



Fall 2025 Newsletter



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1. Director's Message



Welcome readers to our “Fall” 2025 newsletter in which we share noteworthy developments of the University of Florida Master of Sustainable Development Practice (MDP) program. In the following pages, we provide information on our new cohort of students and an overview of the field practicum projects our second-year students undertook last summer in Ecuador, Nigeria, Alaska, and the Gainesville community.

Take a moment to scan the bios of our exciting new cohort of MDP students who joined us from different corners of the world – Ghana, Indonesia, Canada-Mexico-Turkey, Nepal, Pakistan, and the United States (see Welcome Cohort 16! with a link to their profiles). As you will see, they bring a remarkable array of professional backgrounds and equally diverse areas of interest that they aspire to pursue while enrolled in the MDP program.

On page 20, you will find a brief overview of the field practicum (FP) projects our second-year students conducted last summer on regenerative tourism in a coastal community in Alaska; climate change resilience in an Ecuadorean mangrove community; peanut value chains in Nigeria from policy and nutritional perspectives; community energy solutions through a lens of environmental and economic justice in Gainesville, FL; and community engagement in the renovation of T.B. McPherson Recreation Park, also in Gainesville, FL. During the current semester, our students will make a public presentation of the results of their FP, followed by a private defense with their supervisory committees.

We had two new graduates in the Fall semester, Hailey Muchnok, who carried out her field practicum with the Sarapiquí Conservation Learning Center in Costa Rica, and Veronica Manguinho de Souza, who worked with Prosci to explore the role of change management processes in the efforts of businesses to contribute to sustainable development and enhance the sustainability of their practices. Veronica and two other graduates – Bailey Dunn and Salvador Cuadros – have now embarked on their doctoral programs in UF, while Jennifer Quartey has initiated her PhD studies at the University of Indiana. All four are Cohort-14 graduates.

In the Spring 2025 newsletter, we announced the upcoming publication of the book “Transforming Education for Sustainable Development: Global Perspectives from Classroom to Practice”.

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The book has since been published and is available open access at this link: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003392743>. Here, I will provide a brief synopsis of the main messages of two chapters: Chapter 2 that focuses on program diversification across the Global Association of MDP programs (GAMDP), and Chapter 9 that was prepared by MDP alumni around the world to capture their perceptions of the MDP while “On the Job” post MDP.

With regards to Chapter 2, the co-authors highlighted the fact that Partner institutions of the GAMDP programs are situated in highly diverse regional and institutional contexts. They found that while anticipated program diversification has occurred in response to contextual diversity, programs have tended to retain a focus on key themes suggesting the emergence of what the authors term a “signature pedagogy” for education in development practice. Notable themes include the following:

- interdisciplinarity (the strongest theme across the sample of programs, including both interdisciplinary actors – students, faculty, internal and external partners – and interdisciplinary content in courses)
- partnerships across boundaries, referring to collaborative efforts with communities, NGOs, private sector and governmental organizations; and partnerships across programs that make up the GAMDP
- experiential learning that combines theory and practice, integrating knowledge, the application of skills, and personal values
- learning across contexts, highlighting the perceived importance of “sending students out” to engage with novel social, cultural, institutional, and disciplinary contexts
- peer to peer learning that involves creating spaces for students to share their professional and other experiences to enrich and expand the learning environment
- pluralism that emphasizes the coexistence, recognition, and value of diverse ways of knowing, learning, doing or being (Wilsey et al. 2026).

For their part, the authors of Chapter 9 (including lead author, Erica Odera, graduate of the first cohort of UF MDP students and co-author, July Nelson, also an UF MDP alumna – both currently work in UF) compiled with other MDP graduates from partner institutions, alumni perspectives on knowledge and skills fostered through the MDP. Alumni identified four key themes that best describe the types of knowledge and skills they consider most important in their current jobs. These themes fell into four broad categories:

Director's Message

1) Management – Skills and knowledge relevant for project and financial management; 2) Research – Skills and knowledge relevant for conducting research, analyzing data, and drafting reports; 3) Interpersonal – Skills related to understanding other cultures, leading groups, teamwork, and networking; 4) Cognitive – Skills and knowledge to think broadly about problems and integrate and apply concepts across different disciplines (Odera et al. 2026).

We hope this glimpse into these two chapters will encourage you to explore further these and other chapters of the book.

