

# Stephen F. Austin State University

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## Teacher travels to Yucatan through Texas Tides grant

Emily Taravella - April 27, 2007



Mike Moses Middle School teacher April Grady inspects a jaguar track in the Yucatan.



Mike Moses Middle School teacher April Grady stirs chicle, a milky substance from a tree, that is used in making chewing gum.



Priscilla Coulter, SFA librarian, hikes through a jungle in the Yucatan on a trip sponsored by Texas Tides.



A jaguar takes a closer look at a heat-sensitive camera in the Yucatan, placed there to monitor big cat populations.

The things April Grady saw in the Yucatan were unlike anything she had ever seen before.

When the Mike Moses Middle School science and social studies teacher learned she would be traveling to the tropical location through a Texas Tides grant administered by Stephen F. Austin State University, she immediately began to imagine what it would be like. All of her preconceived notions melted away when she actually arrived at the site of an ancient seabed, and realized the ground was made of rock instead of sand and clay.

"The whole experience was great," Grady said, of her spring break. "It was wonderful to see something outside of East Texas, and what I saw when we arrived was different than anything I'd ever seen before."

Texas Tides was initiated in September 2005 through an Institute of Museum and Library Services grant that was awarded to the Ralph W. Steen Library at SFA. One aspect of the program is providing travel opportunities for teachers to learn through first-hand experiences about the subjects they teach. Grady's trip was an opportunity to study Mayan culture and tropical forest ecosystems

Priscilla Coulter, SFA librarian, accompanied Grady to a private wildlife preserve that belongs to Pronatura Peninsula de Yucatan, a Texas Tides partner organization.

Of particular interest on this trip was the partner organization's work monitoring and conserving migratory birds. Many of these birds pass through the Yucatan peninsula on their way to Texas and other locations.

"We also learned about how they monitor big cat populations, especially jaguars," Grady said.

Coulter said she and Grady saw jaguar tracks and puma tracks, and those who were conducting research for Pronatura Peninsula de Yucatan set up heat-sensitive remote video cameras and still cameras that captured some amazing footage and photographs.

"Their focus on education makes them a great fit for us," Coulter said.

Grady said when she returned to the classroom, her students listened to her stories with wide eyes.

"My classroom became a theater," she said. "Class time became story time, and learning became contagious. Everyone wanted to hear what I had to say. This wasn't textbook. This was real."

Textbooks are valuable as reference materials, Grady said. But having someone share a first-person account makes a bigger impression on a child, she said.

The mental images she was able to provide for her students through stories, photographs and videos reached all the different types of learners in her class.

"Everyone got something out of it," she said. "Teaching was easy at that point."

Grady was able to incorporate what she learned about the Mayan culture into her social studies lessons and what she learned about animals, insects, birds and ecosystems into science lessons.

Images and video from the trip will be integrated into Grady's lesson plans and made available on the Texas Tides Web site for other teachers to use.

Rachel Galan, Texas Tides project director and SFA interim associate library director, said it is exciting to see each teacher's enthusiasm after they return from their travels.

"The teacher benefits, the students benefit, the parents benefit -- the whole school benefits," she said.

Coulter said students see their teachers as adventurers and explorers when they hear about these types of hands-on experiences.

This was the third trip to Mexico funded by Texas Tides. Previously, Thomas J. Rusk elementary school teachers Teresa Garcia and Donna Bass visited Mexico to study the culture and the ecosystems.