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INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL SECTION ON RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AT THE IZTACALA CAMPUS OF THE UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL AUTÓNOMA DE MÉXICO, MÉXICO

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In October 2002, we had the opportunity to initiate a long-term collaboration with colleagues from the Iztacala campus of the Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM), whose research interests focus on coastal and nearshore fishes and decapod crustaceans of Veracruz state, Mexico. This is an undergraduate campus with a strong Biology department whose faculty also maintain research programs despite limited sources of funding and a heavy teaching load. During the course of our initial visit, we realized that there is a wealth of unpublished undergraduate student research on understudied fish species.

In Mexico and many other Latin American countries, students must research, write and defend an undergraduate thesis to receive a bachelor's (Licencia) degree in the sciences. Many of these theses represent research on little-studied organisms or ecological aspects of the Gulf of Mexico or Caribbean Sea. Unfortunately, the great majority of these works are never published in any format, owing to factors such as the student graduating and leaving, heavy teaching load of the faculty advisor, lack of encouragement for student publications, and language barriers. For example, the Biology department of the Iztacala campus of UNAM has graduated 1,463 students with the Licencia degree from 1981–2001, representing 1,463 senior theses during a 20 year period. Of the biology theses, 47.5% represent research in environmental areas, whereas the remaining 52.5% concentrated on medically-related fields such as genetics, physiology, and molecular and cellular biology. The majority of the environmentally-oriented theses focused on ecology and natural resources (Figure 1). Students undertaking marine-related environmental research projects at Iztacala collect their data over the period of one year at coastal field sites 4–6 hrs from campus under the supervision of their thesis advisors. The thesis advisors typically pool funds from extramural sources, the university and personal monies to support travel, housing, meals and other expenses for the students and the materials needed to complete the research projects. Samples are transported back to the laboratory, where students process and analyze the data during their senior year. The final thesis defense is a formal affair, with a presentation of the results to an examining committee consisting of 3 of the 5 committee members. Unfortunately, publication of the thesis is not part of the process, resulting in a wealth of valuable information unavailable to the scientific community (Figure 1).

We developed a collaborative partnership in November 2002 between the faculty advisors from the Biology department at UNAM-Iztacala, the Department of Coastal Sciences, The University of Southern Mississippi and non-profit funding organizations interested in research in the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea whereby exceptional senior and Masters theses from the Biology department at UNAM-Iztacala were processed and submitted for peer-review in *Gulf and Caribbean Research*. Once each thesis was translated into English, bilingual scientific writers/editors worked in collabo-

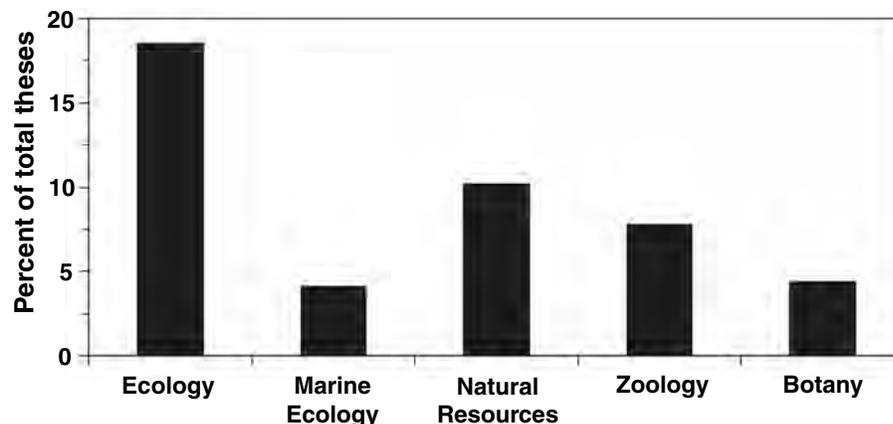


Figure 1. Plot of the percentage of environmentally-oriented undergraduate Licencia degrees by discipline from 1981–2001 from the Biology department at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México-Iztacala. Total number of degrees granted during this period was 1,463.

ration with the faculty advisor to transform the manuscript from a thesis to a publishable article that was submitted for peer review. Publication of the first group of these theses follow in this issue of *Gulf and Caribbean Research*. The topics range from life history and reproduction, to trophic ecology, and parasites of understudied fishes from the southern Gulf of Mexico. As the process is completed, additional theses will appear in the next published volume of *Gulf and Caribbean Research*. The chosen theses represent a small percentage of the wealth of unpublished information from the Gulf and Caribbean region. Hopefully, this pilot program will inspire other institutions and funding agencies to initiate similar programs.

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