Here, I would like to acknowledge the vital support that core, affiliate and other faculty provide to our students, as course instructors and as participants on student supervisory committees. Thank you for your invaluable mentorship to our students. In this edition of the newsletter, MDP Graduate Assistant Susana Quevedo interviewed Dr. Bob Buschbacher, who has been a staunch supporter of the MDP program over the years, providing invaluable guidance to MDP students, and chairing two supervisory committees for students who conducted their capstone projects in Brazil. He presently serves on a third committee with first-year student, Tierra Bartolotti, who will also carry out her field practicum in Brazil. In the interview we gain glimpses into Bob's remarkable international career with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), as Program Coordinator to a UF IGERT (Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship) program, and for a time as interim director to the Tropical Conservation and Development (TCD) program. We appreciate Bob's contributions to the MDP program and his willingness to participate in the Faculty Spotlight in this newsletter.

We are grateful for the current financial support afforded to our first-year students from the Office of the Provost, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the Center for Latin American Studies, the Center for African Studies, and the Tropical Conservation and Development program. Several incoming students saw their programs placed at risk when scholarships they had been awarded were pulled in a precipitous fashion, and generous funding provided made it possible for these students to join the program.

Many thanks also to Susana, our Graduate Assistant, for taking leadership in the preparation of this newsletter and our weekly listserv. Finally, best wishes to our readers. We appreciate your interest in the UF MDP program and look forward to sustaining communication with you.

Sincerely,

Glenn Galloway

Director, UF Master of Sustainable Development Practice (MDP) Program

Welcome Cohort 16!

This fall the MDP program welcomed 11 new students from Ghana, Hawaii, Indonesia, Mexico-Canada-Turkey, Nepal, Pakistan, and the United States. Their backgrounds, experiences, and interests are very diverse.

They have worked for nonprofits, universities, government agencies, and have volunteered for different organizations. Some of their interests are on rural livelihoods, natural resource management, indigenous and local community rights, gender equity and women's empowerment, environmental justice migration and vulnerable populations, sustainable agriculture and agribusiness, conservation and biodiversity, and cross-cultural communication, among many other interests.



Brandon Isenman



Hometown: Satellite Beach, Florida.

Education: Bachelor of Arts in Economics and International Studies from the University of Florida.

Experience: Brandon grew up by the intracoastal waterway on Florida's East coast before moving to Gainesville in 2021. During his undergraduate program at UF, Brandon's studies focused on mixed-methods

research in economics and political science, receiving the University Scholars Award to produce a manuscript on political participation among youth in Africa. In 2024 he was awarded a Foreign Language Area Studies Fellowship to study Portuguese language and Brazilian culture in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Brandon's undergraduate studies culminated in his honors thesis, "Café de Moçambique: Assessing Coffee's Potential as a Catalyst for Sustainable Development in Mozambique," combining political-economic analysis with his interest in the global coffee market. This work serves as a stepping stone for his current studies in the MDP program, where he focuses on interventions to improve economic sustainability in the global coffee industry.

Interests: Global systems, value chain analysis, direct trade relationships in coffee, supply chain transparency.



Charlie Hochfelder



Hometown: Orlando, Florida

Education: B.S. in Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York

Experience: Charlie holds a bachelor's degree from Cornell University's ILR School, where he studied global labor markets and development economics. He gained early international experience through internships in Nicaragua and Indonesia, before working in data analytics

and M&E roles in New York City.

He later served as a U.S. Peace Corps Volunteer in Uganda in the Agribusiness & Economic Development sector, where he collaborated with rural farmer groups to increase access to improved local seed varieties and establish demonstration gardens. This work strengthened his skills in agricultural extension, project management, and cross-cultural communication. Building on this foundation, Charlie worked in Ghana with Texas A&M's Borlaug Institute through the International Agricultural Education Fellowship Program. There, he implemented school-based agricultural education, led youth development initiatives with 4-H Ghana, and provided extension services to smallholder farmers.

Charlie now seeks to integrate his practical experience with graduate study and research in sustainable development.

Interests: Smallholder farming, sustainable agriculture, income distribution, household nutrition, positive youth development, global food systems, biking, hiking, music, and gardening.



Donna Sipata



Hometown: Sorong, Southwest Papua, Indonesia

Education: Bachelor of International Relations, President University

Donna's university experience is based upon community-based development and international relations. She finished her undergraduate thesis on the part of NGOs in promoting environmental justice and indigenous land right in Papua where she carried out qualitative research in the field with a local NGO that works in forest protection and indigenous people rights.

