

**PROJECT REPORT
GALAPAGOS ISLANDS VOLUNTEER TRIP
October 31 – November 10, 2016**

Executive Summary



October 2016 Galapagos Volunteers at Campo Duro, Isabela Island

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP) organized and led a volunteer trip to the Galapagos Islands, between October 31 and November 10, 2016, visiting the Islands of San Cristóbal and Isabela. ConservationVIP provided 9 volunteers, including Trip Leader Mark Hardgrove and Assistant Trip Leader Janice Ballak. Andres de la Torre, a local guide from Ecuador Adventures, assisted the group throughout the trip.

Total Volunteer Hours Contributed: 333

333 hours of work was donated to Galapagos Islands in less than a two-week period. The following training, education, data collection and other volunteer work were completed during this trip: 153 volunteer hours were dedicated to the sea turtle data collection project which is being conducted by the University of San Francisco de Quito at the Galapagos Science Center on San Cristóbal. Interspersed with the data collection, 18 volunteer hours were devoted to beach cleanup. In addition, 162 hours were devoted to the Giant Tortoise Habitat Restoration project, included weeding, replanting and grass trimming.

ConservationVIP volunteers got along fantastically, and integrated well with the Marine Science Center staff and students, other visitors, Galapagos residents, and folks we met on the islands while doing our work. The volunteers used protective equipment, data collection equipment, tools and gear during the course of the surveys and project work. The volunteers used the Go Pro Hero 3+ underwater cameras previously donated by REI Adventures for the sea turtle documentation project.

The weather was mostly warm and sunny during the work days. The temperatures were pleasant and somewhat humid during day time, high 70's and mid to upper 60's at night. ConservationVIP Volunteers worked steadily throughout the days at Campo Duro.



Volunteers at Galapagos Science Center, San Cristóbal Island

Detailed Trip Report

Day 1: The group met at Casa Opuntia, our hotel on San Cristóbal Island. Trip Leaders and our Local Guide Andres de la Torre conducted an in-depth orientation and briefing at the hotel beginning at 2:00 PM. After the meeting we walked from Casa Opuntia to the Interpretive Center where we learned about the natural history of the Galapagos Islands and walked outside the Center to observe the wildlife and see the terrain.

Day 2: We left Casa Opuntia by bus for an island orientation and to hike El Junco, taking advantage of the clear weather. El Junco is the only permanent fresh water lake in the Galapagos so the group was excited to see it as well as the amazing views from the top. Next we visited the Galapaguera reserve. La Galapaguera is the nearby breeding station and sanctuary for giant tortoises where we learned about the captive breeding programs and some of the work necessary and how we could help.



Volunteers at El Junco

Days 3 – 4: Our Volunteers conducted a sea turtle census. Our project for the next two days consisted of assisting researchers with a sea turtle census. We photographed turtles while snorkelling, to identify the individuals by their unique markings, patterns and any injuries, and provide other on-shore assistance with the survey.

Our first day performing the sea turtle research project consisted of snorkelling at Loberia Beach, a popular beach with locals and tourists located approximately one mile from Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. This area is known for its resident population of sea turtles. Several sea turtles were observed and photographed by the volunteers for later identification.

In the afternoon Dr. Judith Denkinger, Marine Biologist from the Galapagos Science Center, University of San Francisco de Quito provided an orientation for our volunteer project with sea turtles. ConservationVIP is participating in a long term study and census of sea turtles as part of ongoing research on the impacts of increased boat traffic on sea turtles being conducted by Dr. Denkinger.



Dr Judi explaining to the group more details about the turtle research

Our second day of the sea turtle research project involved taking a boat to the research site surrounding Kicker Rock, and surface snorkelling in water too deep to touch or see the ocean bottom. Sea turtles were observed and were photographed for later identification. Our volunteers were accompanied by Dr. Denkinger, who provided advice and additional education about the sea turtle population in the area. The ocean was quite choppy which led to shorter duration snorkelling at Kicker Rock. The group also performed trash pickup at Playa Puerto Grande.



Sea Turtles are identified by the patterns on their faces, and compared with a database maintained by marine biologist Dr. Judith Denkinger.

In the afternoon the group returned to the Galapagos Science Center where we viewed a video developed by the Science Center on the impacts of plastics on the environment and marine life. We also viewed an amazing video of a sea turtle wearing a GoPro swimming in the ocean.

