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Smithsonian and Arizona State University Launch Virtual Classroom

This fall, Smithsonian scientists in Panama and Arizona State University life-sciences students and researchers will talk by means of Vidyo—video-conferencing technology that transports virtual learning into the field.

This new educational and research partnership between the School of Life Sciences at ASU, the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., will speed the adoption of Vidyo to promote real-time classroom activities and to facilitate research collaborations.

“This December we will celebrate 100 years of Smithsonian science in Panama,” said Eldredge Bermingham, STRI director. “Given the importance of tropical ecosystems to human well-being in the 21st century, we are pleased to partner with ASU to give North American university students direct access to scientists working in tropical forest and reef environments that inspire exploration.”

“Vidyo’s video conferencing system transforms mediated classrooms on campus into real-time research and learning environments,” said Robert E. Page Jr., dean of the School of Life Sciences in ASU’s College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. “Students will watch video feeds from remote areas in Panama, collect and share data, and talk to researchers simultaneously on their computers.”

“Vidyo technology and products are uniquely suited for applications such as the educational partnership between ASU and the Smithsonian,” said Ofer Shapiro, co-founder and CEO of Vidyo. Low cost and mobility set Vidyo apart as does the simple desktop interface and the number of high-quality, simultaneous classroom connections.

The first use of Vidyo technology in the classroom comes with the fall 2010 launch of ASU’s biology course, Current Topics in Tropical Biology. “In addition to the telepresence in the field and classroom activities, the video systems facilitate our research collaborations,” said ASU professor Jüergen Gadau, associate dean for graduate programs in the School of Life Sciences. “The system offers a new tool for graduate student mentorship and participation in graduate committees abroad.”

The novel ASU–STRI collaboration aims to promote educational opportunities globally and stimulate collaborative research and discovery in the areas of biofuels, social structure, sustainability and World Wide Web approaches to biodiversity and species discovery.

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