She was also an active member of AIESEC and conducted and took part in some of the youth-led initiatives; these qualifications embraced the SDGs including; an education outreach program, an intercultural exchange, and a program on community-based empowerment. Such experiences enhanced her interest in inclusive development and helped her better understand the issues encountered by the marginalized people.

Interests: Social justice, Indigenous rights, gender equity, community empowerment, participatory development, environmental justice, storytelling for impact.



Jordan Gannon



Hometown: Big Rapids, Michigan

Education: B.S. in Organismal Biology and Evolutionary Science, minors in Environmental Studies and Spanish from High Point University, NC

Bio: Throughout her academic and professional journey, Jordan has sought to bridge the gap between conservation science and community engagement. While earning her undergraduate degree in biology, Jordan held federally funded positions with educational non-profits and wildlife centers, where she rehabilitated native wildlife species,

performed outreach at local schools, and ran multi-lingual tutoring programs to improve literacy and expand access to environmental education.

Jordan has conducted widespread research throughout her career, in collaboration with the National Science Foundation, as well as museums and zoos throughout the country. Her topics ranged from the ecological impacts of horseshoe crab harvest, the evolutionary effects of diet on functional morphology, to prefrontal cortex use across various animal taxa. Since her graduation, she has completed internships with AmeriCorps and the Student Conservation Association and worked hands-on as a wildlife technician for the National Park Service, facilitating peaceful human/wildlife interactions, responding to attacks, managing research initiatives for endangered species, and outlining steps for continued wildlife management.

Building on her scientific background, Jordan is now focused on integrating interdisciplinary approaches to conservation, blending her love for science with a commitment to education and social impact. She has previously worked with non-profits in Honduras and the Dominican Republic and indigenous communities in the U.S. to expand access to education and resources.

Interests: Sustainability, environmental justice, education, outdoor recreation, reading about niche wildlife species, playing instruments badly.



Julia Taylor



Hometown: Vero Beach, Florida

Education: Environmental Studies major, Sustainable Development and the Environment minor, Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida

Experience: Julia, a Florida native, was motivated to pursue her undergraduate degree in Environmental Studies at Rollins College after becoming aware of the environmental degradation the world is facing. With a drive to make change, Julia joined EcoRollins student club and Rollins Sustainability Program to lead productive dialogue and campus-wide events on topics like

environmental justice, climate change, and overconsumption. In her senior year, her impact on the community was recognized when she was awarded Outstanding Campus Environmental Advocate in the Environmental Studies Department. Upon graduation in 2023, Julia served two of The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) preserves in Central Florida as their Outreach and Education Intern. She assisted with event planning, managing volunteer workdays, and developing content for newsletters, guided tours, and outreach events. She designed three seasonal bloom guides for Tiger Creek Preserve's trailheads to allow hikers to identify and learn about Florida's native plants. Additionally, Julia designed a canoe tour program at Disney Wilderness Preserve which focused on watershed management and the preserve's role as part of the headwaters to the Everglades.

After her internship with TNC, Julia spent the summer kayaking and working with high schoolers as an Outer Banks Expedition Leader for Green River Preserve in North Carolina. When Julia returned to Florida, she grabbed her lifejacket once more and went back to kayaking – this time for Fin Expeditions and Brevard Zoo. In these roles, Julia reached over a thousand people with conservation success stories, always highlighting the joy of biodiversity.

Interests: Environmental history, environmental education, climate action, fast fashion, overconsumption, native plants, freshwater scarcity, and ecosystem services.



Kaylee McDonald



Hometown: Navarre, FL, USA

Education: Bachelor of Arts, Sustainability Studies; Bachelor of Arts, Arabic Language; minor in International Development and Humanitarian Assistance, Gainesville, Florida, USA

Experience: Kaylee graduated from the University of Florida in 2025. During her undergraduate years she completed a year-long internship at Peaceful Paths—a non-profit organization working with survivors of domestic violence. There, she worked with the economic empowerment team to address housing needs,

create content for economic empowerment classes, and perform follow-ups with clients. Additionally, this internship involved one-on-one meetings with survivors to address short- and long-term needs as well as prioritize individual goals. Over the course of her undergraduate program, she also participated in two study abroad programs: a two-month, immersive Arabic language program in Fez, Morocco (2023), and an urban studies and ethnographic research program in Istanbul, Turkey (2025). During her final year of undergraduate studies, Kaylee worked with Dr. Renata Serra's lab, coding qualitative data with NVIVO. The research analyzed vulnerability and resilience to climate change hazards in the Sahel. Kaylee is passionate about resource accessibility and empowerment approaches in nonprofit settings with regional interests in North Africa, the Sahel, and the Middle East.

