

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

REPORT ON EXPEDITION/PROJECT/CONFERENCE

Expedition/Project/

Conference Title: Operation Wallacea, Honduras 2012

Travel Dates: July 3, 2012 – August 2, 2012

Location: Cusuco National Park and Utila, Honduras

Group member(s): Charlotte Stewart

Aims: Gain experience in the field as a research assistant helping collect biodiversity data for the conservation group Opwall.

OUTCOME (not less than 300 words):-

Traveling to Honduras with Operation Wallacea during the summer of 2012 will be an experience I will always look back upon with great satisfaction and thanks to the James Rennie Bequest for their support in making it possible. I was in the country for four weeks, spending two weeks in Cusuco National Park and a further two weeks on the island of Utila. As a zoology undergraduate I have always been attracted to anything and everything animal, but I had never had the opportunity to experience so much biodiversity first hand before traveling to Honduras. This was also my first time traveling to Central America, which made it an even more interesting and memorable trip.

Just the view from the airplane window was a novel experience for me. The dark, sprawling forests and muddy, winding rivers had me buzzing with anticipation to actually be down on the ground. I spent my first night in San Pedro Sula, which is not considered one of the safest cities in the world, but which I felt quite safe in with Opwall. My expedition began very early the next morning as we were moved out of the city on a bus and then moved onto pick-ups to make our journey into the actual national park and to Base Camp. The ride up the mountain was our first opportunity to really get a feel for the cloud forest, which did not fail to impress. Base Camp is located on the East side of the park, which is the wetter side. After being given a tour of camp and getting a feel for how things work at a field site, we settled down for our first night in the jungle.

The first week of my stay was occupied by jungle training where we were sent out from Base Camp for three nights with food supplies and shelter in the form of hammocks and bashas. We were split into two groups and had to make our own fires, cook our food, and set up our hammocks each evening after hiking to a new campsite. While on jungle training we also learnt survival skills such as navigation and finding food, water and shelter if you were lost in a jungle. We also encountered a lot of local fauna including snakes such as the poisonous palm viper, insects, amphibians, birds, and were even awoken by a howler monkey one morning. Once back at Base Camp we were given lectures about the different plant and animal groups found in the park as well as general information and a history of the park. There are seven camps in Cusuco and different groups travel between the camps to

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

collect data for the different teams. At Cusuco, Operation Wallacea has a herpetofauna team, bird team, bat team, small mammal team, large mammal team, invertebrate team, and carbon team. During this first week we also went on herp walks at night to sample frogs for chytrid fungus, set up pitfall traps, and baited and checked the small mammal traps. All the data collected by the teams is used to monitor the biodiversity of the park and determine whether conservation efforts are being successful or where more attention needs to be given.

During my second week in the jungle I went to the West side of the park to the camp Santo Tomas. The West side of the park is dryer and has undergone a lot more deforestation so has many more open valleys and fields used to graze domestic animals and grow coffee. I dedicated most of my time during this week with the bat team. We were a small group and there were many bats so there was always lots to be done. I learnt to set up mist nets, remove bats from the nets, handle them appropriately to be able to measure, weight and tag them, and finally identify their species. It takes quite a practiced eye however to note the subtleties that distinguish closely related species. I also spent some time with the bird team who never ceased to amaze me with their incredible ear and knowledge of hundreds of different birdcalls. Finally I went out several times with the carbon group who were collecting important data estimating the amount of carbon stored in the trees of the park. This kind of data is being collected in the hopes that Cusuco will one day be able to enter the United Nations Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation Programme (UN-REDD). Measuring trees is much harder than it sounds and I found it very challenging to make good estimates. While in Santo Tomas we also visited a local house where coffee was roasted and ground to be sold in the city. Many families use coffee as a source of income, which is having devastating affects, as people keep moving further into the park that lacks rangers and law enforcement methods. My weeks in the jungle were very enjoyable, if not a bit wet and muddy, and I was sad to say goodbye. In week three though I made my way to the island of Utila just off the Eastern Honduran coast.



-Working with the bat and herpetofauna teams at night.

Arriving in Utila after my time in the jungle was like returning to luxury. We were logged in a hotel with bunk beds and running water. Here I spent a week taking my PADI Open Water Dive course and then my second week doing coral reef ecology

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

training. This was my first time ever diving and I became hooked almost immediately. I found it truly is a different world underwater when you can stay submerged for so long. The coral reefs around Utila are in very good condition despite it not being an officially protected area. The island's small population recognizes the importance of the coral reefs for the essential tourist industry so has protected it in its own interest. The local captains respect certain rules such as only tying up boats to buoys instead of setting anchors, which helps greatly in preserving the reefs. Biodiversity data from Utila is compared to data collected in Cayos Cochinos, a highly protected island group also part of Honduras. Surprisingly, being highly protected does not necessarily make the reefs in Cayos healthier than the ones around Utila and more research was going into understanding why. We were also given lectures about the reefs and their sustainability. We learnt the names of the indicator species of algae, coral, invertebrates, and fish in the area. While on dives we saw many spotted rays, lobsters, sea urchins, butterfly, angel, and parrot fish, along with many other fantastic organisms living on and around the coral. I also got to learn a little about Mangroves, which form an important part of reef ecological systems. Going into the town on Utila was interesting as it really becomes obvious that the island relies on diving tourism and half the people on the island are there to see the reefs. We were also lucky enough to be on the island during their week of carnival festivities, which involved a parade and lots of colourful beads, feathers and celebrating.

The weeks flew by and having to go home was difficult to face. I enjoyed my time in Honduras immensely and feel I gained a lot of experience and practical skills as well as discovering a new culture and area of the world. Being around and watching professionals of my field of study motivated me and made me quite eager for the future. I am so grateful I had this opportunity and that I was helped by the James Rennie Bequest. It was definitely a reinforcement of my passions and has made me want to do many more expeditions and return to Central America. I deeply thank all the members on the committee for their support.



- Jungle training group before setting out from Base Camp and diving training group on our final dive.