In connection with a course he teaches called “Geography of Cuba,” visiting assistant professor Artimus Keiffer (Geography, IUPUI) has, for the past two years, led a research trip for North American students to Cuba. The course is offered through IUPUI, and is, to Keiffer’s knowledge, the only course of its kind in the United States.

The first group went for 11 days in June 1997. Their primary focus was to gather data on the effects of tourism on the environment. The five students who participated mapped land usage in tourist areas and planned recreational areas and green space. The June 1998 group, which consisted of four students and IUB staff member Valerie Savage, collected data classifying architectural design and former and current usage of structures, using GIS software, which layers different fields of information to create detailed maps.

Keiffer is interested in architecture and land use in Cuba, and is involved in an ongoing study on that subject. In August he and IUPUI graduate student Sarah Wagner presented a paper entitled “Promoting Place Through Architectural Heritage: Restoration and Preservation of Twentieth Century Architectural Design in Miramar, Habana, Cuba,” at the eighth annual meeting of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy in Coral Gables, Florida. In that paper he examined the role of tourism in promoting preservation and renovation efforts in Havana.

As the nation’s most important industry, tourism acts as a powerful catalyst for urban design policies, especially in Habana Vieja, the old town section of the capital. Keiffer is interested in the effects of this sort of tourism-driven planning on the environment, culture, economics, and social stratification.

The 1998 study group focused on the western suburb of Miramar, which has a quite different relationship to tourism from Habana Vieja. Prior to the revolution, Miramar was a neighborhood of modest to palatial homes and upper middle-class residents. After Castro came to power, large numbers of Miramar’s wealthy residents fled to Florida, and the communist government converted many of the area’s homes into apartments, schools, and government offices. Later, in the 1970s and ‘80s, the government began using some of the most impressive houses for government ministries, foreign embassies, and Party officials’ residences.

Now, in the 1990s, usage of the area has again shifted, as Cuba’s economy has changed and the government needs to make space available to foreign investors. Miramar proved perfectly suited to the task, as it is well-planned and has the necessary amenities for storefronts, hotels, offices, and condominiums. In this way it is not the tourist who is being courted in Miramar; it is the foreign investor. Hard currency is being used to finance restorations, and the June 1998 study group found these new foreign-owned retail businesses and corporate offices are dispersed more and more throughout the neighborhood, in many cases displacing local residents.

In the summer of 1999, Keiffer will again take a group of students to Havana. They will continue gathering materials on certain architectural styles in Miramar and Veradero, particularly art deco buildings, analyzing their changing use patterns, preservation, and socio-economic impact.