



PROJECT REPORT GALAPAGOS ISLANDS VOLUNTEER TRIP November 25 – December 5, 2018



Executive Summary

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) organized and led a volunteer trip to the Galápagos Islands during November and December 2018, visiting the Islands of San Cristóbal and Isla Isabela. The eleven-member volunteer group included ConservationVIP® Trip Leaders Mark Hardgrove and Gene Zimmerman. Andres de la Torre, an Ecuadorian guide, 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. Dr. Judith Denkinger Marine Biologist from University of San Francisco de Quito led our sea turtle project work on San Cristobal.

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. Our 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, mostly plastics, on several National Park beaches in the Galápagos, a task that helps the National Park to protect the nesting and feeding shore birds, sea turtles, sea lions and reduces ocean pollution, which negatively impacts all sea life. Along each trail the group brought bags to collect trash.

During the trip, approximately 580 hours were devoted to training, safety meetings, orientation, and volunteer work: 332 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 thousands of underwater photographs. These sea turtle and other marine life photographs are taken to gather 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 248 hours were spent at Campo Duro on Giant Tortoise Habitat Restoration.

Detailed Trip Report

Day 1: ConservationVIP® trip Leaders and the local 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 hiked out to the Interpretive Center, Darwin Bay and Playa Carola, where we saw juvenile and adult frigate birds roosting and sea lions.

Day 2: In the morning, the group met Galapagos National Park Guide, Mafer Gordillo and then we travelled by bus to El Junco Lake, located in the highlands of San Cristobal Island. Named after an endemic sedge located there, El Junco Lake is the only fresh water source in the Galápagos Islands. The hike was cool and misty but allowed beautiful views of the lake. 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 Galapagos 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.

In the afternoon the group hiked to Loberia and then on to the cliffs, cleaning the beaches, trails and public uses areas, picking up mostly plastics.

After returning and cleaning up, the group hiked up to the Galapagos Science Center, University of San Francisco de Quito, for an orientation and presentation by Dr. Judy Denkinger, Marine Biologist, and students on the sea turtle census and research project she had been leading. The group also had a discussion on micro plastics and other types of ocean trash and its effects on

sea life. Having heard the context and purpose for our volunteer work, everyone appreciated the issues and choices to be made into the future. We also enjoyed a tour of the Science Center and all their labs.

Day 3: In the morning our team obtained their snorkeling equipment, practiced snorkeling in the pool and headed off for their first snorkeling experience. We travelled to Playa Loberia, named after the sea lions (lobos), which were abundant both on the beach and in the water. We took our first series of photos and enjoyed the wildlife.



In the afternoon, the group hiked to Playa Carola and continued snorkeling the bay continuing the collection of sea turtles' photographs. It was a beautiful day and many sea turtles and sea lions joined us in the water. Photographing the wildlife was very successful here as many species were happy to have their picture taken.



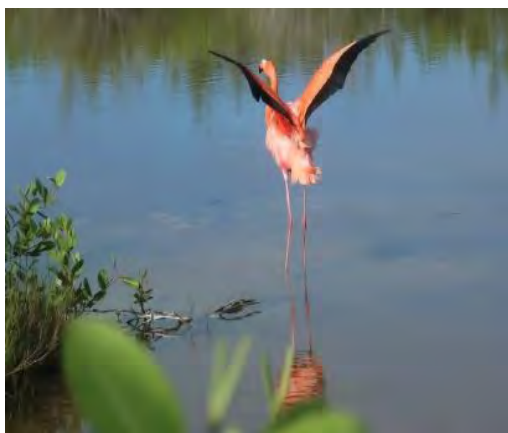
Day 4: After breakfast, the volunteers, guides, and Dr. Judy Denkinger boarded two boats for the trip to Kicker Rock, the remains of a volcanic cone featuring a monolithic rock formation rising over 500 feet above the Pacific Ocean. On the way, the boats stopped on two different beaches. Here the volunteers were able to explore and clean up small bits of trash. Returning to the boats, the group ate lunch on board before leaving for the designated time at Kicker Rock.

The water was beautiful, and the volunteers snorkeled, observed and photographed a number of sea turtles. In addition to photographing sea turtles for the research data, the group saw Galapagos Sharks, sea lions and many species of fish. Back on the boats the group was met by the crew with mugs of local lemongrass tea to warm up with.



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 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, 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 subspecies 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.

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. Following the snorkeling we took a short hike and saw the magic of the area.



In the afternoon, 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.

Days 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 11 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® teams provided supplies, labor and tools to clean three ponds. 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. The volunteers removed the overgrown vegetation allowing better access to the drinking water for the tortoises.



- The limbs and debris were piled to clean up the grounds and allow room for more sun to promote better grasses which the giant tortoises feed on.



- 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 transplanted grass sod.

