



**PROJECT REPORT  
GALAPAGOS ISLANDS VOLUNTEER TRIP  
NOVEMBER 12-22, 2017  
Executive Summary**



*Figure 1 November 2017 Galapagos Volunteers*

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) organized and led a volunteer trip to the Galapagos Islands during November 12-22, 2017, visiting the Islands of San Cristóbal and Isla Isabela. The 12-member volunteer group included ConservationVIP® Trip Leaders Barbara Kennedy and David Summer.

Our Ecuadorian guide from Ecuador Adventures, Andres de la Torre, assisted us throughout the trip. His knowledge of the Islands, wildlife, history and culture contributed significantly to the experience. His knowledge of the people and their food made every evening a memorable. In addition, at different locations on the trip, local guides certified by Galapagos 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 Galapagos Science Center on San Cristóbal. The research project is investigating the impacts of boat traffic on sea turtles in the Galapagos Marine Reserve. The volunteers photographed sea turtles at four different locations in the Galapagos, 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 Galapagos National Park.

Interspersed with the turtle research and tortoise habitat support, the group picked up trash on several National Park beaches in the Galapagos, 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.

During the trip, approximately 573 hours were devoted to training, data collection and other volunteer work: 371 volunteer hours were dedicated to the sea turtle data collection and beach cleanup. In addition, more than 202 hours were spent at Campo Duro on Giant Tortoise Habitat Restoration.

*Figure 2 Sea Turtle Survey*



*Figure 3 Tortoise Habitat Restoration*

## Detailed Trip Report

**Day 1:** Trip Leaders and our local guide conducted an in-depth orientation and briefing at Casa Opuntia, our hotel on San Cristóbal Island, beginning at 2:00 PM. Following the orientation, the group collected trash along the walk to the Galapagos 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 Galapagos Islands.

**Day 2:** In the morning, the group travelled by bus to the Centro de Crianza. The Crianza is one of the Galapagos National Park's breeding stations and sanctuaries for giant tortoises. At the Crianza, we were introduced to the captive breeding programs, which the group would be supporting later in the trip. After visiting the Crianza, the group headed to Puerto Chino to look for blue footed boobies and other wildlife, while collecting trash along the way.

After returning to the hotel, the group members were outfitted with wetsuits, flippers, masks, snorkels and flotation vests.

In the afternoon, the group was divided into two-person teams, and each team was issued a Go Pro Hero underwater camera. The group was instructed in proper use of the cameras and safety issues. It is difficult to concentrate on photography while also paying attention to the ocean and surroundings, so one member of each team photographs while the other team member is responsible for making sure that the photographer is safe and does not drift too far from the group. In addition, designated trip leaders and guides are responsible for watching the entire group in case any member requires assistance. This buddy system and oversight protocol was implemented each time the group snorkeled.

The group travelled in taxis to Playa Loberia, named after the sea lions (lobos), which were abundant both on the beach and in the water. Volunteers participated in their first sea turtle photography project. The 2 person teams snorkeled around the bay, and successfully captured their first photos of sea turtles.

Following the project, the group was instructed in the proper methods for cleaning the gear so it would be in good condition for the next photography project. (The group followed these basic procedures after each snorkeling/photography session.)





*Figure 4 Galapagos Sea Turtle Survey*

**Day 3:** After walking to the nearby Carola Beach and collecting trash along the way, the group enjoyed calm but cool water conditions and an abundance of sea lions, pelicans and marine iguanas as they searched for and photographed sea turtles. They were successful in collecting some good sea turtle photos.

The group returned to the hotel to clean and store gear. After lunch we walked to the Galapagos Science Center, University of San Francisco de Quito, for a tour and presentation by Dr. Judith Denkinger, Marine Biologist, on the sea turtle census and research project she has been leading. At the Science Center, they use computer software to identify individual turtles by their unique facial patterns and study each turtle's carapace to identify injuries. The purpose of the research is to determine the impacts of increased boat traffic on sea turtles. The group also heard a presentation about the research the Center has been conducting on plastics and other types of ocean trash and its effects on sea life. The startling statistics clearly impressed the group and motivated them for trash pick-up chores later in the trip.

