

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

REPORT ON EXPEDITION/PROJECT/CONFERENCE

Expedition/Project/Conference Title: Operation Wallacea Honduras Expedition 2010

Travel Dates: 9 June to 23 June 2010

Location: Cusuco National Park, Honduras

Group Members: Audrey Chia Yan Qi

Aims: To gain an experience in conservation and biodiversity research

Report:

Waking up at the break of dawn in the midst of lush greenery, to the calls of crickets and cicadas right at my ears; this was probably the closest experience I had with nature. The 2 weeks in Honduras in Summer 2010 as a volunteer research assistant with Operation Wallacea was a learning experience that was comparable to no other. Other than being 'close to nature', the experience broadened my horizons and taught me life skills that I would never be able to learn in the classroom.

My first week in Honduras was devoted to jungle training and acquiring skills required for field study. I am particularly excited in being able to learn some skills for field studies. Among them are the ways to measure the height of trees in the wild using trigonometry and simple handheld devices, the determination of percentage canopy cover using simple hand-made tools like a stick and a CD cover, and also the ways to accurately measure out 10 metres by 10 metres quadrats etc. With the hands-on experience of learning these techniques out in the field, I managed to find out for myself the practical difficulty and limitations of these techniques. For example, forming a 10m by 10m quadrat would seem like a simple and straightforward issue if it is taught purely in theory. However, by carrying out the actual technique, I have learnt that there are actually limitations involved, and that it required a far larger amount of people than I had imagined. This reaffirmed my belief that certain things are much better learnt by experience.



Figure 1 and 2: Learning how to handle hummingbirds and bats caught in nets.

Besides grasping field study techniques, I also had the chance to learn about many different types of animals within that one week. In my opinion, the sign-up system was an excellent idea since it gave me freedom to plan for and participate in the various

activities available. I was involved in a wide array of activities, which included small mammal trapping, bat surveys in the nights and mist-netting of birds that took place early in the morning. I am truly thankful to be given the chance to get a sneak peek into how each of these operates. What left a deep impression on me was how the researchers paid a lot of attention to the well-being of the animals they were trapping. In fact, they were even more concerned about that than getting the results of their studies. The researchers ensured that the time they put out the mist nets and the intervals they checked the nets were carefully controlled so that none of the birds/ bats will be left trapped in the nets for too long. One specific incident that happened was a sudden downpour when we were looking at birds caught in mist nets. Although the rain was heavy, and the base camp was not far away, the priority then was to remove the bird from the nets first. The hummingbirds that were caught had very high metabolism rates, and will die if they were not removed from the nets soon enough. I was truly impressed by the thoughtfulness of the researchers, and it reminded me how ethics should always be an integral part of research.



Figure 2: Cooking in the wild under a shelter made by the group

the sweat, soil and smoke was definitely memorable as well. Despite the discomfort, I was particularly glad at having the chance to interact and get closer to my fellow volunteers. As this programme by Operation Wallacea reaches out to students from Universities in the US and Canada, other than in the UK, I got acquainted with many other people who were similarly interested in the environmental conservation and different areas of Biology, and I also really enjoyed knowing more about their background, how teaching is like in their schools, and how different their lifestyles are back at home.

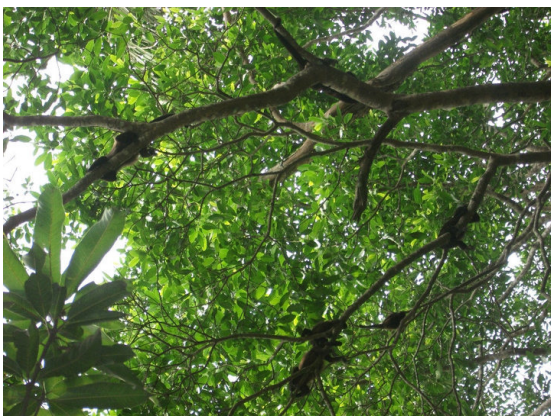


Figure 3: Howler monkeys resting on the tree

Apart from the research itself, the jungle training in the first week of the programme also equipped me with vital survival skills in the wild. The entire experience was indeed helpful, as I learnt to build hammocks steady enough for me to sleep in through the night, make fire so as to cook our own dinner as well as build shelter to protect ourselves from the rain. The entire experience of not showering for 2.5 days despite

In the second week of the programme, I chose to join the howler monkey team in their howler monkey study. This experience provided me with an insight into what researchers really do in behavioural studies. 6 hours each day were spent on observing the same group of howler monkeys, and recording their activity every 10 minutes. As howler monkeys spend 90% of their time ‘resting’, observing them was definitely not an interesting activity.

Inevitably, the study got mundane and boring at times and I

must admit that it takes a lot of passion for their study area, for the researcher to carry on doing this after so many years. Nevertheless, I did take away certain things in my one week of ‘monkey study’. I learnt how to differentiate male and female, adult and juvenile howler monkeys, as well as how to interpret certain movements and calls and how they translate into certain activities. These differentiations do not sound as easy as it may seem, as the parts of the tree that the monkey feeds on has to be determined by some of their subtle but specific actions, such as pulling tree branches closer to their face (to get the younger leaves).

Moreover, I got to learn a few Spanish words relating to the monkeys and their activities as the guide was a Honduran. Other than carrying out the behavioural study, there was also chance to interact with the local guide, and learn more about his lifestyle and culture. Other than that, I also spent quite a lot of time studying the surroundings, observing the plants and invertebrates in the area. I was deeply interested in the diversity of beautiful invertebrates I found, which I probably would have missed out if I had not had plenty of time to spare! The collection of beautiful photos of these invertebrates is definitely one of the many valuable take away from my 2 weeks in Honduras (I especially like the multi-coloured grasshopper!)



Figure 4: Interesting beautiful invertebrates that I found!

I have definitely learnt a great deal in the short but exciting 2 weeks in Honduras. Other than being a memorable experience, I am also proud to have acquired hard skills and practical knowledge from this programme. If I were to take part in such a programme again, I believe that I would be able to benefit more if I could learn the basics of the local language, so that I can understand and interact with the locals more. I am sure that that will make it an even more enriching experience.



I sincerely thank James Rennie Bequest for their grant which allowed me to take part in this unforgettable as well as meaningful experience with Operation Wallacea in Honduras.