ECU Biology Faculty, Jeff McKinnon, has offered a study abroad version of Biol 1201, Principles of Biology II Laboratory, for the past two years. In the study abroad version, students travel to Costa Rica at spring break to experience tropical biodiversity—through tropical forests and coral reefs—personally and directly, and learn about Costa Rican conservation practices and attitudes to nature. This course has been aimed mainly at first year students.

This year I am expanding the program by adding two new courses, at the upper undergraduate and graduate levels, Biol 4800, Tropical Biodiversity Study Abroad Field-Intensive, and Biol 6220, Tropical Biodiversity Study Abroad Field-Intensive. In these courses, students will be introduced to the processes responsible for the diversity of living nature and to the extraordinary biological diversity of tropical regions, with an emphasis on three key classes of habitat/ecosystem: tropical forests (terrestrial); coral reefs (marine); ancient lakes (freshwater). In addition to readings, discussions, and a few lectures in Greenville, the course(s) will take place at sites in Costa Rica. Students will gain field experiences and skills in a tropical setting and become familiar with participatory science methods and data bases. The latter are proving incredibly valuable for monitoring biodiversity and how the distribution and abundance of animals and plants are changing in response to global warming—and guiding policy and management to enhance conservation and sustainability.

These courses will expand opportunities to experience tropical biodiversity directly to ECU Biology upper level undergrads and graduate students, and will emphasize the commitment to sustainability and conservation that permeates Costa Rican society. Students will gain an immediate and personal understanding of the remarkable diversity present in tropical systems and the threats to those systems posed by accelerating extinction rates.