



PROJECT REPORT
GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS VOLUNTEER TRIP
November 20 - 30, 2022

Executive Summary

From November 20-30th, 2022, Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) successfully led a volunteer trip to San Cristóbal and Isla Isabela in the Galápagos Islands. The nine-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 assistance 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 and Emma Tejada, certified Galápagos National Park Service local guides, accompanied the group at various 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 separate 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, a total of 306 volunteer hours were devoted to job training, safety meetings, orientation, and volunteer projects. 162 hours were dedicated to sea turtle data collection and 144 volunteer hours were dedicated to the giant tortoise habitat restoration. Utilizing GoPro cameras at four survey sites (Carola Beach, Darwin Bay, Kicker Rock and Tintoreras), the volunteer group collected ~3500 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), information about the history of the island with an introduction to the flora/fauna of the island. The group learned about endemic vs. native vs. invasive plants and animals.



Day 2:

After 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. The volunteers were able to see tortoises from recently hatched to approximately 10 years of age in the breeding center. They were then able to observe the giant tortoises while they were being fed, observing behavioral characteristics.



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 variety of beautiful 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 sea turtles, marine iguanas and

schools of various fish. The group members by this point were very good with snorkeling and obtained photos of the sea turtles and other marine life.



After returning to the hotel to clean up, the group met at a local restaurant to receive an overview of the research/conservation work being done at the Marine Science Center. They received specific information on how the facial recognition program is used to gain an understanding of marine turtles and assist in the conservation efforts. This allows the individual sea turtle to be tracked all over the world giving insight into their migratory patterns, mating behavior, etc. The turtles are under threat due to warming waters, boat strikes, pollution and number of predators eating the eggs that are laid on shore. Many questions were asked by the volunteers indicating significant appreciation for the projects in collaboration with the Center.



Day 4:

After breakfast, the volunteers boarded a boat 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 boats then proceeded to Kicker Rock and took a tour around this

large rock allowing for different views and spotting of wildlife. On the way, a Bryde's whale and her baby were observed several times breaching the water! Upon arrival at Kicker Rock, A Hammerhead shark was observed swimming the area. The group then began the snorkeling activity. The group spent about 2 hours in the water using the GoPro's to take pictures of turtles, fish, sea lions and sharks. Approximately 15-20 sea turtles were photographed as well as 2 Eagle Rays and a couple of Black Tail Sharks.



Upon returning to the boat, the group shared what they had seen and experienced. The sight of sharks, stingrays and such a large number of sea turtles was an amazing experience. A delicious freshly prepared lunch was then served on the boat.

The group was then taken to a secluded bay with a beautiful beach where we scoured the area for trash. This presented the opportunity to see wildlife in their natural environment including sea lions and marine iguana's.

After returning to the hotel and cleaning up, the group was then taken to a local chef's house for a special dinner. The group said goodbye to Dani and thanked her for the information and education she had provided.

Day 5:

In the morning, the group boarded a plane for a short flight from the island of San Cristóbal to Isla Isabela and checked in to a new hotel.

After lunch, the groups met the local guide Emma and were fitted with their bikes and helmets for the ride to the Wall of Tears. The ~10-mile roundtrip ride ends at 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 Emma 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 360o view of the island.



Day 6:

Today the group shuttled by bus to the marina and boarded a boat to the Islet of Tintoreras where different forms of lava and more mature mangrove trees are found. 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. The area was full of sea turtles and other marine life. Following the snorkeling, the group took a short hike led by Emma, the local guide, exploring lava rock formations, an assortment of iguanas and a few white-tipped reef sharks in the surrounding waters. Various bird species were seen

In the afternoon, Emma 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.

Days 7-9:

In the morning, the group checked out of the hotel 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, cut out and clear several dead trees in the tortoise pen and clean up grass cuttings that had just been mowed down.

Upon arrival, the group received an orientation and overview of the camp including orientation to the tortoise pen where the tortoises stay until they are released into the wild. After lunch, the group began the work of cutting back the excessive vegetation and growth along the fenced in area. In addition, the group raked the property to move the cuttings from the weed whacker funded by ConservationVIP® who worked 2 days at the property.

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 camp fire. The group returned back to the hotel is Isabella on the morning of day 9. While at Campo Duro, the group accomplished the following:

- 125 feet of new plantings
- Cut down and cleaned up 4 large dead trees from the tortoise area.
- Trimmed 400 feet of hedges
- Mowed and raked 3 plus acres of grass and weed clippings that were cut via the weed eater. The volunteers piled up the vegetation for the tortoises to eat.
- Cleared and opened two ponds that were overgrown with tall grass to allow access by the tortoises.





Day 10:

The volunteers travelled by bus to the Sierra Negra trailhead where they started a 10-mile hike. Along the way, Andres gave them an extensive introduction to the volcanic origins of the Galápagos Islands, including the 2015 and 2018 eruption 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. The volunteers were able to gain insight into the forces of nature that continue to create the islands.

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 were infectious and aided to the large amount of work done. They made it look easy.

Day 11:

In the morning, 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