My trip to Tenerife

In this report I will demonstrate how the Travelling Scholarship enabled me to take a part as a volunteer of Atlantic Whale Foundation (AWF) for two weeks in Tenerife. I would like to thank the University of Leicester for providing me with the scholarship which was one of the best adventures in my life.

Introduction

The Atlantic Whale & Dolphin Foundation is a conservation organisation which aim is monitoring the number of whales and dolphin’s species in the Atlantic Ocean. The central hub of the whole AWdF network is in Tenerife, Canary Islands, where volunteers have been making a positive impact for more than 25 years.

My adventure started on 30th June 2018., when me and my friend Tally Came arrived at the South Tenerife airport. We were warmly welcomed by the two AWdF coordinators Georgie and Alex, who took us to the main accommodation and research centre, located in the heart of the city Arona. The main accommodation or Casa de los Delfines, was an old Canarian farmhouse, decorated in a traditional fashion (Pic. 1 & 2) but also, it was full of passionate, young people from all around the world, what made this international atmosphere very friendly and enthusiastic.

Volunteering

Typically, volunteers spend three days per week working on boats as research guides and two days working on their own projects and helping with house chores. Weekends are free and can be used for exploring the island.
Before making our observations, the coordinators introduced us to the whale and dolphin species that reside in Tenerife such as Bottlenose dolphin and Pilot whale, as well as migratory species like Atlantic spotted dolphin, then how to make recordings about spotted species and how to inform tourists of our conservation work. Right next morning, me and my other two colleagues from Russia and France, boarded on a tourist boat called Royal Delfin, where we were making observations on spotted species. My task that day was taking a dorsal fin shot of every whale and dolphin we could see. Since each fin is unique, it would be used for identification of all spotted individuals, which is a useful way to monitor the number of individuals, their unique behaviours and to create associations between individuals and connections between family pods. It wasn’t as easy as it seemed at first, so it took me few days to figure it out how to make a good shot. Nevertheless, when I saw the whale for the first time in my life, instead of taking the photo, I was standing still and admire to the gorgeous pod of Pilot whales that got very close to the boat (Pic. 3).

![Pic. 3 Mother and a calf that came close to the boats on my first day.](image)

Even though they are usually up to 5.5 meters long and can weight more than 3000 kilograms, they would show incredible elegance while milling, which means they were moving slowly in various directions. This state was a very common for whales during the day because they are night hunters and by milling or logging, which means that the animal is stationary on the surface, they were taking the rest and half of their brain was switched off. The scenery was amazing, and one can feel nothing but a huge respect for them. As incredible as it had started, my first day on the boat had continued in the same way. The boat was taking us to the massive cliffs of Los Gigantes, when the whole pod of Bottlenose dolphins started to compete with the speed of the boat (Pic. 4 & 5).
They followed us for more than twenty minutes, which, according to what the coordinators told us, doesn’t happen very often. With every other time on the boat I would brushing my skills of taking fin shots or completing the data sheets about each interaction of cetaceans (Pic. 6). Over the two weeks, I would become more efficient and punctual in collecting the data, especially when the boat would become surrounded by many different pods, which I founded very challenging. In the role of the photograph, at first, I would often find myself running from one side of the boat to another just to get that perfect shot. After a while, I learned how to estimate few positions on the boat that were most likely that cetacean would get close to, so I could still get a clear photo from the close approximation.

Pic. 4 & 5 Los Gigantes or ‘The Giants’; massive cliffs where we would usually spot the dolphins.

Pic. 6 The data sheet that had to be completed for every interaction with cetaceans.
I would usually be in the team with two or three other people, so a good team work and organisation prior the boarding was vital. The teams would always be consisted of different people, which highlighted the importance of good communication skills, organisation and respect to your co-volunteers. I found that very important because, as a future scientist, I think these are one of the most valuable expertise one can have.

As we would get back from the boats to the accommodation, we would have to analyse all the data we collected. Photographer had to filter good pictures, crop only the dorsal fin shot and then, based on the existing data base, identify all individuals. Most individuals would already have their own names, but when a new individual would be found, volunteers could name them.

Another important part of being a AWdF volunteer was the communication with the tourists. We usually got asked about the aim of the organisation and cetaceans species we spotted at that moment. We tried to make the tourists aware of the various conservation issues that threaten marine life and what they, as individuals, can do about it. I got the opportunity to develop my communication skills and got more comfortable approaching to people while, for example, collecting petitions against single use plastic (Pic. 7). Most of the tourists gladly took a part in petitions and I felt we had a great support from them in what we were doing.

Over the two weeks I really got attached to these incredible creatures. Sometimes I could recognise some of the fins and immediately connected it with the name of the individual. I really enjoyed learning about their habitats, behaviours and interactions and then sharing it with tourists and new volunteers.

Apart from working on boats, volunteer time was split between working on projects and exploring the beauty of the island. As a project I choose to make a database of all the
conservation organisations that reside in my home country Croatia. In order to do that, I would first make an online research for each county and then, if there wasn’t enough data about the certain organisation, I would try to reach them by email or find more information by the people I knew in that county. Overall, I manage to make a data base consisted of 53 organisation all around the country and in that way make connection between them and AdWF. That was a very valuable experience of an efficient and quick data collection in less than four days. Also, it felt great to add Croatia to the list of 16 other countries that have already made such connections.

Volunteering with AWdF allowed me to experience new, unusual areas of environmental biology that I would only hear about during lectures or see on the television. It got me out of the comfort zone, but also, I felt incredibly fulfilled simply giving something back by volunteering. I had a rare opportunity to speak with people within the field, experience another county and their culture from the inside.

Vital part of AWdF were, of course, other volunteers. It was great to be a part of a group of enthusiastic young people that, no matter where they came from, had a similar view on life and its values. I could not have imagined a better place to spend my time and at this occasion, I would like to thank the University of Leicester one more time on the adventure of the lifetime.