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Tech goes Caribbean: Get credit, get a tan

By [Kevin Miller](#)

Tech students and faculty will be able to conduct research in such areas as tropical ecosystems and fisheries science.

Virginia Tech officials signed an agreement Wednesday with the operators of a four-star Caribbean resort that could allow select students to simultaneously earn college credit while getting a tan.

Tech administrators negotiated the collaborative agreement with representatives of the Punta Cana Ecological Foundation, which manages a 600-acre reserve connected to the exclusive Punta Cana Resort and Club in the Dominican Republic. The foundation was set up by the resort operators more than a decade ago to study and preserve the region's biodiversity while serving resort guests.

University officials say the partnership will allow Tech students and faculty to conduct research in such areas as tropical ecosystems and fisheries science while offering economic development assistance to the impoverished villages just outside the resort.

Of course, Virginia Tech also has business interests in partnership. University officials hope to one day run professional certification programs in hospitality and tourism management at the resort as well as provide special offers for alumni that combine vacations with educational programs.

"They have resources that we don't have and we have know-how that they don't have," said S.K. De Datta, Tech's associate provost for international affairs and director of the Office of International Research, Education and Development.

While Tech students and faculty will likely enjoy some perks of the resort, they won't exactly be living luxuriously while working and studying in Punta Cana. Students and faculty will likely sleep in a dormitory in a Punta Cana Ecological Foundation building that also houses classrooms and a laboratory. In fact, the building isn't even beachfront.

"We're not sending students to a four-star resort," said John Dooley, Tech's vice provost for outreach and international affairs.

Tech's relationship with the resort and foundation is not new. Tech is part of a group of schools including the University of Miami, Cornell University and Columbia University - that already operate programs at the nature reserve. But De Datta and Dooley said the agreement signed Wednesday will expand Tech's presence in the Dominican Republic and the rest of the Caribbean.

Eventually, Tech officials hope to establish the Virginia Tech Caribbean Center for Education and Research at the site. That will complement Tech's Center for European Studies and Architecture in Switzerland and other outreach programs worldwide, De Datta said.

"I am passionate that Virginia Tech cannot be a Eurocentric university," De Datta said. "We have to be world class."

"What we are trying to do ... is really look at new ways to connect Virginia Tech students to people around the world," Dooley said.