



**PROJECT REPORT
GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS VOLUNTEER TRIP
May 22 - June 1, 2022**



Executive Summary

From May 22-June 1, 2022, Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) successfully led a volunteer trip to San Cristóbal and Isla Isabela in the Galápagos Islands. The twelve-member volunteer group included ConservationVIP® trip leaders Mark Hardgrove and Maxwell Perkins. Ecuadorian guide Andres de la Torre assisted the group throughout the trip with transportation, meal logistics, and local guide translations as needed. His knowledge of the park and islands, wildlife, history, birds and culture contributed significantly to the experience of the volunteers. In addition, Genesis Coronel, a certified Galápagos National Park Service local guide, accompanied the group at different locations on the trip.

Group volunteer activities supported the ongoing sea turtle research project conducted by the University of San Francisco de Quito at the Galápagos Science Center on San Cristóbal. Dani Alarcon, Marine Biologist from the University of San Francisco de Quito, led the sea turtle project volunteer work on San Cristóbal. Volunteers photographed sea turtles at four different locations on the islands of Santa Cristobal and Isla Isabela which contributed data for the Center's 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. In addition, trash pickup was conducted on several national park beaches in the Galápagos, helping protect the nesting and feeding of shore birds, sea turtles, sea lions, and reducing ocean pollution that negatively impacts all sea life.

During the trip, 419 volunteer hours were devoted to job training, safety meetings, orientation, and volunteer project works: 216 surveying the sea turtles on San Cristobal and Isabela (Loberia 4; Darwin Bay 4 and Kicker Rock 8, Tintores 2 total 18 hours X 12 volunteers. There were 35 volunteer hours dedicated to beach cleanups, and 168 volunteer hours (including travel and work) were dedicated to the giant tortoise habitat restoration at Campo Duro. Utilizing GoPro cameras at four survey sites, the volunteer group collected ~7000 digital photographs of underwater marine life. These sea turtle and other marine life photographs provide data about sea turtle populations to support the research conducted by the University of San Francisco de Quito at the Galápagos Science Center. Facial recognition software is used to analyze the photographs, giving the researchers new data each trip.



Detailed Trip Report

Day 1: The trip Leaders and Ecuadorian guide Andres de la Torre led an in-depth orientation at the hotel Casa Opuntia on San Cristóbal Island, beginning at 2:00 PM. Following the orientation, the group hiked to the Interpretive Center, Darwin Bay (the location where Charles Darwin first landed in 1835), and Playa Carola, where they enjoyed a variety of marine and wild life, including sea lions, frigate birds, and the endemic marine iguana reptile, the world's only seagoing lizard. In addition, they also began learning about the history of the island with an introduction to the flora/fauna of the island.



Day 2: After a great breakfast, the group travelled by bus to Centro de Crianza de Tortugas Terrestres. At the Crianza, which is part of the Galápagos National Park's semi-natural breeding programs and sanctuaries for giant tortoises, the volunteers began their education and familiarization with giant tortoises. After the visit, the bus then proceeded to Playa Puerto Chino where the group took a short hike to the beach and

the rocks to view the flora and fauna of this location. Beach cleanup was conducted as well.



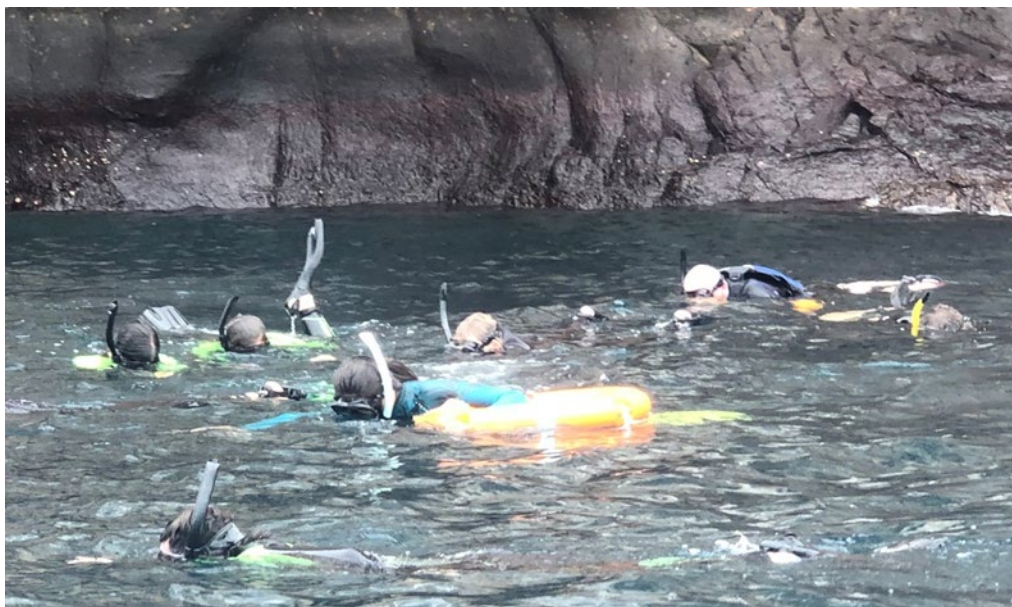
The group then returned to the hotel and walked to lunch. After lunch they were fitted for wet suits, snorkeling and camera gear and then hiked with Dani and the guides to Carola Beach for their first volunteer activity in support of the sea turtle research project. A number of turtles were spotted as well as a beautiful/various fish. This location allowed the volunteers to get comfortable with snorkeling and using the GoPro cameras.