Day 5: Air shuttle from San Cristobal to Isla Isabela hotel/airport transfer via van. The entire group flew on EMETEBE at 7:00am. Andres de la Torre followed on the next flight. All luggage went with passengers and arrived on time.

We spent our first two nights on Isla Isabela at Hotel Volcano, in the village of Puerto Villamil. After arrival we visited the Centro de Crianza, the Giant Tortoise Center of Isabela, and learned about the National Park's captive breeding program. The Center houses several sub-species of tortoises endemic to Isla Isabela. We saw both hatchlings and the older breeding animals in action.

Day 6: In the morning we took a bus to the marina and boarded our boat to the Islet of Tintoreras. We saw sea lions, sea turtles, marine iguanas, penguins, white-tipped sharks and blue-footed boobies. Following our visit to Tintoreras, we snorkelled in a bay adjacent to the marina, where we observed and photographed more sea turtles. The photos were submitted to Dr. Denkinger to enable her to expand her census area to include the area near the Puerto Villamil marina. In the afternoon we returned back to the shore and rode mountain bikes approximately 12 miles round trip to the Wall of Tears. This wall, towering 65 feet in places, was constructed in the 1940's by convicts when Isabela was a penal colony. We stopped numerous times for giant tortious sightings, beautiful sunsets at Playa Amour and climbed an observation tower for a bird's eye view of Isabella Island.

Day 7-8: On day 7 we travelled by open bus to Campo Duro where we had a tour of the grounds, and settled into our tents, which had been previously set up for us by the Camp staff. Campo Duro is an Eco-Camp located in the foothills of the Sierra Negra Volcano. Campo Duro is an enchanting location set in the cooler lush, tropical highlands. We enjoyed the fully equipped sleeping tents with mattresses with bedding, outdoor private showers, bathrooms with flush toilets, and a thatched roof restaurant and bar. Most of the fruits and vegetables served are grown organically in the on-site gardens and our food was cooked in wood fired stone ovens.



Project site with Giant Tortoise awaiting the commencement of our clean-up efforts, Campo Duro

Campo Duro works in concert with Galapagos National Park, providing a reserve to help raise tortoises from 3 to 8 years old. After lunch on our first afternoon we started working. Over the next two and a half days the volunteer group worked and completed the following tasks: Cleaned 3 acres inside fenced habitat, removed 12 hardwood trees, removed 85 rotten fence posts, made 60 new fence posts, installed 40 fence posts, trimmed 1000' living hedge fence, cleaned and weeded three ponds, filled ponds with water, and cleaned vegetable garden to feed tortoises.



Campo Duro – weeding and cleaning one of the ponds



Campo Duro – Pond after cleaning and filling with water

Day 9: We departed Campo Duro in the afternoon and returned to Hotel Volcano. Half of the group walked along the beach to explore the wildlife and pick up trash. The locals really appreciated the trash pickup.

Day 10: Our Volunteers travelled by bus to the Sierra Negra Ranger station where we hiked up the Sierra Negra trail. Unfortunately, it was very cloudy so there was not much of a view of Sierra Negra volcano. However, as we walked around the rim, some of the clouds lifted for a better view! The return hike was down the clay road which fortunately was very dry. We hiked approximately 5 miles up the trail to see the caldera rim, returning to the Ranger Station for our transport back to Hotel Volcano in Puerto Villamil for our last evening together. The Volunteers spent a free afternoon further exploring Isabela. That evening we met for a farewell dinner at a local restaurant sharing memories of our time in the Galapagos, an evening that most will remember with special people, in a special place with lasting memories and friendships.

Day 11: Taxi Transfer from Hotel Volcano to Airport. The entire group flew EMETEBE from Isabela to Baltra at 7:30 where the volunteers all said our goodbyes and boarded our flights home.



Social Interaction: The team of volunteers worked and “played” extremely well together and friendships were quickly formed. At the end of each day an EQ (Emotional Quotient) rating was taken to determine the overall spirit of the group. We all ate breakfast, lunch and dinner together each day and we all enjoyed each other’s company.

Safety: We started each day and each new project with safety briefings and safety reminders and we all worked together to watch each other for dehydration, safe tool use, use of protective equipment and safe work practices. No incidents or accidents were reported during the work projects or sea turtle project thanks to the good work of our Leadership Team and Volunteers. The team readily and cheerfully adopted all safety guidelines for tool usage and tool transport. All personnel were required safety gear while working in the tortoise habitat. Volunteers cordially and occasionally reminded everyone to adhere to all safety guidelines throughout the workday.

Report submitted by:

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