

Kathy Darragh – Costa Rica & Panama 2015

I volunteered for two weeks this summer with fellow NatSci Alex Nicol-Harper at a turtle reserve in Ojochal, Costa Rica. Before arriving at the reserve we spent approximately 10 days travelling around Costa Rica, which was a great opportunity to learn more about the culture and people of Costa Rica. I experienced a wide variety of ecosystems and wildlife, both whilst on trips in nature reserves and national parks, and also on a day-to-day basis wandering around the towns and villages we were visiting. It really opened my eyes to the vast biodiversity present in Central America. I was also able to practice my Spanish skills. Having done A-level Spanish I could at least attempt to communicate with the locals, whether regarding bus times (which everyone said they knew but nobody was ever right...), or random conversations with taxi drivers about their love of football, or whether there are lots of cows or sheep in Ireland. I found the friendly nature of the people an extremely encouraging environment for practicing a language.

At the reserve itself we got involved in many different tasks to help out. We visited the local school to assist with a workshop on water quality, which was an amazing experience. There was also a butterfly garden which needed to be tended daily, and was used as an educational tool when the children visited. We were also involved in many different ecological surveys being carried out, including caiman hunts at night, bird watching, and camera trapping for mammals. However, the main activity was patrolling the beach at night to ensure that turtle eggs were not stolen. As soon as a turtle was spotted it was watched until it left the beach again, with measurements being taken and the turtle being tagged. The eggs were collected and taken to a hatchery to be reburied where they could be watched and protected. The beach is patrolled every night in three shifts of three hours each, starting at 7pm and finishing at 4am. It was incredible to be involved in a conservation project in such a hands-on way.

After two weeks at the reserve I headed to Panama, which is where I will be travelling to carry out work during my PhD, staying in Gamboa, a small village beside the Panama Canal. I spent time shadowing and helping other students and staff in the Heliconius butterfly group, allowing me to practice skills such as dissection, and generally learning how to care for butterflies (and the plants they rely on!). I was also able to network with other researchers, and attend seminars in Panama City and Barro Colorado Island. Furthermore, I carried out some preliminary experiments for my PhD which allowed me to gather some data and samples. The experience will help me when planning what experiments I would like to do during my PhD, as I understand better what is feasible, and what equipment is available.

Overall, I had an amazing time in both Costa Rica and Panama and can't wait to return to Central America in the future as the mix of amazing biodiversity and culture is unbeatable!