Interests: Community-led initiatives and accessibility, women's empowerment, environmental sustainability, climate change adaptation strategies, migration and placemaking.



Lordia Blay



Hometown: Bonyere, Western Region, Ghana

Education: BA in Economics, University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana.

Experience: After earning her Bachelor of Arts in Economics from the University of Cape Coast, Lordia Blay began her career with the Ghana Meteorological Agency, where she supported climate data work and public awareness initiatives. This early experience sparked her interest in the intersection between environmental data and community impact. Motivated to do more, Lordia later joined the Ghana Statistical Service as a field data collector, where she worked on several national surveys focused on health, population, and socio-economic conditions.

Through these roles, she deepened her understanding of how data can drive equitable planning and policy. During fieldwork in the Nzema area, a rural area in the western part of Ghana, she witnessed the impact of illegal mining on water quality, livelihoods, and public health. This experience reinforced her commitment to inclusive environmental policies that reflect the lived realities of women, children, and other marginalized groups affected by extractive industries. In addition to her professional roles, Lordia served as a community reporter for the Ghana Environmental Advocacy Group, where she raised awareness about how environmental degradation undermines community health and economic stability. Currently, she volunteers with GreenLead, a youth-led environmental NGO that empowers young Africans to lead on climate change, greenwashing, and sustainability issues. As part of the research team, she supports policy engagement and advocacy that centers local voices and drive community-led climate action. Lordia's vision is to contribute to a sustainable Africa where economic activities no longer come at the expense of nature or human dignity. She is committed to shaping policies and driving actions that integrate the perspectives of every stakeholder especially those historically left out of environmental decision-making.

Interests: Environmental justice, resource governance, community development and empowerment, inclusive climate policy, sustainable education, field research.



Maryam Aman



Hometown: Islamabad, Pakistan

Education: Bachelor of Science in Politics and International Relations, University of London, UK

Experience: Born and raised in Pakistan, I had always focused on our decades-long struggle against terrorism. This national security crisis initially inspired me to study international relations. However, midway through my undergraduate, my focus began to shift as I explored more of my country and became deeply aware of another looming crisis: climate change. A lesser-known fact, Pakistan holds the largest concentration of glacial ice outside the polar regions. These glaciers are melting rapidly, forming nearly 3,000 glacial lakes—many of which pose serious risks of outburst flooding.

This alarming situation compelled me to dedicate myself to the preservation of our natural environment. I have travelled extensively throughout Pakistan, witnessing firsthand the devastating effects of climate change, especially in the northern valleys. I strongly believe that local and indigenous knowledge must be central to the creation of sustainable solutions that can preserve livelihoods and protect people from displacement. Involving them in development strategies is integral at this stage.

My time at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad—a research think tank operating under Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs—was instrumental in shaping my academic and professional direction. There, I participated in discussions on Pakistan's urgent need to transition toward sustainable development models. I wrote policy briefs on how sustainable agricultural practices in Europe could be adapted for Pakistan, where climate change induced weather events (floods, droughts, changes in weather patterns) are threatening the agricultural sector. Additionally, I worked as a research associate to the former Federal Minister of Human Rights in Pakistan, a PhD and accomplished author in the field of international relations.

I helped establish an online platform for the University of London's distance learning students in 2023. I manage communication between students and the University of London Worldwide team and support community engagement across diverse global cohorts. Today it includes +2,400 students and alumni and continues to rapidly expand.

Interests: Climate justice, sustainable policy designing, traveling, glacier preservation, agro-sustainability, ethnic language conservation, painting, reading, gaming and photography.



Samagya Kharel



Hometown: Dhading, Nepal

Education: BS, Veterinary Science and Animal Husbandry, Purbanchal University, Nepal; MSc, Animal Science (Animal Breeding), Agriculture and Forestry University, Nepal

Experience: Before coming to UF, Samagya has taught animal science courses to undergraduate students at two universities in Nepal: Himalayan College of Agricultural Sciences and Technology (HICAST) and Kathmandu University. She also worked with rural communities on capacity-building initiatives aimed at promoting agro-

ecological practices and sustainable development, as well as empowering vulnerable populations and women.

