

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

REPORT ON EXPEDITION/PROJECT/CONFERENCE

**Expedition/Project/
Conference Title:**

Operation Wallacea

Travel Dates:

2nd July – 31st July 2013

Location:

Cusuco National Park & Cayos Cochinos Marine Park, Honduras.

Group member(s):

Christina Mackie

Aims:

Gain experience in the field a research assistant.

OUTCOME (not less than 300 words):-

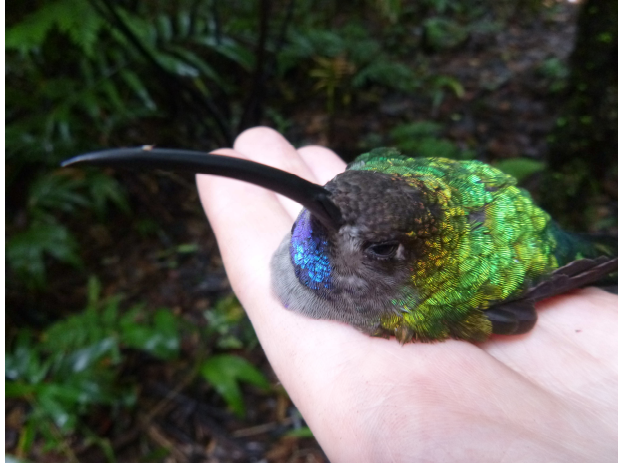
The expedition I chose with Operation Wallacea was to spend two weeks in Cusuco National Park followed by two weeks in Cayos Cochinos Marine Park. I used the money from James Rennie Bequest towards my travel expenses.

The beginning of my first week was spent in base camp of Cusuco National Park where I completed a forest ecology course. Over these three days I learnt about the abundance and diversity of species present in the Honduran rainforest and those endemic to Cusuco as well as being introduced to species surveying and habitat monitoring techniques via a series of lectures and practicals. In the evenings we also had the possibility to join research teams for both herpetofauna and invertebrates. The reptile and amphibian team would leave on a night transects looking in particular for evidence of chytrid fungus in amphibians, while the invert team organised light trapping to catch a range of species including colourful scarab beetles.

In the last few days of this week I completed jungle training with seven other research assistants. Each day involved hiking through the rainforest carrying our rucksacks, food and hammocks until we reached our camp for the night. We were left to set up our own hammocks, start a fire and cook all our meals each night. This experience definitely required organisation, determination, patience and most importantly team work. Everyone agreed it had been an excellent way to bring people closer together to form a strong group.

My second week was based in El Danto on the west coast of park, with an altitude of around 2000m. It took us two days to hike there, stopping for the night at the 'west coast base camp': Santo Thomas, before a six and a half hour uphill trek to El Danto the following day. I was based in El Danto for a full week as a research assistant with a free choice and decision to which research teams I wanted to work with. There was the opportunity to join invertebrate, large mammals, birds, herpetofauna, bats and habitat teams. I split most of my time between the large mammal team and the bird team. Large mammal transects were used to track species of large mammal in Cusuco via evidence of foraging, tracks, dung or nests. Examples we came across included tapir tracks, coati foraging and armadillo nests. I particularly enjoyed working with the bird team because I joined them early on so was soon asked to help out with more hands-on tasks including setting up/taking down/fixing mist nets, untangling caught birds from the nets and handling and identifying a variety of birds including hummingbirds and nightingales.

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In recent years Cusuco National park has seen an increase in illegal deforestation for coffee plantations, cattle grazing and logging. Operation Wallacea conducts biodiversity surveys and assessment of the parks biomass to allow for effective conservation of the park. This is primarily done by using the research to apply for REDD+ funding (Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation plus conservation) which allows long-term conservation management and research in Cusuco to continue. The money provided by students supports the research and local communities allowing sufficient data to be collected for a REDD+ application.

My last two weeks was spent in Cayos Cochinos a scientific marine park only researchers and Honduran government are allowed to visit. Tourists that do arrive on boat trips from other islands are given 15 minutes before having to leave the marine protected area.

In my first week I completed my PADI open water dive training and became a certified diver. This was an experience I am very grateful for as it has introduced me to a new passion of scuba diving. The following week I completed a reef ecology course which included lectures and underwater practicals learning about coral, algae, fish and marine invertebrate identification.

Operation Wallacea is interested in comparing the marine protected area of Cayos Cochinos with non-protected reefs of the nearby island Utila which is a popular tourist and diving location. Cayos Cochinos Marine Protected Area is managed by the Honduran Coral Reef Foundation which places a limit on fishing in volume and species while ensuring income lost to the local fisherman is compensated by providing alternative jobs. By monitoring the reefs Operation Wallacea is able to follow the success of creating a marine protected area in the long term and helps in predicting possible damage to the reef by global warming, hurricanes and its recovery time.

I would like to thank the James Rennie Bequest for their funding which allowed me to be part of an important research and conservation project. The experience overall was one I will never forget and I am grateful to have learnt so much during my time there.