

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Rebecca Pearce

Dates	October 2010 to December 2010
Locations	Costa Rica
Activities	Conservation volunteer

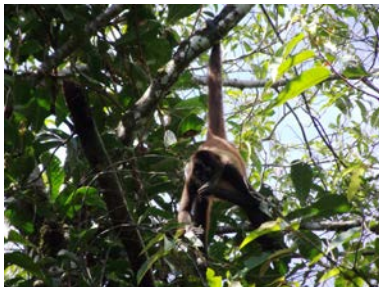


Why did you want to do a gap experience?

My aims and objectives for my gap experience were to fully involve myself with a conservation project. I was hoping to learn and develop a wide range of geographical skills and research techniques. By studying the BTEC Certificate in Tropical Habitat Conservation I was hoping to learn a good theoretical knowledge. One of my personal aims was to make decisions about my future and set myself goals for both education and my personal life.

What did you do on your gap experience?

I flew to San Jose, Costa Rica where I met with the other volunteers and a member of staff. From here, we took a local bus to the Osa Peninsula, in the south of the country. Camp was situated on top of a cliff, overlooking the North Pacific Ocean on one side and the dense Costa Rican rainforest surrounding. Myself and one other girl were the only volunteers at camp with two members of staff. For the next four weeks, we worked together to complete a research timetable. Activities include primate trails, leaf litter, river walks and morning and night turtle patrols. Primate trails involved hiking over vast areas of the rainforest and observing any primates that we encountered. Research involved recording their species, number in the troop, height up the tree, distance from trail paths, GPS location, direction of travel and any activity. Leaf litter studies were done using a fifty metre rope which was sectioned into five metre segments. Along this fifty metre sample, we recorded the density of the leaf litter and the undergrowth along the cross section. This data was used to get a percentage of canopy coverage. River walks were primarily used to collect data on Neotropical River Otters. The data we collected was very important to the environmental report that was being established against the building of a new gold mine upriver. The turtle patrols were a large part of the project and dominated research. Patrols involved very late nights and very early mornings: the hours at which turtles are nesting. Night patrols involved walking along the beach to carry out observations of nesting turtles. Data was collected about their size, and triangulation was used to mark the location of the nest to allow researchers to find it again at a later date. All turtles were given a basic health check and tagged for future recognition and monitoring purposes. Morning





patrols involved walking along the beach usually for 12km to record as much data as possible about nests that had not been recorded during the night patrol.

What did you find easy and more challenging?

The initial culture shock was far more intense than I had thought it would be – living in a tent with no electricity, running water or gas supply was a big change. Eventually, I came to enjoy the challenge of cooking on a two ring camping stove and collecting water from the natural spring. Sat in the kitchen reading books by candlelight is one of the most comforting experiences I have ever had. Living with a range of different people from different countries was interesting, challenging and rewarding. I learned a lot about alternate customs and language. The impact on my geographic skills and knowledge has been vast. I have learned new techniques, how to establish effective and efficient research frameworks, forms of data collection, analysis, strong theoretical knowledge and the practical adaption and implementation of this knowledge.



What do you plan to do next?

I am studying Environmental Geography at the University of Portsmouth. My gap experience has amplified my passion for the environment. I am looking forward to getting back into education and furthering my knowledge. I am eager to return to Costa Rica and take part in more research based in the Corcovado National Park area.



What do you wish you had known before your gap experience?

I wish I had known how extreme wet season in Costa Rica is. The rain hindered our research and at one point, we were stuck in our tents for over eighteen hours. I feel that this did however also enrich the experience as I was able to see the difference in data collected before, during and after rainy season.

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

Thoroughly research the weather during your trip – take appropriate clothing for this. Ensure that you leave a small section of your budget to buy extra equipment over there that you may not have previously considered.

Do not over estimate your strength – your bag may feel fine when you pick it up at home, but when you have to carry it for three hours walking through mud and up steep hills, it feels significantly heavier.

Pack home comforts – it is amazing how much better a mug of hot chocolate can make you feel.