She is a recipient of a faculty research grant from HICAST to “Study livestock production systems and management practices adopted by small ruminant farmers in Bagmati province, Nepal” and a young scientist award to “Study the prolificacy (FecB) gene and its effect on lamb growth in Kage sheep of Nepal” from Nepal Academy of Science and Technology.

Interests: Biodiversity, Conservation, Sustainable Livestock Systems, Climate Change, Women’s Empowerment, Science Communication.



Susana Quevedo



Hometown: Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico

Education: Bachelor of Arts in International Development Studies and Political Science, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Experience: Susana is a development practitioner from Guadalajara, Mexico, with extensive knowledge and experience in migration, sustainable agriculture, and rural development. Her early international travel experiences shaped her understanding of the risks and challenges many migrants from Latin America and around the world face in their pursuit of better opportunities.

Motivated by a desire to better understand global migration, Susana earned a Bachelor of Arts in International Development Studies and Political Science from Saint Mary's University (SMU) in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Following graduation, Susana joined Canadian Crossroads International where she developed and managed projects in Southern Africa focused on promoting girls' education, reducing poverty, and advancing women's rights. Since 2011, Susana has been based in Salihli, Turkey, where she co-founded agricultural businesses with her family. Her work integrates economic development with social responsibility, promoting equal pay and hosting workshops on women's economic independence. In 2020, she completed a 74-acre reforestation project in collaboration with the Turkish Department of Forestry. Most recently, in 2024, she was awarded a rural development grant by the Turkish Ministry of Agriculture to establish a local olive oil extraction facility focused on fair trade, local sourcing, and sustainable practices.

Interests: Forced and seasonal migration, sustainable agriculture, fair trade, rural development, reforestation, nutrition and food security, climate change and its impact on human health, children's rights, cultural and linguistic preservation, tennis, electronic music, reading, and travel.



Tierra Bartolotti



Hometown: O'ahu, Hawai'i

Education: Bachelor of Applied Science in Sustainable Community Food Systems, University of Hawai'i at West O'ahu

Experience: My educational background and professional experience primarily encompasses food systems, agribusiness, and environmental non-profit work. I've worked in Hawai'i, the Indo-Pacific, and most recently Latin America. In addition to my academic and professional background, my

perspectives have been greatly enriched through global experiences.

I've taught filmmaking workshops in New Zealand, The Bahamas, and Ecuador, along with volunteering on a Medical Service Mission in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. Currently, I'm an active member of the North American Food Systems Network (NAFSN) Leadership Circle & F3 Local Advisory Board. My technical expertise includes agribusiness development, farmers markets, food policy, research, along with web & editorial design. While pursuing the MDP Program, I currently work as the SARE Program Assistant within the IFAS Department at UF.

Interests: Supply Chains, Food Systems, Latin American Cooperatives, Rural Economic Development, Social Entrepreneurship.

Graduates Fall 2025

Congratulations to our Fall 2025 graduates Hailey Muchnok and Veronica M. Souza, we wish you the best in your future endeavors.



Hailey Muchnok

Specializations: Latin American Studies, TCD, Entrepreneurship, Global Health.

Advisors: Dr. Taylor Stein and Dr. Glenn Galloway.

Capstone Field Practicum: “Enhancing Community Rural Tourism Initiatives in Sarapiquí, Costa Rica.”



Veronica M. Souza

Specializations: Latin American Studies, TCD, Leadership in Sustainability.

Advisors: Dr. Marcia DiStaso, Dr. Sarah Bush and Dr. Susan Paulson.

Capstone Field Practicum: “Transforming Organizational Cultures: The Role of Change Management Processes in Promoting Sustainability Development Practices.”

Fall Awards



Congratulations to Samagya Kharel (MDP Cohort 16) recipient of the Fall 2025 Research Abroad for Master's Students (**RAMS**) award. The RAMS program provides funding for travel and travel related expenses for master's students to travel abroad to collect data or to access resources not available on campus at partner institutions.



Samagya Kharel
(on the left)

Field Practicums Summer 2025

We are proud of our Cohort 15 members who identified international and local host organizations to conduct their fieldwork and made contributions to these organizations.

We would like to acknowledge the continuous support of our faculty to our students throughout their planning and execution of their field practicums. We are grateful for our faculty commitment to the MDP program.

We would also like to thank the host organizations for making our students international fieldwork placements possible.

Please take a moment to review the Cohort 15 field practicums.



