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**Encounters with the Past: Archaeological Research By and For Students  
in El Paraíso, Department of Copán, Honduras**

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**Research Year:** 2007

**Culture:** Maya and non-Maya

**Chronology:** Late Preclassic to Late Classic, 200 B.C. to A.D. 850

**Location:** El Paraíso Valley, Department of Copán, Western Honduras

**Sites:** El Paraíso, El Cafetal, and El Guayabal

**Table of Contents**

[Abstract](#)

[Resumen](#)

[Introduction to PAREP](#)

[Community-responsive Archaeology](#)

[The Student Research Program](#)

[Results](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[List of Figures](#)

[Sources Cited](#)

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## **Abstract**

The following report details the results of a community-responsive archaeological project undertaken in the El Paraíso valley, Department of Copán in western Honduras. Since its inception in 2002, the El Paraíso Region Archaeological Project (PAREP) has been committed to public outreach and education. The 2007 field program formalized these efforts by involving local secondary students in archaeological research at the ancient Maya and non-Maya sites of El Cafetal, El Guayabal, and El Paraíso. This program included four components—lectures, fieldwork, laboratory analysis, and presentation of experiences. Eighteen students participated over the course of three weeks. This project represents a collaboration between archaeologists and specific community members. In doing so, it took the educational experience outside of the classroom, cultivated an appreciation for national heritage, and perhaps inspired future Honduran archaeologists.

## **Resumen**

La presente detalla los resultados de un proyecto arqueológico comunitario llevado a cabo en el Valle el Paraíso, Departamento de Copán, Honduras. Desde su inauguración en el 2002, el Proyecto Arqueológico Regional El Paraíso (PAREP) se ha dedicado a la educación pública y a involucrar a la comunidad local en las investigaciones arqueológicas. En 2007, se formalizaron estos esfuerzos, integrando estudiantes del nivel secundario en las investigaciones arqueológicas enfocadas en los sitios Mayas y no-Mayas de El Cafetal, El Guayabal, y El Paraíso, ubicados dentro del Valle El Paraíso. El programa abarcaba cuatro componentes: ponencias, excavaciones, análisis laboratorio, y la presentación pública de las experiencias de los participantes. Se participaron 18 alumnos, y el programa duró unas 3 semanas. El programa representa un esfuerzo colaborativo entre arqueólogos y un segmento específico de la comunidad. Por medio del programa, el PAREP logró llevar la experiencia educativa fuera del aula, cultivando un aprecio para el patrimonio cultural de Honduras dentro de los alumnos, y quizás hasta inspirar en algunos el deseo de integrarse a la futura de la arqueología Hondureña.

