



## **Building positive nature awareness in pupils using the “Rainforest of the Austrians“ in Costa Rica.**

Margit Aubrecht (1), Irmgard Hölzl (1), Werner Huber (2), and Anton Weissenhofer (2)

(1) NMS 1 Gallneukirchen, Schulstraße 3, 4210 Gallneukirchen, Austria (margit.aubrecht@24speed.at; irmgard.hoelzl@24speed.at), (2) Universität Wien, Dep. für Tropenökologie und Biodiversität der Tiere; Rennweg 14, 1030 Wien, Austria (werner.huber@univie.ac.at; Anton.weissenhofer@univie.ac.at)

20 years ago, Michael Schnitzler founded the NGO "Rainforest of the Austrians" to help save one of the most diverse rainforests in Central America, the Esquinas rainforest on the Pacific coast of SW Costa Rica, from being destroyed through logging.

In this abstract we present an interdisciplinary upper Austrian school project aiming at building positive awareness in pupils towards rainforest conservation by fund-raising to help purchase endangered forest areas. The acquired rainforest was donated to the Costa Rican government and became part of the National Park “Piedras Blancas”. In the following, we present a chronology of events and actions of the school project.

We started our rainforest project by face-to-face encounters, letting involved persons speak directly to the pupils. Dr. Huber, coordinator of the tropical rainforest station La Gamba in Costa Rica ([www.lagamba.at](http://www.lagamba.at)), together with Dr. Weissenhofer, presented an introductory slide show about the “Rainforest of the Austrians”. With rainforest images and sounds in their mind the pupils wrote “trips of a lifetime” stories, thus creating idyllic images of rainforest habitats. Following up on that, we visited the exhibition “Heliconia and Hummingbirds” at the Biology Center in Linz. Reports about the slide show and the exhibition followed.

Tropical sites were compared by producing climate graphs of La Gamba, Costa Rica, and Manaus in Brazil. The global distribution and the decrease of rainforests were also analyzed. In biology lessons the symbiosis between plants and animals of the rainforest were worked out by searching the Internet. Flyers with profiles of rainforest animals were produced. We also discussed the ecotourism project “RICANCIE” in Ecuador using fact sheets. “RICANCIE” is a Spanish acronym standing for “Indigenous Community Network of the Upper Napo for Intercultural Exchange and Ecotourism”. It was founded in 1993 aiming to improve the quality of life for some 200 indigenous Kichwa families. RICANCIE’s primary objective is the defense of the Kichwa territory against encroaching mining and oil companies. During computer lessons pupils drew brilliant rainforest cards using graphic software, and in handicraft lessons they engraved rainforest animals on wooden plates. These pieces of art were sold at the “open school day”. For presenting the project to other pupils at the secondary school Hellmonsödt, a rainforest quiz contest was prepared. The winners’ prize was a tropical fruit tasting. Another presentation was done at the Biology Center in Linz with research expert Dr. Huber in the audience. The culmination was reached by handing over the sales profit to Michael Schnitzler in order to purchase rainforest land the size of a football field.

Compared to other teaching methods this interdisciplinary approach perfectly involved and motivated pupils. The resulting presentations proved very important, because the pupils wanted to assure other teenagers that individuals have opportunities to influence the fate of our world.

The educationally sustainable nature of the project becomes apparent years later, when the pupils involved have left school, but still talk about the progress of the “Rainforest of the Austrians” in Costa Rica.