There are still truly wild places left on earth, places where the hand of humanity has rested lightly and nature still rules in all its glory. This course will take you to some of those places in the rich, wonderful, and fabulously diverse country of Bolivia. We will see tropical rainforest far off the beaten path through the eyes of indigenous guides who have lived with the forest for 300 years. We will hike in the foothills of the 18,000 foot Cordillera Real mountains, and walk on the shores of Lake Titicaca, one of the highest navigable lakes in the world. We will visit ruined cities of the Incas and the pre-Inca peoples, and experience the largest salt flat in the world, the other-worldly Salar de Uyuni. Through all of these places, our unifying theme will be the experiences of local peoples in conserving the natural resources upon which they rely. This form of conservation, dubbed Community-Based Conservation, is a source of hope for wildness in a world of ever-more people.

Wild Places

Madidi National Park has been called one of South America’s most intact ecosystems, containing 44% of all New World mammal species, 38% of all tropical amphibians, and over 10% of all known bird species in the world (about 1000 species). We will stay at Chalalan ecolodge, owned and run by the indigenous Tacana people of San Jose de Uchupiamonas.

Salar de Uyuni is a wonderland of salt, dotted by desert islands and volcanoes. It is also home to the world’s largest known reserves of lithium, setting the stage for large-scale mining to feed batteries for cell phones and electric cars.

Lake Titicaca, at 12,500 feet, is a splash of emerald surrounded by the Altiplano. It is home to many fish species (80% of which are found only here), an introduced trout, and the Titicaca frog. Titicaca was sacred to the Incas and cultures that preceded them, and remains of their inhabitations still dot its shores. On its borders live the endangered wild vicuña (an american camelid sustained through community-based conservation efforts) and the Andean condor.
Indigenous Cultures

In common with most Latin American countries, Bolivia has a long history of conflict between its indigenous peoples and more recent descendants of Spanish ancestry. In contrast with most others, 60-85% of its population is indigenous, primarily Quechua and Aymará. However, Spanish descendants still control the oil and agriculture-rich areas of the country, as they have for the past 500 years, relegating indigenous peoples to the unproductive highlands. Thus, another theme in Bolivia we will explore is one of environmental and social justice.

Deep History

Bolivia’s history goes back thousands of years, and is evident in the stone cities left by the Tiahuanacan civilization and the later Incas that were still inhabiting sophisticated cities when the Spanish arrived in 1531. The Spanish, in search of treasure, found it in Potosí in 1544. Here the spoils from giant silver and gold mines financed the Spanish empire for the next 200 years, and forced the enslavement of generations of native indians and imported Africans. After gaining its independence from Spain (and later Peru), Bolivia was cursed with one repressive military rule after another until modern times. Now Bolivia is known for having the only indigenous president in all of Latin America, Juan Evo Morales.

Modern Struggles

Evo Morales has overseen the empowerment of the indigenous majority, but serious conflict still exists between his young populist movement and the entrenched wealthy land and business owners. As in many Latin countries, a few families traditionally controlled much of the country’s assets, and still do. We’ll examine how the highland -lowland / indigenous - white divide shapes the country’s politics and future.

Join me in a multi-disciplinary adventure into a land of diverse biology, landscapes, cultures, and history, as we dig into questions of how land and people shape their futures, in good ways and bad.

Dates:      Jan 4-7, 2011, On-campus preparation
           Jan 10-27, 2011, Bolivia

Contact:    Jon Grinnell, Associate Professor of Biology
           grinnell@gac.edu
           507-933-7332
           Nobel 328A