

# Learning and Leading Gap Scholars

## ● April Blair

Dates	September 2013 to March 2014
Location	Thailand and The Philippines
Activities	Conservation volunteering, teaching English, learning languages



### ***Why did you want to do a gap experience?***

I knew that I wanted to go on to study at university but I wanted to try out other opportunities first. I was anxious to get experience for the subject I applied for, not only to stand out, but also to confirm it was the right pathway for me. Firstly, I attempted to look for environmental activities I could participate in whilst studying A Levels. Realistically, to get the experience, I needed time to commit and therefore decided a gap year was my best bet. My aim was to be involved in an environmental or conservation program and to get an understanding of management techniques and fieldwork from it. I wanted to enhance my confidence and communication. I also wanted to learn more about the language and culture of Asia. I hoped to become a more independent person, experienced in the environmental field and come back with new friends and contacts.



### ***What did you do on your gap experience?***

In September 2013 I flew to Chiang Mai in Thailand to start my adventure with elephants. The elephant project I was on was a GVI forest reintroduction program that took elephants out of the tourism industry (elephant camps) and brought them back into the wild under the care of their mahouts. The location was in a mountain village North of Chiang Mai in Thailand where forests are conserved. My role was to go on elephant hikes and record and observe the elephants' behaviour during the hikes and the enrichment sessions. We also had to check the elephants' health each week.



The location was in the mountains, 5 hours away from the nearest city Chiang Mai in a Karen village. I lived in a homestay at a villager's house which was a great way to interact with the families that lived there. Karen villagers are very hospitable - they would invite us to join their traditional events and offer us plenty of Thai food. Teaching and playing with the village children was a joyful time because they were intrigued and enthusiastic about playing the games.

Volunteers, when not busy doing their duties, would watch movies, play games together or go out on hikes and trips. Sometimes we would go into towns or the city Chiang Mai which were the highlights because we were able

to act like tourists. Nights out clubbing and going to the night markets were particularly enjoyable.



From November 2013 to March 2014 I stayed with family in The Philippines. This was an opportunity for me to study the language, learn about their culture and get to know my family who live hundreds of miles away from me. During my stay I was able to travel around some parts of the country and take in the beautiful scenery that makes up the Pearl of the Orient. I was able to island-hop and snorkel when I visited the Hundred Islands which was a sensational experience. Many of the places in the Philippines that my family and I went to see were religious sites, an encounter I am not used to as I practise Anglican Christianity whilst The Philippines is a dedicated Catholic nation.



### ***What did you find easy and challenging?***

The advantage of starting my gap experience on a volunteering program was that I was not the only foreigner. On the project we spoke English so I didn't feel so alien in another country since I had people to talk and travel with. However, it was challenging trying to communicate with the villagers as they knew little English, which meant I had to practice some of the Karen language. Karen is tonal and the sentence structure is quite basic, which made it not too complicated to pick up. Adapting to the Karen village traditions was a bit difficult because of their conservative ways. I also found hiking and living in tropical hot climate conditions challenging. Fortunately I had become acclimatised to the heat by the time I went to the Philippines.

I was nervous in The Philippines as I did not speak the language but fortunately they can speak some English there. They are respectful to elders which meant I had to use the polite terms to address people. There was also less freedom to go places in the Philippines



### ***What do you wish you had known?***

Prior to my gap experience I would have liked to have known about the national practises and festivals that happen in the countries so I could have arranged my trip to fit them in. The weekend I departed Thailand was the lantern festival which I missed, to my dismay.

I also wish I had known that communication and internet access is less feasible in Asia, and also that it isn't easy being a vegetarian in The Philippines.



### ***What do you plan to do next?***

I'm hoping to get a GVI campus intern position whilst at university. Traveling has become a new found love since my adventures away, so I intend to travel to more countries in the future. I also discovered that I enjoy teaching English and spending time with children. As a consequence I want to study abroad in Asia for masters and teach English alongside. My gap experience will help me to prepare for teaching as I can use some of the creative methods and approaches we used to make it interesting for the children to learn.

### ***What is your advice for anyone thinking of taking a gap experience?***

Before heading out on your gap year, check the climate so you arrive with suitable clothing. You should also dress appropriately in religious, conservative places.

Do some research into where you are visiting and any events or festivals that will take place whilst you are away so you can plan for them. Also, remember to bring contingency money for excursions.