

THAILAND

Studying Abroad with Sustainability in Mind and Action

I had the opportunity to study abroad with CIEE in Thailand for a program in Globalization and Development. The program is built around a people-to-people learning approach for students to explore issues of development and social justice at a grassroots level. In the field of development, increasingly scholars and practitioners have had to consider the long-term environmental and social outcomes of today's decisions. 'Sustainable Development' is a term and field of study, increasingly considered an important way to envision future improvement in good governance, economic growth, market opportunities and education. At a much smaller scale it is relevant to consider sustainability in new ways when traveling and learning in developing countries and regions.

One of the alumnae interns at CIEE Thailand began an initiative with other students during her study abroad semester called Sustainable Study Abroad (SSA). They collaborated to calculate the carbon-intensity of student travel and estimates of other carbon-emitting factors on the part of students during their time studying abroad. They were accustomed to studying and critically considering 'living sustainably' and advocating for support from their college. After the semester, the students presented their research findings to the stateside CIEE corporate office to roll out the idea of climate-minded assessments and changes for other CIEE study sites.

After hearing about their project, some students in my semester and I decided to collect 'baseline' data on our food consumption, electricity use, and collective trash. In different countries the impact of these are very different than what we may consider on campus or at home. We did a survey for all of our fellow students on environmental ethics, to see how many people considered their carbon footprint or sustainable impact important. This allowed us to survey later in the semester to see after promoting some small changes and informing each other, if students considered their impact more closely related to their daily decisions.

We audited our campus trash, to see where most of our waste was coming from, before challenging ourselves and other students to start using reusable cups instead of disposable containers every day. We also took a trip to the city landfill, met with community members that make a living sifting through mountains of trash and turning in the recyclables. Our discussion was impactful in considering the growth of the city and the limited future capacity of the landfill, as well as the lives affected by how we all generated waste.

The SSA team also monitored electricity, because room meters at our apartment complex calculated the kw/hr energy use for each room. We took data on each student's room first, before challenging students to competitive meter wars, to see who could reduce their electricity use the most over a course of a few weeks. This helped get students engaged and competitive about reducing our power use, which in Northeastern Thailand, is largely generated by hydroelectric dams.

When we were eating in the city, we were interested to know where our food was coming from in order to assess how 'sustainable' our food supply chain was. We surveyed vendors of the restaurants that students frequented most often, asking where they bought their food. Many just referred us to farmers or suppliers in larger markets, but we also came to find some used food they grew themselves. Next, we surveyed vendors at the citywide markets to see where they sourced produce, rice, eggs and meat. Our survey contained questions on organic vs. chemical fertilizer use, distance from farm, and others.

We compiled and wrote-up all of our reports so that we could pass on our 'baseline' findings to future semesters of students studying abroad with CIEE in Thailand. This was one way I was able to learn and understand how our actions can affect the environment and people while living in other countries.