

Alexander Deats' Story



This summer I went travelling to Costa Rica with a friend from University to take part in a turtle conservation project. We both had decided that we wanted to do a conservation project abroad, but had relatively little funding available. We found the Newcastle Business School Travel Bursary one day when we were in the library and applied straight away. We had a positive response from our application and we therefore went ahead to book our trip. We were given £500 each from the project which covered our flights to Costa Rica, the rest we funded through part time work.

During the whole Costa Rica project and experience I learnt so much. From day one I tried to be open minded and willing, this helped significantly, I would recommend anybody going to do conservation work to the same.

The first few days consisted of meeting lots of new people (all of which were very friendly and people I genuinely got on with) and of course arriving at the turtle conservation project. The location of the project was beautiful, situated on the South West coast of Costa Rica on a beach known as Matapalo. During my time on the project it would be fair to say that I learnt a lot, from the word go we were working. The work on the project was meaningful and the work that you put in you could directly see the results.

A typical day on the project would be waking up early, and then starting the first job of the day which could vary from visiting the local school to teach or carry out maintenance work, collect fruit and vegetables for dinner or simply to clean the beaches. Lunch was typically around midday, and was followed by more work in the afternoon.

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Afternoon work was deemed harder and typical jobs may be building the turtle hatchery for the turtle eggs to be safely stored, mowing the local football teams pitches, planting trees or helping out at the local market. Dinner, usually served around six would be a traditional dish of rice and beans often supplemented with vegetables collected earlier in the day.

Whilst doing this work, there is also the 24 hour a day watching of the nests collected in the hatchery in order to stop poachers, animals or anything else from getting inside and potentially harming the turtle eggs. A rota is situated inside the common area where three hour shifts of watching the turtle eggs were assigned and you generally had one shift every other day. The evening was the most fun part of the project and the opportunity to see some turtles.

On the beach at Matapalo there was one main species of turtle that came up to nest and that was the Olive-Ridley turtle which is the smallest of all turtles in the world. Beach patrols were set up, essentially where a group of people between three and five would go out and walk up and down the beach looking for turtles, tracks or nests.

The time at which you went on patrol was dependant on the level of high tide and the moon light as turtles are less likely to nest when the sky is bright and when the moon is full. The total beach walk per patrol was 11km, which took approximately two hours. However, if anything was spotted such as tracks or turtles then it would take longer.

Throughout my five weeks at Matapalo I experienced a lot, and by the end I was able to teach people about the project and lead beach patrols in the search for turtles and turtle eggs. Earning this reward for my hard work on the project was extremely satisfying; having the chance to go out and lead my own patrol knowing that if an occasion came where a turtle was spotted it would be me that ensured that everything went correctly. I

It was on my first patrol as leader that it really hit me that, what I was doing really made a difference. After walking a couple of kilometres down the beach we found turtle tracks. We subsequently assessed the situation and looked where the nest was likely to be and started digging. We found the nest which contained eggs, 83 to be precise. We followed the procedures which I had been taught and transferred the eggs from the original nest into the hatchery, where the eggs would have a much better chance of hatching.

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The original nest was not in the best place, and the chance of the eggs surviving would have been minimal. Only 1% of baby turtles make it to adulthood as they have many natural and unnatural predators such as dogs, poachers, crabs, racoons and even the sea itself if it floods the nest. Therefore, it was the best option for the eggs to be transferred. After the beach patrol all details about the tracks, nest and eggs were recorded so that information can be kept about them and so their progress can be monitored. As my first patrol as leader was so successful, I had many more opportunities to be patrol leader and my team went on to find many more eggs. To know that after only three weeks I could be running patrols and making changes to the endangered turtle population gave me extreme satisfaction and proves that anybody can make a difference if they put in the effort.

I have benefited so greatly from the project and without the help of the Newcastle Business School Travel Bursary I would not have been able to travel to Costa Rica and take part in the turtle conservation project. The project has matured me significantly and will certainly help me in the future. I have gained tremendous experience in terms of being part of and leading teams. Turning up at the project knowing very little about the project and having no Spanish to rely on and to come away with so much and the desire to continue learning Spanish back at University is unbelievable. I would never have thought that I would benefit so much and now I cannot wait to go on my next trip!