

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

REPORT ON EXPEDITION/PROJECT/CONFERENCE

Expedition/Project/Conference Title: Blue Ventures Marine Conservation Expedition

Travel Dates: 22.6.2010 - 21.8.2010

Location: Andavadoaka, Madagascar

Group Member(s): Elina Jacobs (and other volunteers who joined the expedition independently)

Aims: My aims in this project were getting some practical experience in scientific research and deepening my understanding of sustainable development under the guidance of local and international scientists, all while contributing to a project that has an important impact on the ecology of the region and the development of the local community.

OUTCOME (not less than 300 words):-

Arrival on the Expedition Site

After having taken the overland tour from Antananarivo to Toliara organised by Blue Ventures, we were greeted by Blue Ventures (BV) staff at a Hotel in Toliara where we spent a day before going to the actual expedition site in Andavadoaka. We travelled from Toliara to Andavadoaka in an old army camion, into the back of which we put some mattresses, upon which we sat and laid during the 14 hour drive through the Spiny Tree forest and along the coast of the Mozambique channel.

We arrived at the expedition site late in the evening and were welcomed by local and international BV staff that had not come to Toliara. We were shown into our huts and had dinner, after which we went to sleep as it had been a long exhausting day.

The following morning we woke up to a stunning view, as our huts were at the beach and looking out onto the Mozambique channel. The first day we were shown around the site, told what the scientific program for our expedition would be and explained the safety issues, as it is a very remote site and the available medical facilities are very limited.

Picture: Sun rising over Andavadoaka village

Scientific training

Throughout the expedition, we were given lectures almost every afternoon on various different topics. The focus during the first two weeks was on learning what we would be doing over the course of six weeks – benthos and fish identification. As I was a non-diving volunteer, I did not need to pass a test in the former, but out of personal interest, I participated in the lectures and workshops on coral reef and benthos. However, I had to learn most of the fish species that occur in the waters of the western Malagasy coast as I was going to be involved in a sea grass project that Blue Ventures is running. In order to pass, I had to take a computer test and identify fifty pictures of different fish species and recognise all the families correctly and mistake at maximum 5 species. Furthermore did I have to pass a point-out test under water while snorkelling.

Over the course of the expedition, we received many more lectures on various other topics, the Malagasy culture, sustainability and conservation, the Mangroves, Sea Cucumber farming, octopus fishing, the family planning project and Marine mammals, to name only a few.



Sea Grass Project

As I already briefly mentioned before, I joined the Blue Ventures expedition as a non-diver. While most of the other volunteers went out in the morning to dive, myself and another non-diving volunteer worked on the Sea Grass Project. In the beginning, and whenever they weren't needed in diving, one of the field scientists would go with us to different sites within walking distance to do timed snorkels, during which we would collect the following data:

site

date and time

tidal level

visibility

Species of fish and number

Location of sighting – sand, rock or seagrass, as well as abundance of seagrass

These data were then going to be used by the field scientists to assess the condition and biodiversity of the different sites which very often were fishing sites or current no-take zones.

Further duties

Even though I wasn't diving myself, I participated in the diving related activities several times by either shore or boat marshalling.

Furthermore, all volunteers were asked to participate in a number of other duties, such as keeping the teaching and dive-gear spaces clean, collecting weather data daily and entering all data gathered on dives and snorkels into a computer for back-up.

The Spiny Tree Forest

Even though Blue Ventures is primarily concerned with marine conservation, they were also going to launch a terrestrial project in the following expedition, for which the other non-diving volunteer and I helped running a few preparations. The aim of this project is to compare the abundance in reptiles and insects between degraded and pristine parts of the Spiny Tree Forest that shapes the southwestern coast of Madagascar. For this purpose, one of the field scientists and a local BV staff member went with us for walks into the forest and noted down the GPS coordinates of potential research sites that were within walking distance of the expedition site.

Family Planning

Blue Ventures has established a small clinic on site, to which once a week women from the local and nearby villages can come to receive advice on sexual health and family planning. The aim of the project is to improve the health of women, provide safe methods of contraception for them and at the same time, fight the exponential population growth that Madagascar is experiencing. In addition to the clinic on sight, the current medical staff and the Malagasy nurse also went on outreach trips to further away villages to educate women and make family planning methods accessible to as many people as possible. Currently, over half of Madagascar's population is aged 14 or below, and as a growing population will put more and more stress on the environment, Blue Ventures now also employs a Population, Health and Environment Coordinator to develop a holistic approach to conservation.

I helped out at the clinic, mainly by typing the patient's details onto the computer. The clinic is held by a trained Malagasy nurse, and even though the discussions between the nurse and the patients were in Malagasy, it was a very interesting opportunity to gain an insight into the women's life. As the concept of Population, Health Environment seemed very interesting to me, I had several discussions with the Coordinator and came to the conclusion that it seems like a profession I would very much enjoy. Hence having had the opportunity to experience this first hand was very inspiring for my future career plans, and I am very grateful I had that opportunity.

Camping Trip

Blue Ventures does not only conduct research at the sites in Andavadoaka, but also occasionally goes to gather data in some further away sites. Hence, we went on a camping trip to Belavenuke, where I boat marshalled while the diving volunteers and one of the field scientists were doing science dives, and where we all also went for a snorkel survey.

We were lucky to have great visibility and I had the chance to snorkel around some shallow coral reefs which was the most stunning things I have ever seen, and as Belavenuke is located next to a large mangrove forest, it was a great opportunity to see this unique habitat.

Blue Ventures Conference

My stay at the Blue Ventures research site happened to coincide with the first big Blue Ventures conference – all staff, from different parts of Madagascar and outside, that are working on the Madagascar project came to Andavadoaka for a three-day conference, discussing what has been achieved so far, what should be done in future and what can be improved. It was an incredible opportunity to experience first-hand how such an organisation is run, the volunteers were allowed to attend any talks and workshops they wished, and there was also specifically a session where we were asked to give our input – say what we thought could be improved for future volunteers. It was an amazing opportunity to see all the different projects that are going on, even though we received lectures about different things, as volunteers, we did not know about everything, and having the possibility to see more of the “whole picture” made us all very proud of what we were contributing to.

Overall experience

It was an absolutely incredible experience. Before setting off, I knew that Madagascar is one of the biodiversity hotspots worldwide, but once I had set foot on the island, it struck me how obvious it is. The biodiversity is stunning, I couldn't believe how many different habitats one could find so close to each other, how unique everything encountered was, and how fragile it is, as in many places, the destruction through human activity was easily visible. However I feel incredibly grateful for having been able to see the beauty of the different habitats, and for having been able to see what can be done to protect it and at the same time help people manage their resources responsibly.

The expedition taught me a lot about how field biology works in practice and I feel I gained some valuable insights, but most importantly it was a truly inspiring trip which confirmed for me that I want to work on the improvement of circumstances of those who have less possibilities than we do in the western world.



Picture: Group picture of the volunteers taken during the conference. I myself am the third from left.