



PROJECT REPORT
GALAPAGOS ISLANDS VOLUNTEER TRIP
January 14-24, 2018
Executive Summary



January 2018 Galápagos Volunteers

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) organized and led a volunteer trip to the Galápagos Islands during January 14-24, 2018, visiting the Islands of San Cristóbal and Isla Isabela. The ten-member volunteer group included ConservationVIP® Trip Leaders Mark Hardgrove and Carol Clark. Andres de la Torre, an Ecuadorian guide from Ecuador Adventures, assisted throughout the trip. His knowledge of the Islands, wildlife, history and culture contributed significantly to the experience. In addition, at different locations on the trip, local guides certified by Galápagos National Park Service accompanied the group.

The group's activities supported a sea turtle research project, which is being conducted by the University of San Francisco de Quito at the Galápagos Science Center on San Cristóbal. The volunteers photographed sea turtles at four different locations in the Galápagos, to contribute data for the research database.

The volunteer group also worked on a variety of habitat improvement projects at Campo Duro on Isla Isabela, where Giant Tortoises are raised in a protected environment until they are mature enough to be released in a natural setting in Galápagos National Park.

Interspersed with the turtle research and tortoise habitat support, the group picked up trash on several National Park beaches in the Galápagos, a task that helps the National Park to protect the shore birds, sea turtles, sea lions and reduces ocean pollution, which negatively impacts sea life. Along each trail the group brought bags to collect trash.

During the trip, approximately 317 hours were devoted to training, data collection and other volunteer work: 177 volunteer hours were dedicated to the sea turtle data collection and beach cleanup. Utilizing Go-Pro's at four survey sites, the volunteer group collected 1258 underwater photographs. These sea turtle and other marine life photographs are taken for the purpose of gathering data about local turtle populations to support a research project led by Dr. Judith Denkinger with the University of San Francisco de Quito Science Center in San Cristóbal.

In addition, more than 140 hours were spent at Campo Duro on Giant Tortoise Habitat Restoration.

Detailed Trip Report



Day 1: Trip Leaders and the Ecuador Adventures guide conducted an in-depth orientation and briefing at Casa Opuntia, the group hotel on San Cristóbal Island, beginning at 2:00 PM. Following the orientation, the group walked to the Galápagos National Park Visitor Center and Darwin Bay Viewpoint, where volunteers had their first introduction to the Park and learned about the natural history of the Galápagos Islands.

Day 2: In the morning, the group met Galápagos National Park Guide, Mariuxi John Jones and then travelled by bus to El Junco Lake, a crater lake, located in the highlands of San Cristóbal Island. Named after an endemic sedge located there, El Junco Lake is the only fresh water source in the Galápagos Islands. The hike began a bit chilly and misty but cleared beautifully at top elevation. Here, the volunteers learned about the history and were able to see frigate birds dip into the lake to clean and drink.



Afterwards the bus took the group to the Centro de Crianza. The Crianza is one of the Galápagos National Park's breeding stations and sanctuaries for giant tortoises. At the Crianza, the group was shown the captive breeding program, which the group would be supporting later in the trip.

That afternoon, the group members were outfitted with wetsuits, flippers, masks, and snorkels. The group was then divided into groups of two for the buddy system approach to snorkeling. One carries the go-pro and takes photographs while the other watches the surroundings and surf. After walking to nearby Carola Beach, the group began snorkeling in their designated groups. The surf was rough and the waters very cloudy, still several good research photos of sea turtles were taken.



A highly motivated volunteer takes photos with two cameras

Day 3: The group travelled to Playa Loberia, named after the sea lions (lobos), which were abundant both on the beach and in the water. One feisty sea lion protecting its young kept a couple of volunteers out of the water for a bit. The two-person teams snorkeled around the bay, and successfully captured research photographs of sea turtles.



After snorkeling, some of the group went back into the bay to do more research photography and others went on a hike along the cliff with the Galápagos guide and Andreas. Along the way the group was prepared to collect trash and was pleased to find the trail exceptionally clean. The hikers were treated to views of Marine Iguanas sunning themselves, Blue Footed Boobies and the Lava Gull. Back along the beach the area was not as clean, and the group picked up one bag of trash before walking back to the bus.

After returning to the hotel and because the Galápagos Science Center and Dr. Denkinger were tied up with a university conference, the group took a short walk to Playa Mann, the community beach, and collected several bags of trash. Several local beach goers, including children, helped and brought trash to the group, thanking them for cleaning the beach.

Day 4: After breakfast, the volunteers, guides and Dr. Denkinger boarded one boat for the trip to Kicker Rock, the remains of a volcanic cone featuring a monolithic rock formation rising over 500 feet above the Pacific Ocean. On the way, the boat stopped and a small dingy brought several volunteers onto the beach at Playa Manglacito. Here they were able to explore and clean up small bits of trash while others snorkeled. Returning to the larger boat, the group ate lunch on board before leaving for the designated time at Kicker Rock.

The sea condition was somewhat rough that afternoon at Kicker Rock, limiting the survey to one side of the rock. The volunteers snorkeled and observed and photographed a number of sea turtles. In addition to photographing sea turtles for the research data, the group saw

Galápagos White and Black Tip Sharks, an Eagle Ray, Sea Lions, and many species of fish. Some of the group saw a Hammerhead Shark as well. Back on the boat the group was met by the crew with mugs of local lemongrass tea to warm up with. Despite the cloudy water conditions several good research photographs were captured.