**Day 4:** After breakfast the volunteers, guides and Dr. Denkinger boarded two boats for the trip to Kicker Rock. On the way, the Volunteers spotted Nazca and blue footed boobies, swallow-tailed gulls, shearwaters, brown noddies, and storm petrels. Once at Kicker Rock, under relatively calm conditions, the volunteers snorkeled around the rock and observed and

photographed a number of sea turtles. They also enjoyed watching Galapagos sharks, barracuda, sea lions, and many species of fish. Later the group had a picnic lunch on the boats and then explored the beach and at Playa Manglacito, before boating back to town and the hotel.

**Day 5:** Early in the morning, the volunteers transferred via air shuttle in two groups from the island of San Cristóbal to Isla Isabela. The first group of volunteers to arrive on Isabella picked up plastic trash along 2 miles of beach, motivated by the presentation at the Galapagos Science Center on damage to sea life from plastics in the ocean.

We spent our first two nights at Casita de la Playa, our small ocean front hotel on Isla Isabela in the village of Puerto Villamil. After checking into the hotel, in the afternoon, we met our local guide Fausto, who led a walk to the Centro de Crianza, the Giant Tortoise Center on Isla Isabela. He gave a presentation on the captive breeding program there, which supports several sub-species of tortoises. We saw older breeding animals, adolescents, and hatchlings.

**Day 6:** In the morning we took a bus to the marina and boarded our boat to the Islet of Tintorerías. There we had an introduction to the different forms of lava on the islands, learned about the mangrove trees, and saw some blue-footed boobies, a large Galapagos shark, a huge eagle ray, an astounding number of baby marine iguanas, and the white-tipped reef sharks for whom the islet is named. The Galapagos penguins were not present.

Prior to our visit to the island, we snorkeled an area near Las Tintorerías, where we observed and photographed many sea turtles. The photos were later submitted to Dr. Denkinger to add to her census count near the Puerto Villamil marina.

In the afternoon, we returned to town. 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. Two volunteers and one trip leader stayed behind and cleaned up plastic debris along about 1 ½ miles of beach.

**Day 7-8:** In the morning we travelled by open bus to Campo Duro, the location for our next volunteer project. Campo Duro is an Eco-Camp located in the cooler, lush, tropical highlands on the slopes of the Sierra Negra Volcano. Campo Duro works in concert with Galapagos National Park, providing a protected reserve to help raise giant tortoises approximately 15 years old.

The group worked for 2-1/2 days on a variety of projects to improve the tortoise habitat at Campo Duro:

- ConservationVIP covered the cost of a local resident who used a brush cutter to cut down heavy overgrowth that hampered the growth of native grass in a 2 ½ acre enclosure.
- Volunteers raked debris and pulled out inedible plants in the tortoise enclosure. Debris was hauled in tarps and wheelbarrows and piled around the base of the trees in the enclosure to mulch the trees. The cleared ground is now available to the tortoises, and open so that the native grass can spread and grow.
- 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 were transplanted back into raised beds.

Working so close to the typically silent and slow-moving tortoises, at times it was easy to forget they were there. But at moments, their poses were so absorbing, it was easy to grab the camera and forget about the work.

**Day 9:** In the morning we completed our 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.



*Figure 5 Before Clearing Enclosure*



*Figure 6 After Clearing Enclosure*



**Day 10:** The Volunteers travelled by bus to the Sierra Negra trailhead where our enthusiastic local guide gave us a more extensive introduction to the volcanic origins of the Galapagos Islands and hiked up the trail for a view of Sierra Negra volcano. The skies were overcast and drizzly at the beginning and end of our hike. At the summit, the caldera was fogged in, and while it was disappointing not to see the crater, we enjoyed the quiet and mysterious walk through the cloud forest, and learning about the interesting plants that reside there.

That evening we met for a farewell dinner, shared fond memories of our time together in the Galapagos. Volunteers from four different states accomplished meaningful work, created new friendships and were eager to thank each other.

**Day 11:** The aircraft fuel barge did not arrive at Isla Isabela, so there was no fuel available to the small planes that service the islands, including our scheduled flights back to Baltra. Instead, we were transported via boat to the Baltra ferry dock and the airport. We arrived in time to make our flights, said our goodbyes and boarded planes to head home or on to other adventures in the Galapagos and Ecuador.

**Report submitted by: Barbara Kennedy and David Summer, Trip Leaders for ConservationVIP®**



*Figure 7 Galapagos Giant Tortoise*