



PROJECT REPORT
GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS VOLUNTEER TRIP
January 22 - February 1, 2023

Executive Summary

From January 22 - February 1st, 2023, Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) successfully led a volunteer trip to San Cristóbal and Isla Isabela in the Galápagos Islands. The eight-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 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. Dr. Judy Denkinger, Marine Biologist/Professor 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, helping protect the nesting and feeding of

shore birds, sea turtles and sea lions, and reducing ocean pollution that negatively impacts all sea life.

During the trip, a total of 264 volunteer hours were devoted to job training, safety meetings, orientation, and volunteer projects: 80 hours of sea turtle survey and data collection, 96 volunteer hours dedicated to the giant tortoise habitat restoration and 88 hours of trash collection. Utilizing GoPro cameras at five survey sites, the volunteer group collected ~2700 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 and Darwin Bay (the location where Charles Darwin first landed in 1835) to learn information about the history of the island and have an introduction to the flora and fauna of the island. An extensive walk was conducted allowing the group to learn 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 40 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 was transported to El Junco for a hike to see the only fresh water lake in the Galapagos. At this site, they were able to observe large numbers of Frigate birds doing an unusual maneuver to wash the oils from their bodies as they do not dive in the water. The group then returned to the hotel and walked to lunch.

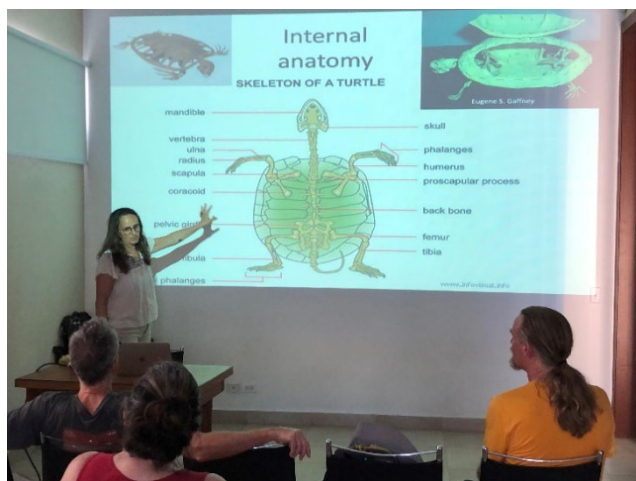


After lunch, the people in the group were fitted for wet suits, snorkeling and camera gear and then hiked with Dr. Denkinger and the guides to Carola Beach for their first volunteer activity in support of the sea turtle research project. A number of turtles were spotted as well as beautiful and various 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 La Loberia. The group hiked to the beach where they deposited their snorkeling gear and then went on a hike allowing them to see a number of birds nesting along the coastal rock formations, marine iguanas and to experience the volcanic activity that has occurred to create the island. After returning to the beach, the group donned their snorkeling gear and snorkeled in La Loberia bay. Sea Lions along with sea turtles, marine iguanas and schools of various fish were plentiful. The group members by this point were very good with snorkeling and obtained photos of the sea turtles and other marine life.

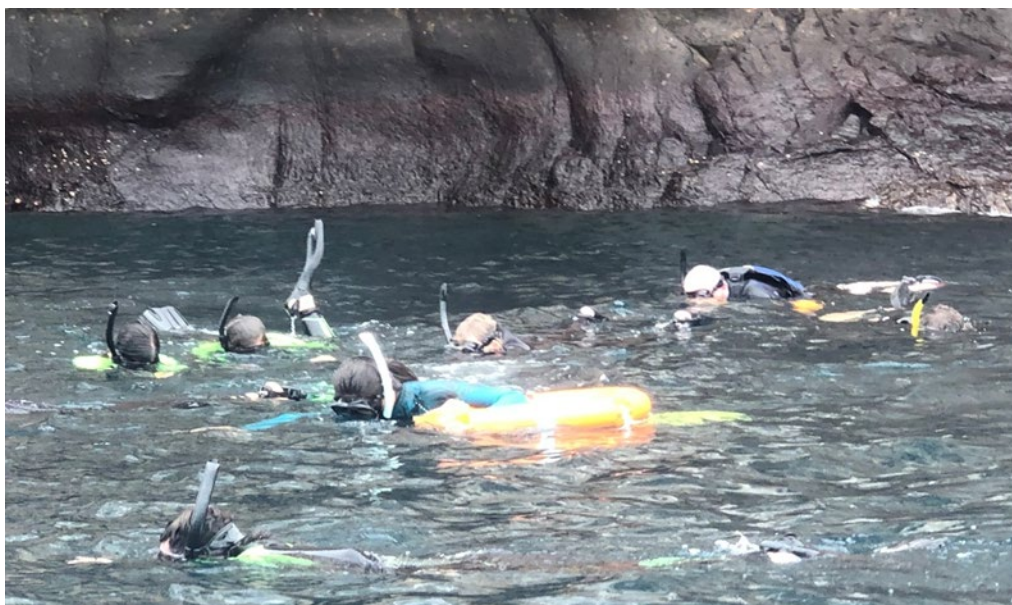
After returning to the hotel to clean-up and enjoying some rest time, the group went to the science center where they received a tour by Dr. Denkinger. The participants were able to see the labs where research is conducted and received an overview of the types of research/conservation work being done at the Marine Science Center. The group then assembled for a slide presentation by Dr. Denkinger. They received specific information on how the facial recognition program is being used to gain an understanding of marine turtles and assist in the conservation efforts. This allows the individual sea turtles 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 a number of predators eating the eggs that are laid onshore. 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. The group spent approximately