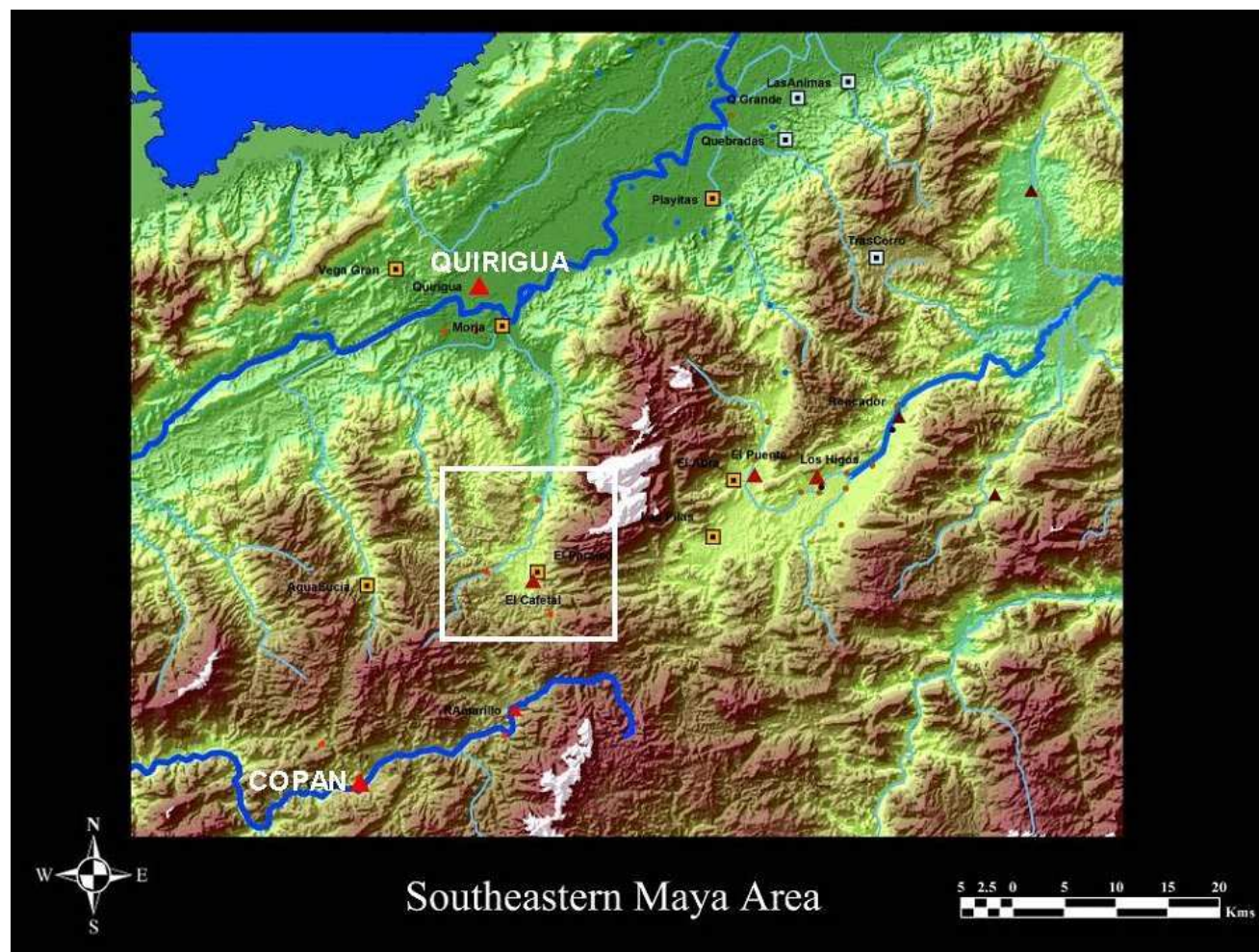


**Figure 1. Students excavating at El Paraíso.**

### **Introduction to PAREP**

This report details the results of a community-responsive archaeological project undertaken by the El Paraíso Region Archaeological Project (PAREP) in the El Paraíso valley, Department of Copán in western Honduras. PAREP was founded with three goals: 1. to complete archaeological research that significantly increases understanding of Maya and non-Maya prehistory in the Copán region; 2. to establish a program of public outreach and education that disseminates research results to local community members; and 3. to have a positive impact on the social and economic well-being of the modern town.

Archaeological research began in 2002, and, thanks to generous support from multiple institutions, including FAMSI (Grant #02092; Canuto and Bell 2003), the project has successfully fulfilled many of its archaeological goals. We have established that the El Paraíso valley ([Figure 2](#)) was the seat of ancient settlement from the Middle Preclassic (400-200 B.C.) through the Postclassic period (A.D. 900-1200), and that it was governed from dual centers, El Paraíso and El Cafetal, in the Late Classic (A.D. 600-850). El Paraíso appears to have been established as a Copán outpost as part of an administrative strategy designed to control the far-flung reaches of its Classic period kingdom. Recent research at El Guayabal, which includes the largest known Preclassic structure in the region, and the smaller centers of Las Orquídeas and El Zacatal suggest that the valley was also important prior to the rise of the Copán kingdom (Canuto et al. 2006).



**Figure 2. Map of southeastern Mesoamerica with El Paraíso valley highlighted.**

The second goal involving public education initiatives speaks to recognition on PAREP's part of the social and ethical responsibilities that archaeologists shoulder when developing long-term research projects in small communities. Since PAREP's onset, project members have cultivated in the community an interest in the study and preservation of the past. Engagement has occurred informally through lectures open to the community ([Figure 3](#)), guided site tours, and radio broadcasts. By keeping the local community informed of research findings and raising awareness of the area's archaeological resources, these efforts advanced the project's pedagogical goals.