Eluagu Izuchukwu Innocent

Title FP: Evaluation of Peanut Production Value Chain in Nigeria, Nutritional Importance and Export Constraints.

Region: Nigeria, Northern Region (Kano and Nasarawa States)

FP Placement Organisation: UF/IFAS Global Food Systems Institute (GFSI)

Committee: Dr. Renata Serra and Dr. Greg MacDonald



Field Practicums (FP) Summer 2025



Graham Linehan

Title FP: Climate Resilience in Churute, Ecuador: Subjective Evaluations and Conceptualizations

Region: Churute, Ecuador



FP Placement Organisation:
La Conservacion Internacional Ecuador

Committee: Dr. Renata Serra and Dr. Sarah McKune



Guiecniza Dehesa Blas

Title FP: Community Energy Solutions: Advancing Environmental and Economic Justice through the Home Energy Tune-Up Program

Region: Gainesville, Alachua County, Florida, USA

FP Placement Organisation:
Community Weatherization Coalition (CWC)



Committee: Dr. July Dayane Nelson and Dr. Andrew Noss

Field Practicums Summer 2025



Heather Burky-Lechwar

Title FP: Regenerative Tourism Potential in Rural Coastal Communities: Exploring Community Perception of regenerative tourism in Cordova, Alaska

Region: Cordova, Alaska

FP Placement Organisation:
The Cordova Chamber of Commerce

Committee: Dr. Kai Lorenzen, Dr. Glenn Galloway and Dr. Frank Asche



Tayler King

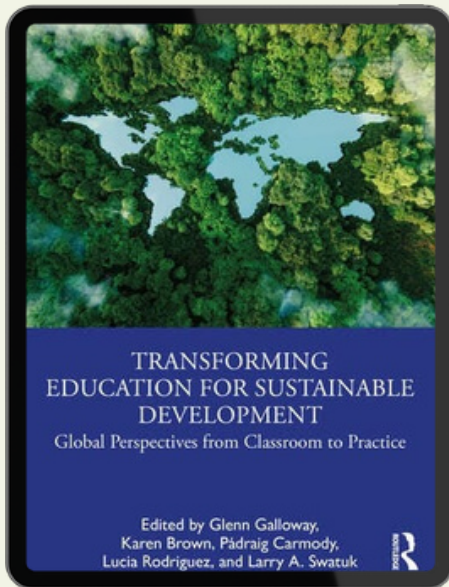
Title FP: Community Priorities, Barriers, and the Future of the T.B. McPherson Recreation Center

Region: US (Gainesville, FL)

FP Placement Organisation:
City of Gainesville Wild Spaces and Public Places Department

Committee: Dr. July Nelson and Dr. Ruth Steiner

Faculty and Alumni Publications



We are pleased to announce the release of the book "Transforming Education for Sustainable Development: Global Perspectives from Classroom to Practice," published by Routledge and developed by faculty, alumni, and students of the Global Association of Master's in Development Practice (MDP). In addition to Dr. Glenn Galloway, Director of the UF MDP program, who served as lead editor and lead or contributing author to several chapters, Drs. Erica Odera, Ignacio Porzecanski, July Nelson, and Muthusami Kumaran from UF made important contributions to the book as can be appreciated in the Table of Contents. In all, 39 faculty members, students, and alumni from five continents participated in this project in an effort to capture 12+ years of global experience, innovation and learning in education for sustainable development (ESD). This book was prepared for professionals involved in ESD, sustainability education, development practice, and related areas of endeavor.

Our faculty members Jazmín Gonzales Tovar, Robert Buschbacher, and Stephen Perz, and indigenous leaders of the Resguardo Indígena de Yunguillo (Colombia) and the Mancomunidad de Comunidades de los Ríos Beni, Tuichi, y Quiquibey (Bolivia) co-published an article on the journal Sustainability.

'Sustainable Development and Infrastructure: Effective Indigenous Resistance from a Power and Decolonizing Environmental Justice Lens'

<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/17/20/9122>



Picture taken by Domingo Huasna

Faculty Spotlight

Dr. Robert Buschbacher



This fall we interviewed Dr. Robert Buschbacher, a systems ecologist who spent fourteen years at the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). At WWF-US he directed the Tropical Forestry Program and then served as the Program Director at WWF-Brazil.

