

Animal volunteering in Ecuador

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As part of my first year internship I had the opportunity to go to Ecuador for a month with other students from N7. This trip had an animal and humanitarian objective. It required a lot of preparation beforehand in order to finance and organise the first week in Puerto Lopez and the following three weeks in Las Tunas.

Pre-departure preparation

To prepare this trip we first had to agree on the destination and the objective of the trip. We quickly agreed on the idea of making a trip with an animal purpose and then after a lot of research we decided to go to Ecuador with the organization freepackers. The next step was to raise money through different means (grant applications, bar week at the school's foyer, online fundraising, canvassing companies).

First week in Puerto Lopez

Our first week's work focused on the study of whales on the Ecuadorian coast. Indeed, whales are migratory animals that feed in the Antarctic seas and reproduce in the Pacific Ocean on the South American coast. We went out on the boat every day (figure 1) to take pictures of the whales' tails, which are the equivalent of a fingerprint and allow us to identify them (figure 2). Once the photo was taken, we had to note down information about our position, the number of whales in the group and the size of the individuals in order to facilitate the analysis on our return. We shared the different roles on the boat and changed every day (taking the photo, taking the GPS information, taking the weather, taking notes of the information (figure 3)). We also took pieces of whale skin that floated to the surface after a jump and the scientists who accompanied us took pieces of whale meat with a crossbow.



Figure 1: Our group and our boat in background



Figure 2: Tail of a whale

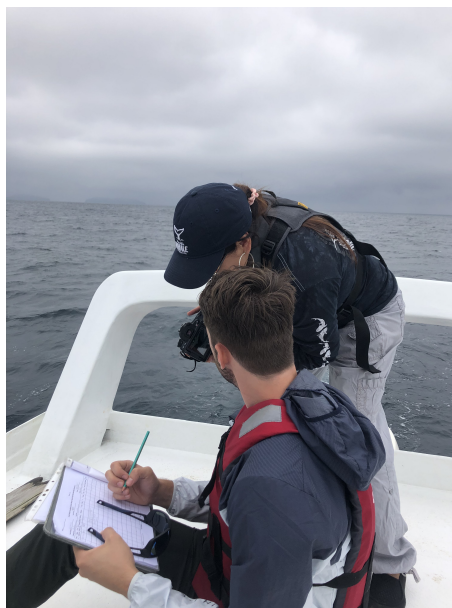


Figure 3: Note-taking during the photos



Figure 4: Juliana and us in the laboratory

After spending about six hours at sea we returned to the lab (figure 4) to analyse the photos taken during the day to reconstruct the groups living together and to match the DNA samples to the tail photos of the whales.

This data is then shared with other whale protection associations around the world.

During this first week we were supervised by Cristina Castro, who has a doctorate in animal biology and is the founder of the Ecuadorian branch of the Pacific Whale Foundation. With her were Luna and Juliana, two employees of the association who also studied biology. They were in charge of the DNA analysis.

Second to fourth week in Las Tunas

At the end of the first week, we moved to a new location a few kilometres further north in the village of Las Tunas. In this village, our missions were very different and focused on sea turtles. We were welcomed by Judith, a local resident. The programme for the three weeks was very busy and was organised in the same way every day:

Every morning we left at 6am from the beachside accommodation to walk 6km along the sea. The aim of this walk was to locate new turtle nests that had appeared during the night (figure 5). We spotted them thanks to the tracks that the turtles left in the sand to reach the nest and then go back to the sea. Once a nest was located we would dig up an egg to identify the species, then we would seal the nest and protect it with a grid and a sign to inform us about the presence of turtles on the beach. During this walk we also collected the huge amount of rubbish that the sea brought back. With 12 of us, we brought back about ten kilograms of waste every morning.

We also went twice a week to a rehabilitation centre for sea turtles. When sick or injured turtles are found on the beach, this centre is called in to collect and care for them. The turtles



Figure 5: Turtle nest



Figure 6: Turtle with skull injury

are placed in large tanks filled with sea water. Caregivers are on hand to provide treatment and care for their injuries. The turtles are most often injured by boats or fishing nets. Since the centre was set up, 600 turtles have been treated and released back into the sea. We had to take the turtles out of the tank, clean them, empty the water from the tank, clean the tank and then put the turtles back in the tank and refill it with sea water. In total there were 25 turtles in the centre. The last time we went to the centre we saw a turtle with a skull wound from a boat propeller being treated. The carer had to clean the wound and we were responsible for holding the turtle as it struggled in pain (figure 6).

We have regularly done work for the inhabitants of the Manabi community. For example, we have carried out work in a nursery (weeding, painting the walls, extending a playground, building a wooden fence). We also built a bamboo playground in a school in the village of Puerto Rico. We took part in the creation of a courtyard from start to finish, in fact we went to the bamboo factory where they are cleaned and then treated to last over time. In the same school we also had to give English lessons to the children of the village.

Judith did not speak a word of English, so communication was very difficult at first. Some of us spoke a few words of Spanish but not enough to hold a conversation. After some time of adaptation and learning some essential words we managed to understand and be understood. It was very enriching to discover a way of life very different from ours and to have been able to adapt quickly.