**Figure 3. Lecturing to the community.**

In 2005, interaction with the community further developed with the formation of a student-led extracurricular group, la Unidad para el Desarrollo Arqueológico de El Paraíso (UDAP). Michael Sullivan, who at the time was a M.A. candidate at American University, provided the impetus for the group's formation. With the guidance and encouragement of PAREP members, UDAP worked to protect surrounding sites, as well as learn about archaeological practice and Mesoamerican prehistory. Amongst other activities, UDAP constructed models of the area's sites for display in the town hall, met with a sister group in Copán Ruinas and toured the Classic Maya center of Copán ([Figure 4](#)), visited sites during PAREP's excavations to see archaeology in action, and produced a pamphlet describing what they had learned from these excavations. All of these activities and interactions laid solid groundwork for future community involvement.



**Figure 4. UDAP members visiting Copán in summer 2005.**

### **Community-responsive Archaeology**

In his AAA Distinguished Lecture in Archaeology, Sabloff (1998:872) urged archaeologists to engage local communities in cooperative projects, and in so doing, to make such projects the rule and not the exception. Such an endeavor is not without important and positive consequences. Archaeological practices that involve communities are undergirded by inclusivity (Hodder 1997) and thus present “a challenge to the stigma of intellectual colonialism” (Nichols and Andrews 1997:4). Numerous archaeologists have recounted their successful incorporation of diverse and long marginalized perspectives into the practice and interpretative process of archaeology—women (e.g., Gero and Conkey, eds. 1991; Moore and Scott, eds. 1997), indigenous peoples (e.g., Anyon and Ferguson 1995; Creamer 1990; Nichols and Andrews 1997; O’Regan 1990), members of the lower or working class (e.g., Costello 2000; McGuire and Reckner 2003), and African-Americans (e.g., Blakey 1998a:396-402, 1998b; La Roche and Blakey 1997; McDavid 2002). As a consequence, nuanced interpretations about past social differences—such as those predicated upon gender, age, race, ethnicity, nationality, or class—usually follow from an inclusive research environment.

Projects that involve communities reap practical benefits, as well. McGuire (1992:829) has detailed the trust and dialogue that results between locals and archaeologists, while Blakey (1998a) has recognized that “mutual education” is likely to occur. There is, however, no one-size-fits all model that archaeologists can follow when they seek to involve communities. Community-responsive archaeology projects are as diverse as the communities they serve. Marshall (2002:216) identifies two types of communities—those comprised of direct descendants of the ancient inhabitants of archaeological sites and those that have no direct link to prehistoric settlements but reside on or near

archaeological sites. Successful community-responsive archaeological projects in Mesoamerica have engaged both types of communities. For example, in northwestern Yucatán, Ardren's (2002) dialogue with contemporary Maya communities living close to the Classic period site of Chunchucmil has enabled community members to use the past in the service of modern economic development. More specifically, local communities have drawn on "academic archaeological inquiry as a foundation from which to generate tourism" (Ardren 2002:380). In the case of non-indigenous locals, Pyburn and Wilk (2000) have also demonstrated the value of mutual involvement; in northern Belize locals are involved in archaeological research and project members participate in the community's socioeconomic life. Regardless of the type of community, these projects provide access to the past through their inclusive practices, thereby increasing the number of "stakeholders" (Mortenson 2001).

The residents of the El Paraíso valley, the area under study, make no claim to indigenous origins and recognize no direct cultural ties to the nearby sites. In the past, this disconnect has resulted in disinterest, neglect, and the destruction of archaeological sites in the region. Based on increasing exhortations within the discipline and the current state of affairs within the El Paraíso valley, PAREP saw the need to undertake a formal "community-responsive" archaeological project.

We targeted the youths of the local community for several reasons. During her work at Chunchucmil, Ardren (2002:388) found that children seemed especially eager to communicate the information they acquired. The Secretariat of one community related to her, "Este programa de visitas de alumnos esta buena [sic] porque los alumnos van a sus casas y hablan con sus familias sobre las cosas que han visto, hablan mucho, y ahora más gente está preguntando sobre la arqueología y las cosas que estamos buscando."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in past PAREP field seasons, school children have shown a great deal of interest in archaeological investigations, often volunteering to help with research tasks ([Figure 5](#)). These informal and highly amicable interactions have demonstrated this group's enthusiasm for and curiosity about their local heritage and archaeological methods. With these incidences in mind and building on the project's past interactions with local students via UDAP, we developed an educational program that involved hands-on archaeological field research for the community's high school students.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: This program of student visits is good because the students go home and talk with their families about what they have seen; they talk about it a lot, and now more people ask about archaeology and the things we're looking for.