After returning and cleaning up, the group walked up to the Galápagos Science Center, University of San Francisco de Quito, for an orientation and presentation by Juan Pablo Munoz, MSC, the head Administrator and Researcher and Dr. Judith Denkinger, Marine Biologist, on the sea turtle census and research project she has been leading. The group also heard a presentation about the research the Center has been conducting on micro plastics and other types of ocean trash and its effects on sea life.

ConservationVIP® Program Manager and Trip Leader, Mark Hardgrove, presented the Science Center with a donation of two Go-Pro 4's to assist in the sea turtle research program.



Day 5: Early in the morning, the volunteers transferred via air shuttle in two groups from the island of San Cristóbal to Isla Isabela. Arriving at the same time, the group was shuttled to the hotel. The first two nights on Isla Isabela were in the village of Puerto Villamil. While waiting to check into the hotel the group grabbed trash bags and collected trash along the beach.



Later the group met up with local guide, Fausto Cartagena, who led the group on a walk in the national park to the Centro de Crianza, the Giant Tortoise Center on Isla Isabela. Here the group learned about the captive breeding program there, which supports several sub-species of tortoises. The center protects older breeding animals, adolescents, and hatchlings.

Day 6: Friday morning the group was shuttled by bus to the marina and boarded the boat to the Islet of Tintoreras where different forms of lava on the islands are found, and mangrove



trees are more mature. Blue-footed Boobies, Galápagos Penguins, many adult and juvenile Marine Iguanas, and Sea Lions inhabit the area. The group witnessed large male Marine Iguanas fighting over territory. Following the walk the group was instructed on where to safely snorkel to avoid sea urchin colonies and clear instructions to follow the national park guide in the shallow waters.

Volunteers snorkeled in an area near Las Tintoreras, where many sea turtles were observed and photographed for the University of San Francisco de Quito research project.

In the afternoon, most of the group rode mountain bikes approximately 10 miles roundtrip to the Wall of Tears. Convicts constructed this wall, towering 65 feet in places, in the 1940's when Isabela was a penal colony. One volunteer and one trip leader hiked approximately 3.5

miles of the trail, enjoying the mangroves, looking for Giant Tortoises in the wild and collecting trash along the way back.

Day 7-8: In the morning the group packed up and boarded the bus to Campo Duro, the location for the next volunteer project. Campo Duro is an Eco-Camp located in the cooler, lush, tropical highlands on the slopes of the Sierra Negra Volcano. Working under a permit with Galápagos National Park, the approximately 3 acre privately owned camp provides a protected reserve to help raise the 12 Giant Tortoises that are approximately 15 years old.

Sleeping in tents at the camp, the volunteers worked for 2-1/2 days on a variety of projects to improve the tortoise habitat at Campo Duro:

- ConservationVIP® covered the cost of delivery of 2500 gallons of fresh water that will be stored for two of the tortoise ponds. One pond had been leaking and the others were very dry due to the lack of significant rainfall in the preceding few months.
- ConservationVIP® covered the costs of supplies, tools, cement and sand to patch a large section of the bigger pond that had been leaking. Working as a team the volunteers shoveled and raked out slimy pond scum and swept debris out of the dried pond to expose the cracked areas. After marking the cracks, the volunteers mixed cement and sand to make permanent repairs. The concrete was placed with a broom finish.



Large pond before repair



Repairing the large pond



Large pond filling with water

- Concrete left over from the large pond repair was used to repair the smaller pond that had fewer cracks. Once the smaller pond was filled by hand-buckets and before completion, a Giant Tortoise immediately entered and drank for several minutes.

Repairing the small pond



After cleaning, patching, and hand-filling



Just a few minutes after the volunteers began a bucket brigade to fill the small pond, a Giant Tortoise walked into the pond and drank for several minutes.

- Volunteers raked debris and cut back brush and hedges along the fence line of the pen, tossing the edibles into the pen as they moved along. Along the pond areas, volunteers trimmed thick stances of pampas grass to expose the rocky pathways to the ponds. Tortoises utilize these rocky entrances to access the ponds and another positive aspect is that the rocks help wear down their nails, helping keep them healthier.
- Volunteers weeded and transplanted food crops in the organic garden. Weeds were deposited in the compost pile, tortoises were supplied with their favorite grass, and volunteer herbs, flowers and vegetable plants.
- Volunteers also organized the tool shed for the next volunteer group.



Organic garden before cleanup



Weeding and clearing the garden



Ready for the next season

Day 9: In the morning, the group completed tasks in the Tortoise enclosure and organic garden and cleaned up our tools. After lunch the group packed up, said goodbye to the appreciative Campo Duro staff, and returned to the hotel in town.

Day 10: The Volunteers travelled by bus to the Sierra Negra trailhead where the local guide



gave us a more extensive introduction to the volcanic origins of the Galápagos Islands and hiked up the trail for a view of Sierra Negra volcano. Despite a low-level alert that there was some seismic activity near the Volcano, the only area closed was the walking path known as Volcan Chico. The skies were intermittently overcast. However, keeping with this group's good luck, at the summit the views of the caldera opened up, revealing fantastic views of the caldera and far-

off views of hot gases. Omitting the closed-off trail from the hike, the group walked back to the bus and proceeded to Cueva de Sucre, a short 1/8 mile walk through a natural cave.

That evening, the volunteers celebrated their successful project work and new friendships over a farewell dinner.

Day 11: The group flew on two separate flights to Baltra, arriving in time to head home or on to other adventures in the Galapagos and Ecuador.

Report submitted by Mark Hardgrove and Carol Clark, Trip Leaders for ConservationVIP®