Green Macaw and their release. Because of the project's success and through its partnership with the Ministry of Environment and Energy, they have also been brought a variety of other native and exotic species that have been rescued for injuries or other purposes.

Levy noted that several students have inquired about returning to Costa Rica as well as other international locations for continued studies. "The passion that they witness amongst the NATUWA team is inspiring and impacts the students in a variety of professional, personal and academic ways," he said.

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Ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as one of the top in the Best Regional Public Universities North category, Ramapo College of New Jersey is sometimes viewed as a private college. This is, in part, due to its unique interdisciplinary academic structure, its size of approximately 6,000 students and its pastoral setting in the foothills of the Ramapo Mountains on the New Jersey/New York border.

Established in 1969, Ramapo College offers bachelor's degrees in the arts, business, humanities, social sciences and the sciences, as well as in professional studies, which include nursing and social work. In addition, Ramapo College offers courses leading to teacher certification at the elementary and secondary levels. The College also offers eight graduate programs as well as articulated programs with Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New York Chiropractic College, New York University College of Dentistry, SUNY State College of Optometry and New York College of Podiatric Medicine.