Day 3: After breakfast, the volunteers and guides were transported to Darwin Bay for another snorkeling activity. Sea Lions were plentiful with some sea turtles and schools of various fish. The members of the group were able to practice snorkeling and continue to learn to use the GoPro cameras for underwater photography.

After returning to the hotel for clean-up and lunch the group hiked to the Galápagos Science Center for a tour of the facility. This included an overview of the research labs as well as an orientation to the projects being undertaken at the Science Center. A presentation was made on the facial recognition software approach to identify, classify, and catalog each sea turtle photographed allowing that specific sea turtle to be tracked all over the world giving insight into their migratory patterns, etc. Many questions were asked by the volunteers indicating significant appreciation for the projects in collaboration with the Center. Mark Hardgrove presented a donated GoPro camera to Dani Alarcon on behalf of ConservationVIP® and the volunteers.

Day 4: After breakfast, the volunteers boarded two boats for the trip to Kicker Rock, a volcanic cone featuring a monolithic rock formation rising over 500 feet above the ocean. On the journey they observed many birds including blue-footed Boobies, frigate

birds, and the swallow tail gull. The first stop was at the Cerro Brujo (Witch's Hill) beach where they had a view of Kicker Rock, also known as Leon Dormido (sleeping lion). The groups went on the beach and the guides led them on a short walk while sharing local history and more information about the local flora, fauna and geology. Upon return to the boat, the groups received a locally prepared delicious lunch consisting of rice, fish and vegetable dishes. The boats then proceeded to Kicker Rock and took a tour around this large rock allowing for different views and spotting of wildlife. They then identified the location for the volunteers to enter the water. Both groups spent about 1.5 hours in the water using the GoPro's to take pictures of turtles, fish, sea lions and sharks.



Approximately 47 sea turtles; 3 Eagle Ray Snorkel Sharks and 1 Hammerhead Shark were observed. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the magical underwater views including the colorful reef and the large and dense schools of fish including sharks. Upon returning to the boats, the groups were able to share what they had seen and experienced. The sight of such a large number/variety of sharks was a memorable experience for everyone. On both the trip out and trip in, dolphins accompanied the boats offering an up-close perspective and allowing pictures to be taken of the dorsal fin which is used in identification. A special dinner was prepared at a local fisherman's and chef's home.

Day 5: Due to limited flight service, half of the group of volunteers transferred via air shuttle from the island of San Cristóbal to Isla Isabela early in the morning. Upon arrival to Isla Isabela, the first group of volunteers ate breakfast, got settled in and then spent approximately two hours picking up litter/trash along the beach and observing the wildlife. Several times while the volunteers were doing trash pickup, locals would bring

trash over to place in the bags. In addition to picking up trash, the group began to experience the native wildlife including Marine Iguanas that are endemic to the Galapagos. The second group arrived later that morning. Once everyone was settled in, the group walked next door for an amazing lunch.



After lunch, the volunteers met the local guide Maxi who would be with the group for the remainder of their time on Isabella. The group was outfitted for the bike trip to the Wall of Tears. They received helmets and set out on mountain bikes to ride a ~10-mile roundtrip to the Wall of Tears, which serves as a haunting reminder of the time when Isla Isabela was used as a penal colony. Prisoners toiled in the hot equatorial sun to build this monument as punishment to serve their time. The group got to see a Giant Tortoise in its natural environment along the route. Along the way they stopped at a mature mangrove area and the local guide walked them through a mangrove forest to a freshwater area and explained to the group more about mangroves. After hiking up to the Wall of Tears, some of the group hiked up to the viewpoint where they had an almost 360° view of the island.





