Research volunteering in Tenerife

I was able to volunteer with the Atlantic Whale and Dolphin Foundation as a research assistant in southern Tenerife, thanks to the travelling scholarship awarded to me by the University of Leicester. In this report I will explain how the scholarship allowed me the rare opportunity to collect scientific data in situ, how I was then able to liaise with the researchers using it, and additionally participate in a conservation campaign. This experience has taught me a lot about cetaceans and the threats they face, but more importantly it has enabled me to contribute towards making a difference to marine wildlife.

My trip with fellow student Ivana Osredek began on Saturday 30th of June 2018, when we flew out with RYANAIR, arriving in Tenerife in the evening. We were collected from the airport by organisation leaders who brought us to the research centre, where we stayed for fourteen nights. The research station was a quirky Canarian farmhouse providing a large research room and accommodation for long stay researchers and volunteers. Ivana and I were housed in one of the adjacent buildings which act as hostels for short-term volunteers. Living with other young people from all over Europe gave me an insight into different cultures and perspectives, and sharing a small house with around 10 other girls allowed firm friendships to develop.

The AWdF centre is located on the outskirts of a small town called Arona; only a 20-minute drive from the ports and tourist hotspots of Los Cristianos and Puerto Colon but despite this it was very different, providing an insight into real Canarian life. The town provided amenities including shops and bars, and was surrounded by stunning, arid scenery with several canyons and large hills. I was able to try authentic Canarian cuisine at the centre, as well as local Sangria in Arona’s main bar.

During our induction we were given information about Tenerife’s resident cetacean species, pilot whales and bottlenose dolphins, as well as the most common migratory species’ such as the Atlantic spotted dolphin. We were also taught about the threats cetaceans face in the modern world; cetaceans are still hunted in some parts of the world including in an annual tradition in the Faroe Islands called The Grind where groups of pilot whales are forcefully breached. However, the primary issue the AWdF are currently campaigning to address is oceanic plastic. Plastics in the oceans can affect cetaceans, and other marine wildlife by entanglement, direct ingestion, or ingestion through bioaccumulation. The foundation, in response to this, are running a petition to ban single use plastic bags, in a campaign called Project Plastic.
Volunteers assist the research conducted at the centre by going on commercial whale watching boats to collect data whenever there is a siting. The whale watching boats benefit from this by receiving assistance from volunteers with simple tasks such as emptying bins and ash trays or serving food to tourists, whilst the foundation is provided with a convenient way to collect cetacean data. Additionally, they are able to help educate the public on the threats facing cetaceans, as volunteers discuss conservation issues with tourists from all over the world and collect signatures for a current petition.

Working in pairs, or small groups, us volunteers fill out data sheets recording the species and number of individuals (adults, juveniles or calves) seen, the pod formation and individual behaviours, as well as recording coordinates and weather conditions at the time of the siting. In addition to this fin shots are collected, these are clear photographs of adult cetacean dorsal fins which are used to identify individuals as the indentations or ‘nicks’ present on these fins are unique to each animal. The raw data is entered into a database at the end of each ‘boat day’ by the volunteers and the fin shots collected are compared to pre-existing shots of known individuals to identify whether new or known animals and have been sited. Studying the individuals found together allows family groups known as ‘pods’ to be identified, when the same pods are found on separate occasions the movement of the pod can be tracked. Researchers use the data collected by volunteers to answer pressing questions about cetacean behaviour, one undergraduate internship student was trying to answer the question of whether male pilot whales change pods. Another small group of researchers where trying to determine whether Atlantic spotted dolphins are in fact a resident species in Tenerife rather than a migratory species as they are currently believed to be.
In the two weeks I was there I spent five days on various whale watching boats, during that time I saw pilot whales, bottlenose dolphins and Atlantic spotted dolphins as well as Atlantic green turtles, the largest hard-shelled sea turtles, and collected many signatures for the Project Plastic campaign. Assisting the boat crew made me feel like I was earning the right to travel on the excursions free of charge and the chance to collect useful scientific data was invaluable experience I am immensely grateful for. Being able to have this early scientific experience in such beautiful surroundings working with animals as majestic as whales and dolphins was truly a privilege. Whilst analysing fin shots I even identified a previously undocumented pilot whale pod!

Volunteers time not spent on the boats is split between an individual project and activities around Tenerife. Projects utilise volunteers’ individual skill sets to benefit the scientific research, conservation campaigns, or the house environment by creating artwork or even furniture for the centre. Unfortunately, our stay was not long enough to conduct a scientific research project, so I turned my attention to the wildlife conservation campaign. Based on the information given to us during our introduction, as well as my own research I created a campaign poster for Project Plastic, using my own photos taken whilst whale watching. I was able to combine art and science to create something which can educate the public about perhaps the largest threat to marine life in the modern world.

As well as providing me with first hand experience in scientific data collection the travelling scholarship has also enabled me to take advantage of the many activities Tenerife has to offer. I was part of a group of volunteers who climbed Mount Teide, with a summit of 3,718m above sea level, it is the highest point in Spain and the third highest volcano in the world. The trek began at 11:30pm and we reached the summit at around 7:00am, despite taking several breaks along the way that meant 5 hours of walking to climb to the summit! The views of the sunrise when we reached the summit however were worth the gruelling challenge of the ascent, as the clouds beneath us formed what looked to be a sea. The way down was no mean feat either as it was incredibly steep, and many rocks were unstable, we were however able to see spectacular views and marvel at how we could have possibly climbed the route in the dark. We reached the bottom at about 11:30am, twenty-four challenging but incredible hours.

Another fantastic opportunity Tenerife afforded me was the chance to go scuba diving for the first time, I was able to touch the ocean floor and see many beautiful tropical fish. We were also able to have fun at Siam
Park, the world’s best water park according to trip advisor, and let our hair down with a night out in Playa de Las Americas.

As well as the voluntary work and fantastic activities, the opportunity to meet other enthusiastic young people from across Europe was one I am grateful the travelling scholarship has allowed me to have. I met many incredible people from whom I gained a lot. I learned about life in other countries, the cultural similarities and differences between different nationalities and snippets of several languages. The experience has made me more motivated to participate in a year abroad between my 2nd and 3rd year, ideally on the Erasmus+ scheme to further develop my research experience and international network of friends.

To conclude my trip to Tenerife has met the ambitions I had before going and provided me with so much more. I have gained experience in how to collect scientific data in the field, and enter this into an academic database, I also now have a greater appreciation for the anthropogenic threats to marine wildlife. The growing problem of plastic waste in the oceans is now one close to my heart; I in fact saw a turtle entangled in plastic netting, an experience which has motivated me do more research into the problem of plastic pollution, the use of microplastics and emerging solutions. To work alongside whales and dolphins was truly a privilege that I never took for granted. This experience has built my confidence in international travel and I feel inspired to join in with other such initiatives in the future, to make a difference to wildlife conservation. I would therefore like to thank the University of Leicester again for providing me with the Travelling Scholarship, as it allowed me to undertake this incredible trip.

1518 words