At the University of Florida since 2001, he was Program Coordinator for the Working Forests in the Tropics IGERT, the Amazon Conservation Leadership Initiative (ACLI), the Governance and Infrastructure in the Amazon program, and the Biocultural Conservation Working Group. He also served as the interim director for the Tropical Conservation and Development Program (TCD) between Marianne Schmink and Bette Loiselle. Dr. Buschbacher has a bilingual Brazilian-American family.

In the interview **SQ** stands for Susana Quevedo, and **RB** Robert Buschbacher.

SQ: Can you tell me what influenced you to pursue a career in ecology and sustainable bioeconomy practices. How did getting the award of Eagle Scout influence you?

RB: Do you know what an Eagle Scout is?!

SQ: Yes, I do! I did my homework

RB: Yes, that was a big part of my adolescent years!

SQ: Did this inspire you in any way?

RB: It inspired me to spend time outside and explore more, it was one of three big influences, along with a high school biology teacher who had dozens of cages with interesting creepy crawlies in his classroom, as well as summer courses at the Bronx Zoo, organized by the Wildlife Conservation Society. This led me to a degree in biology and eventually a PhD in ecology.

SQ: How was being in the field in the past when there were not so many technologies available?

RB: It was more fun when not so many technologies were around, more boots on the ground measuring trees, setting up plots, collecting soil samples, harvesting biomass. By doing that, we also got immersed in the social dynamics with the local communities, colonists, ranchers, ranch workers.

When I was doing field research for my PhD I spent months at a time in Venezuela, and then I had two post-docs based in Brazil. Students should maximize time in the field to immerse themselves better. Remote sensing technologies make it possible to do research with very short-term visits, but it is also important to understand the different level of social dynamics.

Faculty Spotlight

Dr. Robert Buschbacher

From WWF to UF 1993–2000

SQ: Can you tell me about your time in WWF?

RB: I spent seven years in WWF-US where I led a Tropical Forestry Program. It was only the second program at WWF where we tried to integrate livelihoods and conservation. We worked on forestry and agroforestry with ejidos in Mexico, former gold miners near Corcovado National Park in Costa Rica, land reform settlements in Bahia, and the rubber tappers in Acre and Rondonia.

SQ: And then you moved from WWF-US to Brazil?

RB: Yes; first I requested to work more intensively on fewer projects by being “out-posted” to Belém, Brazil. After two years in Belém, I moved to Brasilia where I spent five years helping with the transition from a loose set of projects led by WWF organizations throughout Europe and the US into an integrated national program housed in newly-created WWF- Brazil.

I managed twelve conservation program officers, all very talented Brazilian professionals, and when that team matured up and were ready, I stepped back and left it to the Brazilians to run WWF-Brazil.

SQ: That is amazing! You were overseeing this transitioning process and recognized they needed autonomy and stepped back.

RB: Yes, but I continued to work intermittently for the WWF network, with evaluation and re-design of conservation programs in Oaxaca, Mexico, Colombia, UK and the Guianas.

SQ: So, after this I imagined you came to UF, how did you end up in UF?

RB: Some of the funding of WWF was from USAID who were also funding the TCD MERGE program, who were active in Acre, Brazil and elsewhere. That’s how I met the TCD director, Marianne Schmick. I had family in Florida so I reached out to her and Chuck Wood, who was then director at the UF Center for Latin American Studies. They graciously offered me a one semester opportunity to teach a seminar course to share and reflect on the WWF experience with Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDP).

During this semester, I met a fellow alum of the University of Georgia who was chairing the Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Department, and he invited me to teach an undergraduate course on conservation biology (and later to fill in with Lyn Branch’s graduate course when she was on sabbatical). Eventually, Marianne, Karen Kainer, Jack Putz and others got a major NSF IGERT grant called Working Forests in the Tropics (WFT), and I was hired as the IGERT program coordinator.

Faculty Spotlight

Dr. Robert Buschbacher

WFT was focused on 4 regions of Latin America, but the NSF grant was designed to train a future generation of US researchers and practitioners, so the funding was limited to American citizens. The TCD team saw an urgent need to also support students from the Amazon region and we reached out to the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, who provided us with two major grants for an Amazon Conservation Leadership Initiative. This support integrated UF academics with practice through connections with NGO professionals. Some of this support was for graduate degrees but we also sponsored professional exchanges of NGO workers from Amazonia to come to UF to strengthen NGO and academic partnerships. These short-term visits were a semester or a year for practitioners from the South to come as exchange students to UF.

SQ: This was so beneficial for the UF American students as well, right? To be able to meet and be in the same classes with NGO workers from the South.

