For 5 weeks during the summer vacation 2018 (13th July - 15th August 2018) I volunteered in Costa Rica as part of a programme organised by Green Planet Ventures (GPV) based on rainforest conservation research. GPV is a social enterprise which aims to enhance young people’s education within sustainable development and the protection of tropical forests. During my internship I aided 2 biologists (Alejandro Zúñiga Ortiz and Daniel Ramirez Arce), employed at Selva Verde Eco lodge, who were performing research for 3 ongoing programmes. These share a common purpose of forming a basic research line on the ecology of the herpetofauna, mammals and flora in the tropical forests owned by the lodge. This is important as only with this knowledge can the management and conservation of natural resources within this area be applied effectively and efficiently.

For each programme, I assisted the field specialists in their everyday research work to assess the diversity, richness and relative abundance of species in different habitats throughout the reserve. I gained field research skills and learnt about many different surveying methods ranging from daily day and night walks when researching herpetofauna (frogs and snakes) to setting up 120 Sherman traps to catch rodents.

Work on this project benefitted me beyond increasing my knowledge of flora and fauna of a different continent. For example, people who worked in Selva Verde were very keen for me to help with their study of English and I spent time with them practising their conversation techniques. Given that I had never learnt Spanish, I found this really improved my conversation skills and the success of these ‘lessons’ really boosted my general confidence. However, I also found myself in challenging situations; I was working far from home and I had many periods on my own since there were no other students engaged on the project while I was there. Furthermore, I was staying in a particularly undeveloped region of Costa Rica. This meant all the professionals I was working with were men and I found it very challenging often to be the sole woman. Nevertheless, given the gender gap of the society, as well as the lack of any other volunteers I believe the overall experience very much developed my resilience and self-reliance. It also really focused my mind on the further study and work I would like to undertake once I complete my degree.

At the end of my internship I was asked to produce a scientific report of all my findings. This allowed me to develop my writing skills and gave me the opportunity to gain valuable advice about report writing from the biologists with whom I had been working. I enjoyed this task as it allowed me to review the work I had been doing and seek to identify any trends in the data, learning even more about the habitat I had been studying.

Even though I was faced with many personal challenges, I very much enjoyed my time volunteering at Selva Verde and would like to thank especially the biologists, as well as the manager and other employees of the lodge, for being so kind, accommodating and welcoming. I would also like to thank Loraiza Davies from GPV who organised the internship as well as the Not-For-Profit Bursary Scheme and Pembroke College for their financial support.

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