



Syllabus

Course Title: Rainforests, Reefs, & Children in Nature

Program and Date: Belize; May 16-30, 2027

Instructor Name: Dr. Meg Gravil

Instructor Home Institution and Department: Eastern Kentucky University; Department of Applied Human Sciences

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Get to Know Your Professor

My enthusiasm for exploring the interactions between children and nature began watching my own child examine pine trees through sight, touch, smell, and feel when she was a toddler. Her inquisitiveness inspired me to pursue my PhD in Interdisciplinary Early Childhood Education. I combined this fascination with nature with my experience in early childhood research and now work to encourage the child-nature connection with future educators in formal and non-formal settings. I teach undergraduate and graduate courses in the Child & Family Studies program and am the P-5 Coordinator of Outdoor Learning Initiatives for the Center for Science and Environmental Education at ECU. Current research I'm engaged in focuses on children's voices throughout the world in the face of climate change. Past international travel experiences include supervising undergraduate and graduate students in Guatemala City during an IECE study abroad program. Through this, I realized the numerous positive impacts and opportunities for learning and personal growth offered by studying abroad in a different culture.

Course Description

Belize's coastal, marine, and rainforest habitats comprise one of the most diverse ecosystems on the planet. These environments offer different opportunities for children to learn, play, and explore than we are used to in the United States. This course provides foundational knowledge of theory, practice, and research on the emerging field of nature-based learning for young children in formal and non-formal settings. We will immerse ourselves in the rich ecological and cultural landscapes while examining how nature shapes childhood, learning, and development. We will engage with ecosystems, natural spaces within the environments, and local communities to investigate how children interact within the natural spaces, and analyze how these experiences support physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development.

Course Level and Credit Hours

Upper level undergraduate and graduate levels
3 Credit Hours

Prerequisite(s)

none

Student Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of all coursework with a passing grade and full participation in course activities, students shall be able to:

- **Identify and explain** Developmentally Appropriate Practice through observations of children's interactions within natural environments, including community-based and outdoor learning settings.
- **Synthesize** types of nature-based play and learning observed across the location's ecosystems and **analyze** their impact on children's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development.
- **Summarize and apply** relevant theories and research on child development by interpreting field-based experiences, site visits, and engagement with local educators and programs.
- **Compare and contrast** Belizean natural and constructed play environments through site visits and ecological exploration, evaluating how each supports or constrains children's learning opportunities.
- **Assess** social, economic, and cultural factors influencing children's access to natural spaces, including disparities and their implications for development and equity.
- **Evaluate and design** nature-based learning experiences by analyzing play affordances in the local environment and connecting them to developmental domains and principles of Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS).

Additional Student Learning Outcomes (Graduate Students):

- **Investigate and analyze** the accessibility and use of natural spaces within a specific community in Belize through field research and data collection.
- **Synthesize and present** field-based data and course concepts in a professional research poster that integrates ecological context, developmental theory, and nature-based learning practices between American and Belizean contexts.

Required Readings and Materials

Online articles and readings to be available prior to, during, and after the trip.



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Assignments and Grades

The final grade will be assessed as follows:

Pre-departure short writing assignments based on the textbook due on departure date = 15%

Journal entries every other day with writing prompts provided by instructor = 35%

Short essay based on self-directed field trip to historic site = 10%

Participation in all class activities and discussions = 15%

Final project/paper due a month after return from Belize = 25%

Grading Scale

The following scale will be used to compute your grade.

90 – 100% = A

80 – 89% = B

70 – 79% = C

60 – 69% = D

Below 60% = F

Onsite Learning Experiences and Activities

Onsite learning experiences in this class will likely include the following site visits. This is a tentative list which will be replaced with a detailed daily itinerary of class meetings and field trips prior to the departure date.

Belize City Zoo

Belize Barrier Reef

Rainforest communities

Mayan ruins

Current Mayan home

Preschool/elementary school/children's home site visit

Urban/rural children's play spaces

Attendance Policy

Attendance is mandatory at all scheduled activities and class meetings as well as field trip excursions. This includes any virtual meetings before and after the onsite experience. Repeated absences, including for ill health, will require documentation to be excused.



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Academic Integrity Policy

Plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty (see your campus student handbook for definitions) will not be tolerated and will result in failing assignment grades or even a course grade of F. Violations of academic honesty will be reported back to student's home campus.

Physical Expectations

Program requires walking 3-5 miles per day on uneven pavement in all kinds of weather and long periods of standing. Students must be able to carry their own bags and belongings.

Disability Accommodation

CCSA is committed to providing access to education abroad to the extent possible in a study abroad setting. The earlier CCSA and the faculty know the needs, the more likely we can accommodate them. At a minimum, students seeking accommodations are to contact both the CCSA office and the faculty one month in advance of the program's beginning. Students seeking such accommodation must provide CCSA with a copy of the letter on file with their own Office of Disability Services outlining what services they receive on their home campus.

Title IX Policy

Sexual misconduct (including sexual harassment, sexual assault, and any nonconsensual behavior of a sexual nature) and sexual discrimination violate CCSA policies. Students experiencing such behavior may obtain support from the Onsite Program Director or the CCSA Executive Director. To report sexual misconduct or sex discrimination, contact either of these two officers. Disclosure to faculty instructors or CCSA officers of sexual misconduct, domestic violence, dating violence, or sex discrimination occurring on the program or involving a visitor, student or employee is not confidential under Title IX. Faculty and other CCSA employees are required to forward such reports, including names and circumstances, to the CCSA Executive Director.

Statement about Final Syllabus

Please note that all CCSA syllabi are subject to change, but every effort will be made to ensure participants receive notice of such changes in a timely manner.