RB: Yes, it was value added as these exchanges enriched both ways. They integrated UF students and practitioners, facilitated learning from each other to bring skills and theories to analyze conservation / development methodologies and results. It also offered an opportunity for visitors to reflect on their own professional experience and/or to learn new skills. They went back to the Amazon as more effective professionals. I was thrilled to see at least eight ACLI alumni among the conservation leaders at the recent TCD Amazon Conference.

SQ: Were you also teaching at that time?

RB: Both WFT and ACLI included a series of field courses on land use dynamics, conservation policy and leadership, resilience and livelihoods. I also developed TCD skills courses on Conservation and Development Entrepreneurship and Impacting Conservation and Development Policy.

SQ: Why did you develop the course Conservation and Development Entrepreneurship? And what were the benefits for students?

RB: Going back to my first program at WWF, I've always looked for ways to engage the people who actually live in tropical forests in managing and conserving natural resources. That meant generating income to improve livelihoods, and thus supporting and creating microbusinesses, for example to harvest nuts, açai, eco-tourism, and even harvest timber.

As a biologist, I had to learn by trial and (mostly) error, so I wanted to help students develop skills managing businesses related to natural resources and conservation. Conservation and social entrepreneurship are very related, TCD is very strong in developing skills. The key aspect

Faculty Spotlight

Dr. Robert Buschbacher

of this course was to develop a business plan, from production to marketing to sales, integrating conservation principles within it. Students participated in a business plan competition at the UF Business school and some of them won these competitions! Therefore, the benefits of this course were for their professional careers, training them to integrate business and management with conservation and development.

SQ: How hopeful are you for the future of the Amazon?

RB: I am most hopeful about the strength of local leadership, including social movements, professionalized NGOs, and scientists. COP 30 in Belém shined a light on the expertise with knowledge and management strategies that have been locally developed. The problem is the Amazon has a conflict between bottom-up development and serving as the periphery of Brazil to produce commodities and energy.

Fortunately, local people are increasingly gaining territorial rights, getting autonomy over governance processes, and becoming protagonists of more bottom-up practices to improve local livelihoods that use forests and rivers sustainably. Local leadership is very important; our challenge as academics is to support them.

SQ: What would you like to do in the future?

RB: I have been participating in a group of academic leaders in the biocultural field who recently wrote 'On Tap Not on Top: An urgent call for Academia to support Indigenous Science and Equitable Conservation'. We continue to have dialogue about how academia can contribute to effective conservation.

And I continue to think holistically about conditions and strategies for effective conservation on the ground, including broader socio-political processes such as land occupation by different economic groups, their political dynamics, governance, and policy.

So just continue to look for opportunities to share knowledge and experience at the interface of academia and conservation practice.

SQ: Any other plans that you would like to share?

RB: I am open to opportunities for contributing, collaborating, and working with MDP and TCD students, supporting Brazilians or others from the Amazon or Latin America with interest in the Amazon because I have local connections that could be of good use for students.

Let's continue UF's contribution to partners through appreciative inquiry and documenting their experiences.

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SQ: Any final comments you would like to share?

RB: It is great to be part of TCD and MDP with our inherent multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary ways of looking at social and natural aspects of conservation and development. Many students have fantastic professional experiences learning and enriching communities.

SQ: Thank you so much Bob, hope to see you around.

Student Activities Outside the Classroom

Cohort 15

Graham Linehan: Center for Latin American Studies, Graduate Assistant

Guiecniza Dehesa Blas: Community Weatherization Coalition, Volunteer

Innocent Eluagu: Center for African Studies, Graduate Assistant

Tayler King: Assistant to Academic & Career Initiatives, UF Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars Program

Wendy Mesa: Community Building and Engagement Program Coordinator, UF College of Veterinary Medicine

Student Activities Outside the Classroom

Cohort 16

Charlie Hochfelder: UF International Center, Peace Corps Representative; TCD Student Group President

Lordia Blay: Center for African Studies, Graduate Assistant (African Studies Quarterly, Book Review Editor); PIE Fellow, 2025 – 2026 Cohort

Samagya Kharel: Tropical Conservation and Development Program, Graduate Assistant

Susana Quevedo: MDP, Graduate Assistant; TCD Student Group Latin America Representative

Tierra Bartolotti: UF IFAS Extension, SARE Program Assistant

MDP Social Events

We had a wonderful time sharing meaningful moments during the Fall 2025.



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