

The course on Tropical Dendrology given in Costa Rica by the Tropical Science Center

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I participated in the Tropical Dendrology course in 2001. I had been to Ecuador the year before to teach, and was interested in gaining additional knowledge to help me teach tropical biology courses. This course certainly filled my needs. It was one of the best learning experiences of my life. Although it lasted only 2 weeks, I was able to absorb a great amount of material because of the manner in which the course was taught. With Dr. Humberto Jimenez-Saa, the main organizer and instructor, and with 3 other specialists also involved, the students had a wealth of knowledge available to them during the two weeks. Utilizing Dr. Jimenez's Matrix method, we systematically were introduced to the typical families and genera in the region. With the emphasis on family and generic features, we were instructed to keep careful notes on the most important characteristics, and to organize the notes into a form in which an unknown specimen could be quickly located. The instructors continually challenged us to identify specimens with our Matrix notes, and the students had great fun trying to see who could be the first to identify the specimen. Many of the participants did not have much background in botanical terminology and systematics, but they too became quite successful in their identifications. The whole course was great fun, meeting people from many different countries and backgrounds, and especially being able to interact with these experienced specialists in tropical botany, and to share their obvious excitement in learning about their tropical flora. I have since made two additional trips to Ecuador, and used my Matrix notes extensively and with great success on these trips. In addition, I conducted a 4-month sabbatical study in 2007, with the assistance of Humberto, involving a study of woody plants of Los Cusingos, in southern Costa Rica, and a property of the Tropical Science Center. I had a number of resources available to help in identifying these woody plants, but my Matrix notebook was again of great help to me. I often checked these notes first when I encountered a specimen that I did not immediately recognize as being in a particular family or genus.

Also, I completed a book in 2005, *Plant Life of Kentucky*, in which I provided keys and family descriptions for 2,600 taxa. In the preparation of these keys and descriptions, I found myself thinking about what I had learned about families in the Tropical Dendrology course, and this information helped to shape my thinking and how I described families and emphasized important characteristics. I cannot overemphasize the importance of the Tropical Dendrology course in providing me a background to learn about tropical plants, and also in expanding my knowledge on the diversity of plant families.