JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

REPORT ON EXPEDITION/PROJECT/CONFERENCE

Expedition/Project/ Conference Title: Operation Wallacea, Honduras 2012

Travel Dates: 11th July- 8th August 2012

Location: Honduras

Group member(s): Sarah Scott

Aims: To gain experience in scientific research in the field and to assist with the monitoring and conservation of key taxa

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OUTCOME (not less than 300 words):-

The money I received from the James Rennie Bequest went towards funding my expedition to Honduras in the summer of 2012 to take part as a research assistant with several on-going conservational projects, both within the rainforest, and at an island marine site. It was a truly incredible and rewarding experience that allowed me to gain valuable research experience in an area I hope to pursue as a career in the future.

I spent the first two week of my expedition between two different sites in Cusuco National Park within the Honduran rainforest. At the first site, I took part in a jungle training course that provided me with essential survival skills required to live in this type of environment. These included how to safely collect drinking water, how to determine if certain plant material is safe to ingest, and how to navigate through the forest and what to do if I became lost. During this time I slept in a hammock which I had great fun learning how to put up myself.

I was then able to assist in the collection of data for several of the different scientific teams. This included mist netting with the bat team to catch and record the number and species of bats living within national park. I then helped the team take several measurements including wing span and parasite load. This was a great experience as I'd never been so up close and hands on with bats before, an animal I have always been interested in. I was also able to assist the herpetological and invertebrate teams in the collection of several organisms including frogs, where we were investigating the presence of a lethal fungus. In order to improve and perfect my identification skills and knowledge of the wildlife within the park, our group was given a series of informative lectures and a final test which allowed me to gain valuable knowledge and increase my awareness of the endangerment faced by many species.

We then moved to a lower altitude site in the second week which was much hotter and more humid, therefore providing habitat for an array of different flora and fauna not present at the first site. Here, I learnt how to set up different types of insect traps with the invertebrate team to help with the collection of various insects. After gaining experience with mist netting in the first week, I was able to get really involved helping with the mist netting with the bird team and learned how to take various measurements of different tropical birds.

The second two weeks of my expedition were spent at the marine site on the island Cayos Cochinos where I underwent dive training and earned my PADI open water certification. As I had never been diving before, this was my favourite part of the expedition as the marine life

I was able to experience was incredible. We also received a set of lectures on the different organisms present on the marine site and how to recognise and correctly identify them whilst underwater. I was taught the hand signals for several types of fish and invertebrate used by marine researchers to communicate with each other underwater, which proved extremely useful. I found taking part in the marine research both fascinating and exhilarating and my time as a research assistant at the dive site has inspired me to consider taking part in further marine research. On the island I was also able to assist in research on the endemic pink boa constrictor and several other snakes and iguanas which was very interesting.

Overall, I am hugely thankful for the funding I received from the James Rennie Bequest as I would have otherwise been unable to take part in such an amazing experience that has allowed me to gain an insight into scientific research in the field. My time as a research assistant in Honduras has allowed me to develop valuable research skills and scientific knowledge that will prove extremely helpful to pursuing a career in conservation and research.