two 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 several Eagle Rays and Black Tail/white tip and reef 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 Playa Maglacita. This presented the opportunity to interact with 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. This also provided the opportunity to say goodbye to Genesis and Dr. Denkinger and thank them for the information/education they had provided.

Day 5:

The group boarded a plane for a short flight from the island of San Cristóbal to Isla Isabela. Upon arrival, the group met the local guide, Emma. After arriving at the hotel and checking in, 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 in the week, is one of the wilder environments where the young giant tortoises go prior to release in to the wild.

Following lunch, the group members were then 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 while they served their time.

Along the way, the group got to see several Giant Tortoises in their natural environment. 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 and the important role they play in preventing loss of land mass during storms. Along the way, the group hiked up to the viewpoint where they had an almost 360 degree view of the island.



Day 6:

Today the group was shuttled by bus to the marina and boarded a 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. During the boat tour the group was able to observe a Galapagos Penguin (the most Northern penguin in the world).

First, 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 as well. The group then 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. The activity presented the group the opportunity to continue to take pictures of Sea Turtles for identification purposes.



Upon return to the hotel, the group went for lunch at a local restaurant. In the afternoon, members walked the beach from one end to the other doing beach cleanup/liter patrol. A large amount of liter was obtained from the effort.

Days 7-8

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 operates under permit with the Galápagos National Park. The 6-acre privately-owned camp is located within the park boundaries. It provides a protected reserve to help raise Giant Tortoises in a more natural environment prior to be released into the wild. The project for our volunteers for this trip was to cut back the excessive vegetation, clean out the water pond used by the tortoises, plant new vegetation and clean up piles of debris.

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, focused on cutting back the excessive vegetation and growth along the fenced in area. In addition, the group also planted a number of branches of clippings along the fence to grow and prevent the tortoises from being able to push out under the fence.



In addition, a weed whacker funded by ConservationVIP® worked for two days to trim the grass and weeds. 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. While at Campo Duro, the group accomplished the following:

- Three hundred feet of new plantings
- Cleaned out a concrete pond used by the tortoises.
- Trimmed 928 feet of hedge.
- Consolidated piles of debris to create more grass space for the tortoises to be able to use for feeding.



Day 9:

The Volunteers left Campo Duro after breakfast to return to the local hotel. They were then transported to The Tunnels snorkeling area which is known for its rich population of sea life. The group was able to observe several Blue Footed Boobie mating dances. Upon entering the water to snorkel, the group was able to photograph a number of large sea turtles (the largest seen thus far), white tip sharks, a stingray, a Moray Eel, an octopus as well as several sea horses of which the size is unique to the Galapagos. The topography of the land underwater consists of a number of tunnels created by lava flows, giving the volunteers a different perspective on the lava formations from what they had seen previously. On the way back from the diving site, several Orcas were spotted, which is a rare sighting!

**Day 10:**

The volunteers travelled by bus to the Sierra Negra trailhead where they started a ~10-mile hike. Along the way, the local guide Emma and 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. The volunteers were able to gain insight into the forces of nature that continue to create the island.

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 and Maxwell Perkins, Trip Leaders for ConservationVIP®