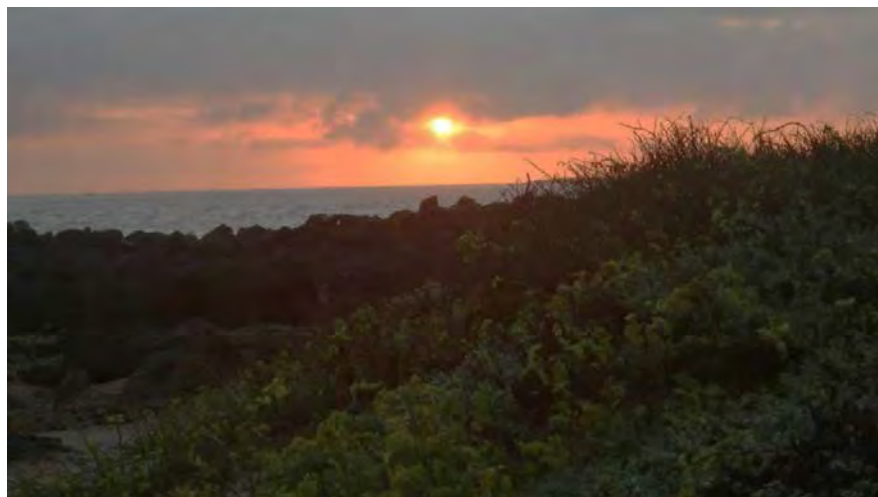


Day 9: In the morning, the group completed tasks in the Tortoise enclosure and cleaned up our tools. After lunch the group packed up, said goodbye to the appreciative Campo Duro staff, and returned to the hotel in town.

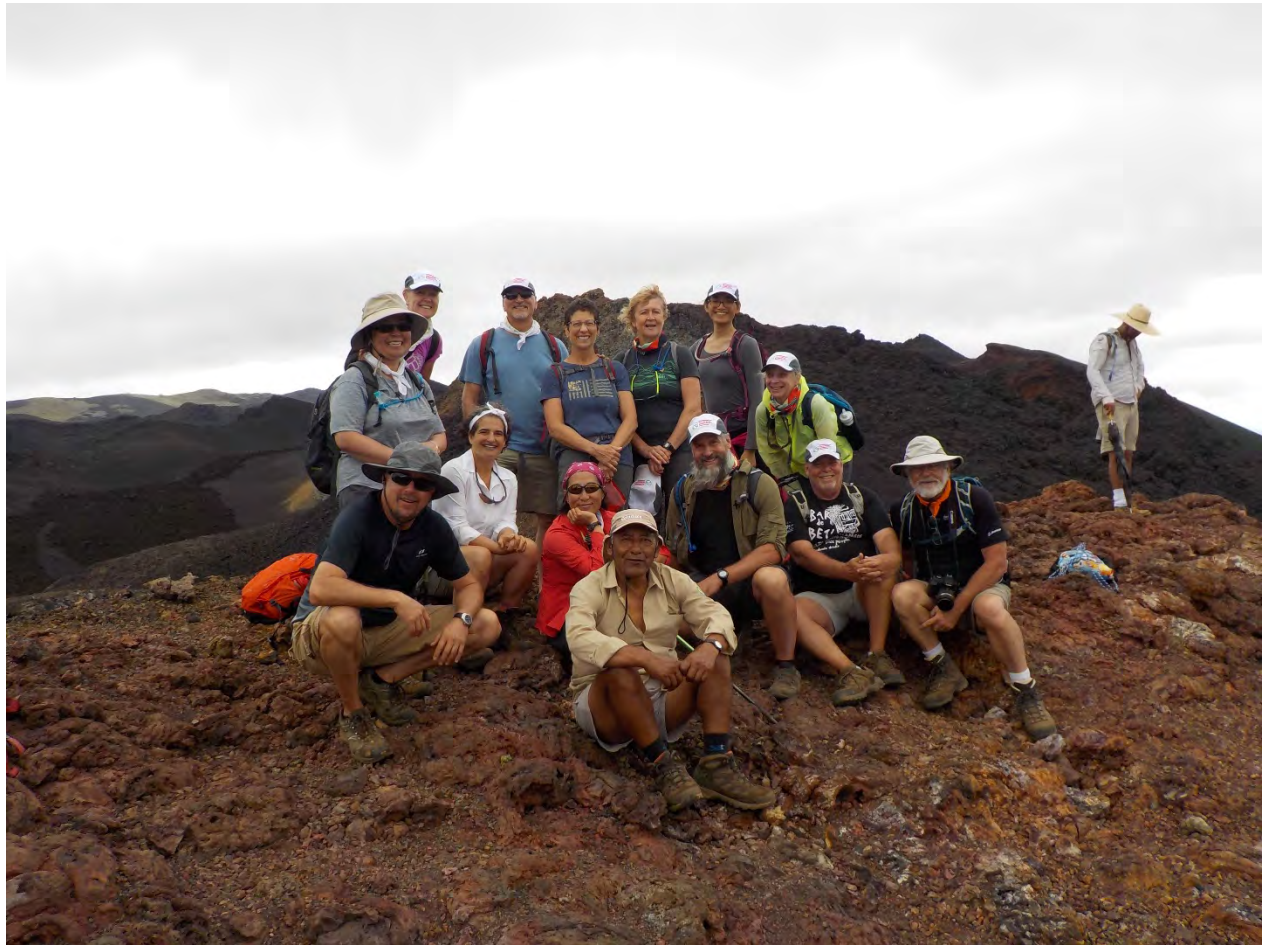


Day 10: The Volunteers travelled by bus to the Sierra Negra trailhead where the local guide gave us a more extensive introduction to the volcanic origins of the Galápagos Islands and hiked up the trail for a view of Sierra Negra volcano. Our group hiked the entire trail for the first time walking the 11-mile path known as Volcan Chico. The skies were overcast. However, keeping with this group's good fortune, at the summit the views of the caldera opened up, revealing fantastic views of the caldera

That evening, the volunteers celebrated their successful project work and new friendships. The volunteers and staff came from all corners of the country. Their compassion, energy and thoughtfulness was outstanding and we enjoyed our time together. The final dinner was a celebration and appreciation for our time together. The evening ended with music and dance.



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 with the assistance of Gene Zimmerman,
Trip Leaders for ConservationVIP®**