Day 6: 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, lava egrets, crabs, and many adult and juvenile marine iguanas, and sea lions inhabit the area.

First, the group performed their fourth and last snorkeling volunteer work in the waters of Las Tintoreras, where sea turtles were photographed for the Galápagos Science Center research project. The area was full of sea turtles and other marine life. In addition, the group was able to swim through a grotto that had a large number of white tip reef sharks resting on the bottom. Following the snorkeling, the group took a short hike led by Maxi, the local guide, exploring lava rock formations, an assortment of iguanas and a few white-tipped reef sharks in the surrounding waters. Various birds were seen including a flamingo; black-necked stilts; moorhens and a white-cheeked pintail.

In the afternoon, Maxi and Andres led the group on a walk to the Centro de Crianza, the Giant Tortoise Center on Isla Isabela, where tortoises are bred and kept in safe captivity from the time they hatch until they reach the maturity necessary for safe release into a wilder environment or into their natural habitat. While at the Crianza, the group learned about the captive breeding program, which supports several subspecies of tortoises. They also learned that Campo Duro, where they would be performing volunteer work later that week, is one of the wilder environments where the young giant tortoises go prior to release in to the wild. At Campo Duro, they would see the 20 new arrivals, approximately 8-year-old tortoises that will spend the next 10 years at this location.

Days 7-9: The group checked out of the hotel the morning of day 7 and boarded the bus to Campo Duro, the location for the next volunteer project of the trip. Campo Duro is an Eco-Camp located in the cooler, lush, tropical highlands on the slopes of the Sierra Negra Volcano. The camp works under permit with the Galápagos National Park. The 6-acre privately-owned camp located within the park boundaries provides a protected reserve to help raise Giant Tortoises. The project for our volunteers for this trip was to cut back the excessive vegetation that had grown, since it had been approximately 2.5 years since a group has been to Campo Duro.



Upon arrival, the group received an orientation and overview of the camp. After lunch, the group began the work focused on cutting back the excessive vegetation and growth along the fenced in area. In addition, the group also raked the property to move the cuttings from the weed whacker who worked 1.5 day at the property, funded by ConservationVIP®. The volunteers slept in tents at the camp. The volunteers saw the immediate benefits of their activities as a number of the tortoise started enjoying the fresh food that had been piled up for them. In addition, the volunteers were able to feed the tortoises. The volunteers enjoyed the beautiful, lush surroundings, organic food, homemade Aji, outdoor showers and the quiet, dark evenings with no artificial light pollution. Evenings were concluded with the enjoyment of music around a pit fire. The group returned back to the hotel Isabella on the morning of day 9.



Day 10: Up early, volunteers travelled by bus to the Sierra Negra trailhead where they started a 10-mile hike. Along the way, the local guide and Andres gave them an extensive introduction to the volcanic origins of the Galápagos Islands including the 2015 and 2018 events. They hiked the trail along the caldera up to the point that was impacted by the 2018 fissure eruption. They saw flora and fauna including the Darwin Daisy and the Mockingbird. The foggy weather gave a magical feel to the location and although views were limited, the volunteers still were able to gain insight into the forces of nature that continue to create the island. On the way back to the hotel the volunteers were provided a lunch by the staff of Campo Duro and some said a final goodbye to the tortoises.



In the evening, volunteers enjoyed a special dinner and celebrated the new friendships and lasting memories. The group had prepared a special presentation for their Ecuadorian guide, Andres, thanking him for his work during the trip including the logistics and arrangements of hotels, rooms and restaurants, the fabulous food and especially his knowledge of the local culture, islands, birds and flora and fauna. The compassion and the positive attitudes of the volunteers on this trip was infectious and aided to the large amount of work done. They made it look easy.



Day 11: In the AM, the group flew to Baltra, arriving in time to catch their connecting flights to other destinations or to home. Volunteers left understanding the significance of the Galapagos and that even small accomplishments make a huge positive impact! Indeed: “ordinary people performing extraordinary services”

Submitted by Mark Hardgrove with the assistance of Maxwell Perkins,
Trip Leaders for Conservation Volunteers International Program