## The Student Research Program

During the 2007 season, and with generous funding from FAMSI, PAREP began a formalized phase of community involvement by including a group of local high-school students in research efforts.



**Figure 5. Students helping with reconnaissance and survey.**

Though Michael Sullivan had originally planned to serve as a link between PAREP and the students, he notified the project in April that he would be unable to participate in the 2007 field season. Given his absence, there were several changes that needed to be made at the last minute. Mary Hostenske, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Pittsburgh, acted as assistant for the student research program. Hostenske is very familiar with the El Paraíso community given her previous experiences as a PAREP staff member. Additionally, Manuel Aroldo Lemus, Director of El Paraíso's secondary school the Instituto Paraíso Occidental, acted as a liaison between PAREP and local students ([Figure 6](#)). Director Lemus has offered encouragement and advice since PAREP's inception, and he was instrumental in the formation of UDAP.





**Figure 6. Students of the Instituto Paraíso Occidental.**

To pique student interest, PAREP members provided an overview of the program to students. Director Lemus stressed to students that those who wished to participate needed to be serious, sincere, and responsible. Students were also asked to complete a brief questionnaire. In addition to basic contact information, students explained their reasons for participation and expectations. Most students expressed a desire to learn more about basic archaeological practices and the past—“saber or conocer como vivian los antepasados” and to help their community—“para ayudar a mi pueblo.” Altogether, 18 students, ranging in age from 14 to 18 years, took part in one session that extended from 11 June to 2 July 2007 ([Figure 7](#)). These students were:

Mirian Yorgeni Mejia Aldana  
 Rufina Maudalia Alvarenga  
 Daniel Arevalo  
 Carlos Alfredo Arito  
 Ruhama Yanira Barrero  
 Keblin Yojana Guerra Bueso  
 Heidy Pamela Chacón Caballero  
 Cindy Jasmin Chinchilla Dubón  
 Enma Yessenia Garcia

Carlos Martin León  
 Karen Banessa Monrroy Marroquín  
 Carlos Jose Torres Lopez  
 Rigoberto Jigueroa Mejia  
 Kenya Morales  
 Fany Carolina Pinto  
 Norma Leticia Rivas  
 Keni Merari Solis  
 Dimas Sorina



**Figure 7. Students participating in the research program at El Guayabal; not all are pictured.\***

First and foremost, the student research program was designed to accommodate students' school schedule. Students attended school in the morning, and during the afternoon they were in the field. Exams and a weeklong vacation also coincided with the research program. While students were not permitted in the field during exams, they had the option to participate in excavations and lab work during their vacation. Several students chose to do so.

For all activities, students were required to obtain signed permission from parents or guardians. Seeking permission ensured that students discussed the program with family members. PAREP also provided students with notebooks and disposable cameras, which allowed them to document their experiences. The photographs especially underscored the different perspectives students had about archaeology—i.e., the things they found interesting or important as compared to researchers' concerns.

To introduce students to PAREP's archaeological research, project members gave introductory lectures at El Paraíso, El Cafetal, and El Guayabal ([Figure 8](#)). These lectures included overviews of the sites' physical landscape, culture history, and current excavations. To clarify, work at these sites was an amendment to the original proposal submitted to FAMSI. For the student research program, PAREP had originally planned to conduct excavations at the Late Preclassic monumental center Las Orquídeas (ca. 200 B.C. to 250 A.D.). Unfortunately, recent plowing had disturbed the site and additional excavation was not feasible in 2007. The damage to this site speaks loudly to the importance of a project that strives to educate the community—students and those in positions of power— about prehistory and its preservation.



