A diverse landscape
Punta Cana
In 1969, Ted Kheel, a New York attorney who had been appointed by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson as a mediator to resolve labor and civil rights conflicts, and Frank Rainieri, a local developer, purchased 15,000 acres of land at the eastern end of the Dominican Republic, renaming it Punta Cana after the local variety of palm tree. They established the first resort in the area, the Punta Cana Resort & Club.
A beach at the Puntacana Resort and Club (investors now include Julio Iglesias and Oscar de la Renta)
During peak season, the Punta Cana Int'l Airport accommodates 250 flights per week bringing tourists to the area. The new airport terminal was designed by Oscar Imbert, a Dominican architect who focuses on the design of sustainable buildings for tropical climates.
In recent years, tourism has grown rapidly, with many resorts built in the Bávaro area, northwest of the Punta Cana Airport. In 1995, there were 3000 hotel rooms in the Punta Cana/Bávaro area; according to the Punta Cana/Bávaro Hotel Association, the area currently has approximately 25,000 hotel rooms in 50 resorts.
Development due to the growth of the tourist industry: the new Cap Cana Resort (8000 hotel rooms; 5 Jack Nicklaus-designed golf courses; Donald Trump is one of the investors) under construction south of Punta Cana – Many (including the leaders of Grupo Puntacana) are concerned over the environmental impact of this scale of construction.
In a effort to promote sustainable development and tourism, the Puntacana resort founded the Punta Cana Sustainability and Biodiversity Center. In May 2005, the Center hosted an interdisciplinary group from Virginia Tech, shown here with Frank Rainieri, President of Grupo Puntacana, and Jake Kheel, Grupo Puntacana’s Environmental Director.
A typical dormitory room in the Sustainability and Biodiversity Center
A well-equipped local hospital (built to serve tourists staying at the resorts) a few miles from the Punta Cana airport.
The Virginia Tech group studied the settlement of Verón, near the Punta Cana Airport. Only 3-4 families lived there when Ted Kheel and Frank Rainieri purchased the land in 1969. In 1993 there were less than 80 houses in Verón. But, in 2000, during the presidential election, many squatters came, most seeking employment in the construction industry or in service positions in the resorts. In 2005, the population of Verón was estimated at 6000-8000 people, and it was still growing rapidly.
Punta Cana
Sustainability and Biodiversity Center
Community of Verón Alto
("High Verón")
Punta Cana Sustainability and Biodiversity Center
The team of Virginia Tech faculty and graduate and undergraduate students studied High Verón, performing a building survey, housing census, health-care survey, and mapping study.
Other neighborhoods have also grown up in the area, such as the “Mata Mosquitos” shantytown, several miles from Verón, populated mostly by Haitian workers.
The busy highway, connecting the Punta Cana Airport and the tourist resorts in Bávaro: approx. 3 Verón residents are killed every year in vehicle-pedestrian accidents.
The coral limestone ground surface, characteristic of the area around Verón
Utility infrastructure is poor: while many houses have electrical power, the service wiring often is run over the ground surface.
An opening into a subterranean cavern: these are used to dispose of waste water (sewage).
These “soak-away” outhouses are common in Verón.
A water system provided by the Club Med resort serves part of high Verón; however, it does not provide a reliable, clean water source. A regional aqueduct project has been proposed, but it may be years away.
Those residents fortunate enough to be served by the water system often sell water to their neighbors at approx. $20 per month.
Verón residents spend about 9% of their income on water: tap water and bottled water.
One of the primary schools in Verón – children are normally in school for only 3 hours per day (double sessions). Schools tend to be overcrowded, and student:teacher ratios are high (75:1).
Verón’s new high school, donated by Ted and Ann Kheel
The “Junta de Vecinos” – some of the neighborhood leaders of Verón
The “Alcalde” – the mayor of Verón
The people of Verón...
Softball game – Virginia Tech vs. Verón – May 2005
Virginia Tech played respectably, but Verón swept the series 2 games to 0.
The Virginia Tech 2005 Group

Barb Bennett
Pedro Borges
A.J. Broadbent
Monica Dazzini
Joshua Dziegiel
Theresa Gabriel
Bill Galloway
Lindsey Gates
Daniel Gussman
Leslie Harwood
David Hiltebrand
Netanya Huska
Dennis Jones
Korine Kolivras
Thomas Mazich
Casey Parker
Bryant Phillips
P.J. Reitter
Christopher Ressler
Joseph Scarpaci
Bob Schubert
Chris van Swol
Kathryn Von Bredow
David Weissberger
Beau Woodrum

Thanks to Peter Sforza of the Geography Department for his advice regarding GIS software.