

Jack Payne: Economy, environment can thrive together

By Jack Payne

Special to The Sun

Published: Wednesday, April 8, 2015 at 6:01 a.m.

The revolution of the ampersand has guided an important part of the University of Florida's global sustainability work.

It's that ampersand — the “&” — in the UF/IFAS Tropical Conservation & Development (TCD) program that is helping overthrow the false dichotomy of economy versus environment. The ampersand tells us that if we do it right, we serve both.

We do much on campus to reduce our environmental footprint. Today we celebrate those efforts during Campus Earth Day on our Plaza of the Americas from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

UF makes its greatest contributions to sustainability, though, through the “revolutionaries” we train and send out across the globe.

Claudio and Suzana Padua studied here in the 1980s and 1990s. Claudio had just decided to ditch the suit-and-tie world to follow his passion and study the black lion tamarin while at the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences' Department of Wildlife Ecology. Suzana got her graduate degree from the UF Center for Latin American Studies. They then brought their expertise and the ampersand back with them to their native Brazil.

They founded IPE, the Institute for Ecological Research, not long after a spate of murders of Brazilian environmental activists.

The Paduas and IPE team's work has led to the planting of 1.5 million trees in a “forest corridor” linking two important ecological areas. They have worked to save many endangered species in Brazil. They have prompted the country's education secretary to embed environmental education in the curriculum of many of the nation's schools. They've struck up corporate partnerships to expand their work and solidify conservation-commerce coexistence.

For example, the French yogurt company Danone contracts with the Paduas' institute to barcode for biodiversity in the tropics. The innovative technique to gather DNA data from water, soil and milk gives researchers and corporate scientists a better shot at predicting whether the biodiversity in Brazil will be there a decade from now. That can determine whether Danone can continue to produce yogurt there.

The Paduas have also launched what may be their nation's first MBA program run by a non-governmental organization and the first professional master's.

The accolades have poured in: Time Magazine conservation heroes, the Whitley Gold Award from the Royal Geographic Society, Ashoka Fellow, and Schwab Foundation recognition as Brazil's social entrepreneurs of the year and Claudio is a “distinguished alumnus” from UF.

They had a homecoming this month and last as the keynote speakers at the recent annual conference of the Tropical Conservation & Development program in Gainesville.

True to Gator form, they did not come to rest on their laurels. They came seeking possibilities. If our talks progress beyond the conversation I had with them in my office — and I have every reason to believe they will — we'll be seeing more of our students and researchers headed to Brazil in coming years and receiving more Brazilian students at UF.

That could give UF/IFAS researchers and students increased access to the research stations in a nation with similar enough soil and climate to Florida's that the work has the potential to propel us toward solutions to the constant threat of pest invasion and control of the citrus disease that threatens Florida's signature crop.

Our researchers can gain through association with the Paduas an influential ally in the complicated logistics arrangements in a nation that is Florida's leading international trading partner.

The ethic of intertwined economic prosperity and environmental health signaled by the ampersand is part of what brought the Paduas to Gainesville nearly three decades ago.

At the time, said IFAS wildlife ecologist Emilio Bruna, who sees immense possibilities in expanding his work in Brazil with the Paduas' partnership (and who dubbed the TCD's punctuation mark "the revolutionary ampersand"), much of the rest of academia was still mired in an either/or view.

Ampersand thinking has since become mainstream, thanks in part to the Paduas and other UF-trained ambassadors that have carried it to the far reaches of the globe.

The Paduas give us another Gator outpost in Brazil. When TCD Director Bette Loiselle reached out to them to start talks about potential partnerships, the Paduas not only enthusiastically agreed but invited her to stay with them near Sao Paulo — and fed her Claudio's homemade bread and salt-crusted chicken with vegetables.

When higher education is at its best, our students learn so much that they end up becoming our teachers.

Sending our students and researchers to the Paduas will expand opportunities for Gators and steep them in the sustainability ethic. Then they can spread the revolution of the ampersand.

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