Undergraduate research highlight: Vietnam caves and climate

Undergraduate students Kumalie Wijesekare and Cynthia Abuede on their fieldwork in Vietnam.

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Image of the fieldwork crew in Vietnam. Top row from left to right: Mui Tran Xuan (Lead Cave Guide), Professor Phuong, Dr. Kathleen Johnson (Professor, Department of Earth System Science), Elizabeth Patterson (Ph.D. candidate, Professor, Department of Earth System Science), and Quoc Do (Researcher). Bottom row from

left to right: Kumalie Wijesekare and Cynthia Abuede.

Picture Credit:
Kumalie Wijesekare and Cynthia Abuede

Last summer, fourth-year undergraduate students in Earth System Science, Kumalie Bhagya Wijesekare and Cynthia Eseofe Abuede, traveled to Vietnam with Professor Kathleen Johnson, Ph.D. candidate Elizabeth Patterson and other local collaborators to conduct fieldwork in several river and cave sites.

The students helped monitor present-day cave conditions, and their work is helping Johnson and Patterson interpret records of past climate change in cave deposits (stalagmites) found in the caves they visited.

When asked about their favorite memory of the trip, Wijesekare recalled the moment she first entered Hang Tien Cave. “The ceiling of the cave was so high,” she said. “It was awe-inspiring, and it felt like we were on a different planet.”

Abuede enjoyed trying different cuisines with a variety of vegetables and spices – but her favorite memory of the trip was swimming in the caves through clean waters. “It was also beautiful to see local people take initiative to care for their environment,” she said.

Wijesekare and Abuede plan to continue working in Professor Johnson’s lab. Wijesekare is applying to graduate school programs in the Earth system sciences, and Abuede hopes to explore how paleoclimate can be used to assess anthropological impacts.

If you are an undergraduate student at UC Irvine interested in conducting research in the Department of Earth System Science, you can apply using the following link:

https://www.ess.uci.edu/form/ugrad-res-app

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