Volunteering Opportunity in Tenerife

Being awarded the Travelling scholarship from the University allowed me to travel to Tenerife where I volunteered with the AWDF (Atlantic Whale and Dolphin Foundation). AWDF conserve Dolphins and Whales off the Tenerife coast by observing their behaviour and then uploading this data into a mass spreadsheet. In this report I aim to explain in detail how this data is collected and explain how this aids AWDF to reach their ultimate goal in conservation. I would not have been able to engage with the AWDF and contribute to a cause that I am passionate about without the Travelling Scholarship.

I undertook this trip with another student at the University, during the week commencing 9th June. We began travelling the night before, we boarded an early morning coach to Stansted airport. We flew with Jet2 and landed in Southern Tenerife mid morning. Prior to flying we had arranged transport through the foundation to collect us from the airport and take us to the complex by one of the supervisors. The research hub and the accommodation in where we and fellow volunteers were housed made up the moderately sized complex owned by the foundation. The complex was situated in a small but authentic Spanish town called Arona. Arona is only a 30 minute drive from the more tourist destination of Los Cristianos, which is where the boats used to carry out research and observations were found. We stayed in a place called the ‘barracks’ which was accommodation intended for short stay volunteers. For the duration of our stay we lived with two other girls who were from other parts of the UK. We got on very well with them and I have remained in touch with them since and have become friends. We also met other volunteers who were from different parts of Europe, including; the Netherlands, Scotland and Ireland. Meeting those from different countries and nationalities allowed me to gain a true insight of cultures from a personal perspective.

Arona is an idyllic Spanish town with beautiful scenery and historical architecture which was a pleasure to explore and experience. I would have not had this experience if it were not for the help from the travelling scholarship. Adjacent to the complex was a delightful little restaurant that served homely food to the residents of the town.

On our day of arrival we were given a concise but informative talk by one of the supervisors. They explained to us the main species of dolphin and whale found in Tenerife, these are the Bottlenose dolphin and the Short Finned Pilot whales. In addition we also learnt about their diet and how they hunted for their prey and what threats they face. The main threat being choking or being strangled by plastic
due to the plastic pollution of single use plastics, something that the foundation aims to stop).

Each day we were either on the boats, working with supervisors analysing data in the research facility or cleaning beaches. During ‘boat days’ groups of 2 to 3 volunteers, assigned by the supervisors, were driven down to the port in Los Cristianos. In exchange for helping out the crew we were allowed on the tourist boats for free. We helped by cleaning the boats after tourists. We were either on Freebird catamarans (FB 1, FB13 or FB15), the Maxicat catamaran or the Royal Delfin which had a viewing deck which allowed tourists to see the cetaceans under the water. I was mainly assigned to the Freebirds. When an interaction took place, 1 or 2 people would fill out the interaction data sheet. This included writing down the start and finish time, the corresponding coordinates of the interaction, the number of individuals, the types of individuals (e.g. adult, juvenile or calf) and their number. We also wrote down the position of the boat to the pod, the pod’s behaviour and how many times we saw that behaviour take place. If a calf was spotted then we recorded down its position in the pack, whether or not it interacted with the boat and its behaviour. The other person took shots of the cetacean’s dorsal fin. As previously mentioned the foundation is aiming to stop plastic pollution, they are achieving this goal through a petition. At the end of the trip we would ask tourists to sign the petition to spread awareness of the dangers that face aquatic life (ecotourism). The foundation is aiming to get 1 million signatures by the end of 2020 to stop the use of single use plastic thereby reducing plastic pollution in the ocean that have been killing aquatic wildlife for many years now.

Figure 1- These are some of the boats that the foundation has access to in order to carry out their research. Top row: Left- Freebird 13, Middle- Maxicat, Right- Freebird 15. Bottom row: Freebird 1
During ‘home days’ we would help clean the main house. We also analysed fin shots. To analyse dolphin fins we would go through the database of already existing photos and either match the unknown fin with an image thus identifying the individual or discovering a new dolphin. For whales the fin shots were identified using a computer programming software called ‘Darwin’ which worked by manually tracing the outline of the fin and the software would bring up a list of closest matches based on the number of nicks a fin had. Sometimes it would be right sometimes not. In the cases that the software was correct the image would be renamed with the name of the whale, in the cases were the software wasn’t correct it was best to go through the database and look at the images one by one to try to find a match. If no match was found then it would be safe to say that the whale found was a new individual and would be named as such.

On one of these home days we were tasked with cooking for everyone at the complex. It became somewhat of a skill to cook in such large quantities as we had to cook for so many other volunteers and staff. It quickly turned into a valuable lesson in time management and organisation, one that that will help me in the future in other aspects of my life.

After every day in the evening the volunteers and supervisors would have a meeting. During these meetings, we would be assigned our tasks for the next day (whether we would be on the boats or analysing data in the complex). It would also give the volunteers who were on the boats that day chance to go through fin shots and delete any un-viable ones and crop any shots that could be used in the Darwin software for later identification. The same volunteers would also add to the mass spreadsheets, one was to document the interactions that had occurred whilst on the boat, the other was to add names to the petition that you had gathered.
On our last day of volunteering we were paired up with two supervisors and travelled to a beach in one of the surrounding cities where we participated in a beach clean up. This is another danger to sea life that the foundation would like to highlight. When people leave rubbish on the beach and the tide moves in the rubbish gets washed into the sea where it is moved further away from the shore and becomes a threat to the aquatic life. These beach cleans are done in the hopes of encouraging the Spanish Government to enforce tighter restrictions against littering on beaches. The foundation wants to show this visually by collecting the same weight in litter as a whale. During this clean it really opened my eyes to the extent of the problem and shocked me at how careless people are. We didn’t just find the occasional item we found whole meals. We collected as much litter as possible and placed them in bags and brought them back to the complex where we went through the litter and separated it out into glass, plastics, cardboard, paper and miscellaneous. Once separated we would weigh each category individually and then take the sum of these weights for the overall weight which would go towards the target weight. If we could make out any brand names we would make a list of them so that the foundation can contact the companies and inform them of what was found on the beach in order to either sign the petition and/or persuade them to consider using bio-friendly materials in the future.

On our last day in Tenerife I had the amazing opportunity to venture into Los Cristianos and explore what the town had to offer at a more leisurely pace. It was a pleasure to be able to visit independent shops that were local to the town and experience authentic Canarian life. Los Cristianos is a vibrant city full of colour and artistry. All the benches are painted by different artists to express different aspects of Tenerife or to tell a
story. The walk that connects all of the beaches in the area is known as the ‘Geranium Walk’. Between two of the beaches, Los Cristianos and Playa de las Américas, there is a tunnel that connects them. On the Las Américas side of the tunnel there is a beautiful mural depicting rather colourful parrots.

In conclusion working with the AWDF has been a once in a lifetime opportunity that I will never forget. I would like to thank the University of Leicester for granting me the Travelling scholarship which has allowed me to go on this incredible journey and actively contribute to a cause that I profoundly care about. I have learned so much from the short space of time I was there, both that will further me in my academic career as well as in my personal life. For example academically I have been taught how to collect real time data accurately and also how to interpret this data. I have also learned how to work proficiently as part of a team and to communicate effectively with other volunteers so that no data is lost or misinterpreted. These transferable skills will help me in all aspects of my life. Overall this experience will inspire me to get more involved with other organisations in the future and also encourage others to take part.

Word count 1,701