

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Sophie Wild

Dates	May 2011 to July 2011
Locations	Kenya
Activities	Volunteering on turtle conservation project



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I decided to do a Gap Experience because I wanted to do some independent travel and was unsure what I wanted to do both at university and after so thought it would be a great idea to meet some people with the same interests as me for some inspiration. Also, I have always wanted to visit Kenya from a young age and had learnt a lot about it during my Geography A Level and wanted to experience it first-hand.

What did you do on your gap experience?

My gap experience lasted for 9 weeks. I flew to Malindi in Kenya and stayed in Watamu, a small fishing town on the Kenyan Coast. Watamu is well known for the Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, the largest indigenous forest in Kenya and the beautiful Mida Creek.



I took part in Watamu Turtle Watch (WTW) which is Local Ocean Trusts flagship programme. I stayed in the volunteer house, which was called Lallies House. Volunteers had their own bedroom and bathroom but shared a kitchen. Lunch was provided which was traditional African food such as Ugali, the staple diet of maize and water.

I worked from 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday, although I would also help over the weekend if anything needed doing. I was involved in the sea turtle rehabilitation programme, nest protection and monitoring programme and the catch release programme.



Every morning I would go to work in the rehabilitation centre to clean tanks, feed the turtles and give any medication the turtles needed, including tube-fed antibiotics. During my time at WTW, the number of patients more than doubled from 6 to 13 so I learnt a lot about common illnesses and injuries turtles can suffer from which are mainly caused by human activity.

Unfortunately, some sea turtles are not so lucky. One turtle passed away, hours after being brought into the rehab centre. We performed an autopsy and the turtle had died from plastic consumption.

Other activities linked to the rehab centre were snorkelling to collect sea grass to feed the turtles, taking sick turtles for sea baths for them to gain strength, and taking some to Malindi Private hospital for x-rays.



After jobs were completed in the rehabilitation centre, I would either be involved in the catch-release or nest protection and monitoring programme.

The catch-release programme involved receiving calls from fisherman about turtles that had been trapped in nets or had been found floating or beached. We would go to collect the turtle, take biometric data about the turtle and tag it. After that, we would check for any signs of ill-health. Healthy turtles could be released back into the ocean and sick turtles would be taken back to our rehab centre. We used an incentive scheme where the fishermen would be paid for notifying us of the turtle. The money would go towards fixing the fisherman's net.



The nest protection and monitoring programme included watching for nesting turtles, protecting the nests, watching the hatching and excavating the nest afterwards to gain data. Members of staff would carry out beach patrols every night to spot signs of nesting turtles. I witnessed 5 nesting turtles! If the nest was in a safe place it could be left but if it was in danger of being destroyed by sea wash, we would very carefully move it to a safe position. I also witnessed 4 hatchings. Unfortunately only 1 out of 1000 hatchlings survives. After the hatching, we would excavate the nest to see if there were any more live hatchlings, take data on what had happened to any unhatched eggs and calculate a rate of success.



As well as being involved with the programmes, I was also involved in a beach clean-up which I helped to organise. I did walks through the mangrove forest to collect seeds to be used to help maintain the vast mangrove forests around Mida Creek.

I also took some time to further explore the coast. I travelled to Mombasa, Kenya's second largest city with a fellow volunteer. I also took time to go on a 2 day safari to Tsavo East National Park where I stayed overnight in a tented camp inside of the park. I could hear a herd of elephants near my tent in the middle of the night. I saw so many animals including elephants, giraffes, zebras, buffalo, lions, cheetahs, hippos, crocodiles, warthogs, antelope and ostrich. As part of my safari, I also visited a Masai village.

What did you find easy and challenging

The part I found the easiest was working 9 to 5. It was so enjoyable and didn't feel like working at all. Every day was different. I also found meeting people and building up close relationships with them very easy. A difficulty I faced was losing my luggage for 8 days as it was not checked through to Malindi. Although I did not have much, I had luckily packed spare clothes, shoes and anti-malarial tablets in my hand luggage. Another difficulty I faced was the abundance of mosquitoes. I travelled at the end of the rainy season. It was very hard to sleep and many bites became infected so I had to buy very expensive antibiotics. Insect repellent was very





hard to get hold of and was often expensive and not very reliable.

What impact has your gap experience had?

My gap experience has made a massive impact on my geographical skills and knowledge and personal skills. Carrying out beach surveys gave me the opportunity to use a GPS system. My geographical knowledge of developing countries has become much more in depth. Travelling alone allowed me to achieve personal goals and allowed me to make many more close relationships than maybe I would have done if with a group. I worked closely every day with a lot of people I hadn't known for very long, overcoming language barriers to work more effectively in a team. I also became very confident in decision-making as my knowledge of running a small organisation like WTW grew with time.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

An unexpected outcome was being asked to be involved in some fundraising here in the UK.



How do you think this experience will help you?

The improvements I have made to my geographical and personal skills will certainly help me in the future. I will now be very confident in travelling and meeting people from all over the world. I think this will help me greatly at university.

What are you intending to do as result of this gap experience?

I plan to go to other schools around the country and give presentations. Telling them about my experiences and how it has helped me may give them the motivation they need to take an opportunity like this.

What do you plan to do next?

I am studying Bioveterinary Science at university. I also plan to return to Kenya to improve my skills.

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

Pack spare clothes, shoes and anti-malarial tablets in your hand luggage. Don't be afraid to travel alone. I found that I was thankful for travelling alone because I got a lot more out of the experience and made a lot of close friendships. Make sure you research the area before you go. My expectations turned out to be very wrong. This has been an experience of a lifetime. I would definitely encourage anybody thinking of doing a gap experience to do it!