

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Amy Bennett

Dates	December 2011 to March 2012 and April 2012 to June 2012
Locations	Cambodia and Costa Rica
Activities	Conservation volunteer



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I had always had a burning desire to travel and so thought it the perfect opportunity to explore some of the world, experience cultures other than my own and meet a range of new people. I hoped that by stepping out of my comfort zone, my confidence and self-belief would improve.

What did you do on your gap experience?

As I had not had much travelling experience prior to this gap year, I felt that I needed the structure and security that an organisation offers. Due to my on-going interest in the forest environment, I chose to do two different project placements with 'Frontier' involving work in the forest. Whilst on the project in Costa Rica I also achieved a BTEC Diploma in Tropical Habitat Conservation. My first placement was in Cambodia starting in January and lasted for ten weeks. I spent the first week in Siem Reap. During this time I did a bit of sight-seeing with people from the placement, including the magnificent Angkor Wat, as well as a flooded mangrove forest and a village on the water. A week later we all made the journey via 'tractor' into the jungle to begin the project work. In the Cambodian jungle (Kulen Promtep Wildlife Sanctuary) we carried out research into the biodiversity of the area through butterfly surveys; canopy traps and sweep netting sessions, small pitfall traps, small mammal traps, camera traps, disturbance transects and night walks. I enjoyed all of the project work, in particular the sweep netting and the night walks. Unfortunately we had to leave the project slightly earlier than planned due to a water shortage.



I returned to the UK briefly then flew to Costa Rica for my second placement of 10 weeks. After a night in San José I was flown to the Osa Peninsula and submerged into camp life the following day. Once in the forest the group carried out many different surveys. These included otter walks, primate surveys, dragonfly surveys, swamp walks (amphibian surveys), opportunistic walks, turtle patrols, bird surveys and tree regeneration project.



What did you find challenging?

Settling in to Cambodia was definitely the most challenging part of my gap experience. However, the project coordinator did



everything he could to ensure I felt more comfortable in Cambodia. After a few days and a phone call home to my mother I felt much better.

What impact has your gap experience had?

I now have greater knowledge of the countries I visited. There are many aspects of my personal development that have been helped by my gap year experience, from gaining more confidence in my own ability to social and communication skills. Living in remote jungle camps alongside others allowed me to begin relying on others and allowing others to rely on me. My confidence has increased as I have proved to myself that I can achieve great things by stepping out of my comfort zone and challenging my fears. My motivation has also progressed since gaining the scholarship. Receiving the grant and using it productively has shaped my future career and motivated me to do everything in my power to pursue a career involving animal research conservation. I feel that I have gained huge insight into biological research and the techniques used. It has provided me with a good understanding and basis in preparation for my university studies and has confirmed that this is the career I wish to pursue.



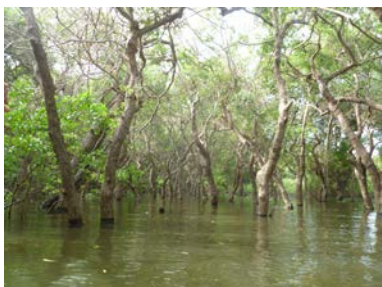
Highlight of your gap experience

The highlight of my whole experience was slowly creeping down the River Piro in Costa Rica at 05:30 and being able to see a neotropical river otter not 20 metres away from me.



What do you plan to do next?

My plans for the future are to study Environmental Biology at Nottingham University for the next three years. Following that, I may take a year out to travel again or further my degree and study a conservation related Masters. The ideal career for me would be working with animals, preferably helping carry out vital research across the globe.



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

Do plenty of research – research the country in depth and the organisations out there (if applicable)
Have a good plan – keep organised and structured. Know what you want to do and how you are going to do it every step of the way.
Keep an open mind – Enjoy yourself!