

Rebecca Loy – Palau in Micronesia, Winter 2018

In December 2018, with the generous support of Pembroke, I was able to spend two weeks in the Republic of Palau, a country in the Western Pacific Ocean belonging to the region of Micronesia. The purpose of this trip was to complete a volunteer internship with the Palau International Coral Reef Center (PICRC), a research and conservation organization dedicated to protecting the marine biodiversity in Palau. As Palau is so isolated from any populated city or area, its marine environment has a low level of local stress threatening its survival. In addition, some of the reefs in Palau have been identified as bleach-resistant, suffering no major bleaching during the 2010 and 2016 global mass bleaching events. As such, the unique coral reefs of Palau have been the focus of many research groups over the years.

In addition, Palau is known for its strict environmental regulations and strong commitment to the protection of the natural world. It was the first country to create a shark sanctuary covering all of its waters, as well as the first country to ban sunscreen unsafe to coral reefs. All visitors have to pay a Palau Pristine Paradise environmental fee, which went towards funding the management of protected areas in Palau. We also have to sign a “Palau pledge”, stamped in our passports to represent a commitment to travel responsibly and respect the environment. For these reasons, I was extremely keen to intern with PICRC, to gain more experience with coral reef research as well as to learn more about the culture of environmental stewardship in the country.

Over my internship, I assisted the Research department with their long-term coral reef monitoring programme, which collected data from 22 different sites to assess the health of the reefs around Palau. This included surveying key fish and invertebrate species, assessing live coral cover and measuring abiotic factors such as temperature and water quality. My main tasks in this project were to collate the data collected from previous field visits, as well as conduct titration tests to calculate the total alkalinity of the water samples. Apart from these roles, I was also able to attend an ocean acidification workshop conducted by a visiting researcher from the University of Hawaii. I have also been interested in looking further into the link between culture and conservation, and this trip to Palau gave me the opportunity to observe how people’s way of life has influenced their approach to the environment. Palauans form a small, close-knit community, and through the hospitality of people that I had met I was able to speak to members of the Palau government and a representative to the UNDP, all of whom were key figures in the environmental movement in Palau.

Over weekends and free days, I was also able to explore more of the country through scuba diving and hiking. Strong currents originating from the Pacific Ocean attract megafauna such as manta rays and sharks to the waters in Palau, and these thriving reef ecosystems were beautiful. Being able to dive in such pristine environments is an incredible privilege that I am extremely grateful for, and it inspired me to continue pushing for the preservation of the natural marine world over the course of my studies and in my future career.