**Figure 8. Ellen Bell explains excavations at El Paraíso.**

Students were then split into groups and assigned to work at one of the three sites under the supervision of PAREP researchers ([Figure 9](#)). As PAREP members had been conducting excavations at the three sites prior to the start of the student research program, students were able to see and participate in various stages of the investigative process. From PAREP members, which include professional archaeologists and American and Honduran college students, they learned about excavation, documentation, mapping, and surveying. Experienced project workers from the local community also assisted with students' instruction.



**Figure 9. El Paraíso, El Cafetal, and El Guayabal in the El Paraíso valley.**

Each day involved instruction in an essential aspect of archaeological method. To become familiar with their sites, students began by walking them on their own. These landscapes, which they have known all of their lives, took on a different meaning and shape as the students identified sites' structures and sketched a map of their approximate dimensions. This exercise also required students to locate the four cardinal directions using a compass. Students were then provided with a formal map of their site, which PAREP researchers explained in detail. The following day, students learned about laying out a unit for excavation. First, they were asked to determine where they thought a unit was needed. That is, they had to explain what they hoped to learn from excavating in a particular location. Afterwards, they practiced laying out a 1m x 1m unit ([Figure 10](#)). One day of instruction was devoted to drawing profiles and plan maps of completed excavation units. Students took turns drawing and measuring ([Figure 11](#)). As a result, they gained knowledge about stratigraphy. They also acquired a familiarity with the Munsell soil chart, as they made determinations about the colors and types of soils visible in units' sidewalls. Additionally, they learned how to take notes properly, photograph excavations, identify and count artifacts, and fill out lot forms and tags for artifact bags. Students were also briefly introduced to the basics of surveying, which involved setting up the Total station and locating the reflector prism on stadia rod ([Figure 12](#)). During this week, Director Lemus and several teachers from the Instituto Paraíso Occidental visited the sites for tours and updates on the investigations and student progress.



**Figure 10. Mary Hostenske teaches Carlos Alfredo Arito, Carlos Jose Torres Lopez, Enma Yessenia Garcia, and Keni Merari Solis (from right to left) how to lay out a unit at El Guayabal; a local community member looks on.**



**Figure 11. Heidy Pamela Chacón Caballero and Dimas Sorina draw a profile at El Paraíso.**



**Figure 12. Pamela Geller teaches Carlos Alfredo Arito and Carlos Jose Torres Lopez to set up the total station.**



**Figure 13a. Cindy Chincilla Dubón and Carlos Martin León take notes at El Cafetal.**



**Figure 13b. PAREP member Erlend Johnson teaches Cindy Chincilla Dubón to draw a profile at El Cafetal.**

Upon completion of field instruction, students were given the option to work in PAREP's field laboratory. The project lab manager, Milton Grageda, instructed students in the proper way to wash, register, and analyze objects recovered during excavation ([Figure 14](#)).



**Figure 14. Students busy at work in the field lab.**

Following field and laboratory work, PAREP invited students on a fieldtrip to the El Puente Archaeological Park. The park is maintained by the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia (IHAH) and is approximately 30 kilometers distance from El Paraíso ([Figure 15](#)). This fieldtrip provided students with the opportunity to learn about a regional site that was contemporaneous with settlement in the El Paraíso valley. As part of the Proyecto Arqueológico La Entrada (PALE), directed by Seiichi Nakamura, many of the structures at El Puente were consolidated for tourism, and thus students could develop an idea of what comparable sites in the El Paraíso valley might have looked like in antiquity. Santiago Escobar Morales, an archaeologist with IHAH who works with PAREP and collaborated with PALE at El Puente, gave a highly informative walking tour of the park's museum and site ([Figure 16](#)).



Figure 15. Sites in the El Paraíso valley in relation to El Puente.



Figure 16. Santiago Escobar Morales (in red) lectures during a fieldtrip to El Puente.



At the conclusion of the research program, PAREP members and Director Lemus worked together to organize a mini-symposium for the school ([Figure 17a](#) and [Figure 17b](#)). Director Lemus provided a context for the symposium by urging all students to protect their national patrimony. His introductory remarks were followed by presentations during which students described their experiences to fellow classmates. As visual aids for their talks, students had created posters comprised of photographs, lot forms, lot tags, etc, and these posters remained on display after the symposium. Following students' presentations, Ellen Bell gave a lecture about the local prehistory in the El Paraíso valley. At the completion of their presentations, participating students were presented with PAREP baseball caps and diplomas ([Figure 18](#)).



