



CHANCELLOR'S
PROFESSORS

Sally Horn

UT Biogeography Professor Sally Horn takes long, arduous trips back through time—not in a space capsule but on a wobbly Huck Finn-type raft on remote Costa Rican lakes.

It all began 25 years ago with the chance to visit the small, Central American country. It's the type of opportunity she now promotes for undergraduate and graduate students, area school teachers and the occasional tourist interested in learning.

"Costa Rica is a country where I can easily bring students. It's relatively safe," she says. "Over the years, I've brought more than 40 graduate and undergraduate students and teachers not just to Costa Rica but to various countries in Latin America."

Horn and her team search for evidence of the ways human history has affected tropical landscapes over the centuries. In particular they study pre-Columbian agriculture in the Americas, looking at how and when indigenous cultures cleared forests and cultivated corn and other

crops. Oftentimes, that requires collecting lake sediment—hard work with simple tools.

"What I'm really interested in is disentangling climate change in the past from what humans were doing," she says. "That can give us important clues about the future."

She takes pride in the accomplishments of her students.

"Some of those students have gone on to their own masters and Ph.D. work." She says. "But a lot of people come along just to help me and to have an experience in a foreign country."

Her selection as a Chancellor's Professor – UT Knoxville's highest permanent academic honor—is rooted in her enthusiastic teaching and more than 25 years of outstanding research.

It's seldom glamorous work. She recalls one particular strenuous trip into the mountains of the Dominican Republic.

"We did a careful inventory, but brought the wrong size wrench," she said. "There was no way to call and just order the right tool. It looked like the whole project was sunk, so we spent countless hours over the next three or four days actually filing down the wrench until it fit the equipment."

That type of ingenuity and hard work have paid off.

She's become fluent Spanish, which in turn has helped her establish a solid network of contacts throughout Latin America.

"I've basically created a world of teaching and research that plays to what I like to do," she says.

At UT, she commits considerable energy to the National Science Foundation-funded GK-12 Earth Project, which sends graduate students to work with area school teachers.

"Instead of teaching or being a research assistant, their task is to spend ten hours a week in a rural middle school, linking science education, particularly earth sciences, with what we're doing at UT," she says. "We're trying to give teachers a view of science they probably otherwise wouldn't get. We want kids to enter high school thinking 'we want to get into science'."

Horn and her husband, Roger, have two college age children: Kevin, who studies art, music and environmental science at Warren Wilson College in Asheville; and Carolyn, who studies engineering and German at Rose-Hulman Institute in Terre Haute, Indiana.