**Figure 17a. Director Manuel Aroldo Lemus gives an introduction.**



**Figure 17b. Students' presentation at the Instituto Paraíso Occidental.**



**Figure 18. PAREP members and students proudly displaying their diplomas.**

## **Results**

Students approached the research program with a genuine interest in the past, seriousness about the work, and a sense of humor. As a consequence, their involvement in archaeological investigations yielded several important academic and social outcomes. First, by taking the educational experience outside the classroom and into the field, students acquired hands-on knowledge about archaeological methods and the remains of nearby ancient settlements. As a consequence, the young people of El Paraíso have come to foster an appreciation for their national heritage. This program, however, was not just beneficial to student participants. Community members—family, teachers, and peers—to whom they communicated this newfound knowledge likewise benefited. As a coda to the project, during their next visit to El Paraíso in winter 2008, PAREP members will disseminate a follow-up survey to those who participated. Students will be queried about their recommendations for future improvements, as well as their thoughts about their experiences and expectations several months after the fact.

Ultimately, it is PAREP's hope that initiating educational outreach for a community's young people will contribute to stewardship of cultural resources, cultivate a sense of place and community importance, and lead to economic or career opportunities. These are of course long terms goals that may not come to fruition for many years. However, we find it encouraging that several students asked PAREP members what university courses they should take to pursue a professional career in archaeology. Their queries suggest that local youths regarded PAREP members as mentors, and that they found the community-responsive project interesting, educational, and inspirational.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the student research program, a collaboration among archaeologists, Honduran high school teachers, and local El Paraíso high school students, expanded PAREP public outreach programs already in place and furthered dialogue between project members and the community. Students who participated also disseminated newly acquired information into various segments of the El Paraíso community. In doing so, they increased understanding of local prehistory, and realized the role they have to play in its preservation.

We hope that the students who participated will extend the scope of the collaboration even further by taking newly acquired information into all segments of the El Paraíso community, increasing the understanding of local prehistory by generating interest in and discussion of the results of their experiences.

We see community-responsive archaeology as both a responsibility and a privilege. We hope that our efforts have benefited the community as much as their collaboration has helped us, and that other communities might benefit from the incorporation of similar programs into other archaeological projects.

## Acknowledgements

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## List of Figures

[Figure 1.](#) Students excavating at El Paraíso.

[Figure 2.](#) Map of southeastern Mesoamerica with El Paraíso valley highlighted.

[Figure 3.](#) Lecturing to the community.

[Figure 4.](#) UDAP members visiting Copán in summer 2005.

[Figure 5](#). Students helping with reconnaissance and survey.

[Figure 6](#). Students of the Instituto Paraíso Occidental.

[Figure 7](#). Students participating in the research program at El Guayabal; not all are pictured.\*

[Figure 8](#). Ellen Bell explains excavations at El Paraíso.

[Figure 9](#). El Paraíso, El Cafetal, and El Guayabal in the El Paraíso valley.

[Figure 10](#). Mary Hostenske teaches Carlos Alfredo Arito, Carlos Jose Torres Lopez, Enma Yessenia Garcia, and Keni Merari Solis (from right to left) how to lay out a unit at El Guayabal; a local community member looks on.

[Figure 11](#). Heidi Pamela Chacón Caballero and Dimas Sorina draw a profile at El Paraíso.

[Figure 12](#). Pamela Geller teaches Carlos Alfredo Arito and Carlos Jose Torres Lopez to set up the total station.

[Figure 13a](#). Cindy Chincilla Dubón and Carlos Martin León take notes at El Cafetal.

[Figure 13b](#). PAREP member Erlend Johnson teaches Cindy Chinchilla Dubón to draw a profile at El Cafetal.

[Figure 14](#). Students busy at work in the field lab.

[Figure 15](#). Sites in the El Paraíso valley in relation to El Puente.

[Figure 16](#). Santiago Escobar Morales (in red) lectures during a fieldtrip to El Puente.

[Figure 17a](#). Director Manuel Aroldo Lemus gives an introduction.

[Figure 17b](#). Students' presentation at the Instituto Paraíso Occidental.

[Figure 18](#). PAREP members and students proudly displaying their diplomas.

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