



**PROJECT REPORT
GALAPAGOS ISLANDS VOLUNTEER EXPEDITION
March 14 – 24, 2016**

Executive Summary



March 2016 Galapagos Volunteers at Campo Duro, Isabela Island

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP) organized and led our third volunteer expedition to the Galapagos Islands in partnership with REI Adventures, visiting the Islands of San Cristóbal and Isabella March 14 – 24, 2016.

ConservationVIP provided 14 volunteers, including Trip Leader Mark Hardgrove and Assistant Trip Leader Janice Ballak. Andres de la Torres, our local guide from Ecuador Adventures assisted us.

Total Volunteer Hours Contributed: 602

Over 602 hours of work was donated to Galapagos Islands in less than a two-week period. On the island of Isabella the National Park has 15 employees. ConservationVIP nearly doubled their staff size with one volunteer team.

The following training, education, data collection and other volunteer work were completed during this expedition: More than 406 volunteer hours were dedicated to the sea turtle data collection and project completion. In addition more than 196 hours were spent at Campo Duro on Giant Tortoise Habitat Restoration, which included weeding, replanting and grass trimming.

ConservationVIP volunteers got along fantastically, and integrated well with the Marine Science Center staff and students, other visitors, Galapagos residents, and folks we met on the islands while doing our work. The volunteers took the opportunity to use all protective equipment, data collection equipment, tools and gear during the course of the surveys and project work. The volunteers used the Go Pro Hero 3+ underwater cameras previously donated by REI for the sea turtle documentation project.

The weather was mostly hot and sunny during the workdays. The temperatures were hot and humid during daytime, high 80's and high 70's at night. ConservationVIP Volunteers worked through the hot, humid days focusing work in the shady areas of Campo Duro.



Volunteers at Galapagos Science Center, San Cristobal Island

Detailed Trip Report

Day 1: Casa Opuntia, our hotel on San Cristóbal Island.

Trip Leaders and our Local Guide Andres de la Torre conducted an in depth orientation and briefing at the hotel beginning at 2:00 PM. The remainder of the afternoon was spent with volunteers fitting snorkelling gear to be used for the sea turtle photo survey.

Day 2: We left Casa Opuntia by bus for an island orientation and to snorkel and photograph sea turtles at Playa Puerto Chico. Next we visited the Galapaguera reserve. La Galapaguera is the nearby breeding station and sanctuary for giant tortoises where we learned about the captive breeding programs and some of the work necessary and how we could help.

In the afternoon we hiked from Casa Opuntia to the Interpretive Center where we learned about the natural history of the Galapagos Islands.

Dr. Judith Denkinger, Marine Biologist from the Galapagos Science Center, University of San Francisco de Quito provided an orientation for our volunteer project with sea turtles. ConservationVIP is participating in a long term study and census of sea turtles as part of ongoing research on the impacts of increased boat traffic on sea turtles being conducted by Dr. Denkinger.



Dr. Judi explaining to the group how the research is done and demonstrating the turtle recognition software.

We also viewed a video developed by the Science Center on the impacts of plastics to the environment and marine life and then watched the sunset from the top floor of the Science Center.

Days 3 – 4: Our Volunteers conducted a sea turtle census.

Our project for the next two days consisted of assisting researchers with a sea turtle census. We photographed turtles while snorkelling, to identify the individuals by their unique markings, patterns and any injuries, and provide other on-shore assistance with the survey.

Our first day performing the sea turtle research project consisted of snorkelling at Loberia Beach, a popular beach with locals and tourists located approximately one mile from Puerto Baquerizo Moreno. This area is known for its resident population of sea turtles. Several sea turtles were observed and photographed by the volunteers for later identification.

Our second day of the sea turtle research project involved taking two boats to the research site surrounding Kicker Rock, and surface snorkelling in water too deep to touch or see the ocean bottom. Sea turtles were observed and were photographed for later identification. Our volunteers were accompanied by Dr. Denkinger, who provided advice and additional education about the sea turtle population in the area.



Sea Turtles are identified by the patterns on their faces, and compared with a database maintained marine biologist Dr. Judith Denkinger.

Day 5: Air shuttle in two groups from San Cristobal to Isla Isabela hotel/airport transfer via truck/taxi. The first group of 7 passengers flew on EMETEBE at 6:30 and the second group flew on the EMETEBE 8:30 flight with 8 passengers. All luggage went with passengers and arrived on time.

We spent our first two nights on Isla Isabela at Casa Marita, in the village of Puerto Villamil. Those who arrived on the first shuttle had time to explore the nearby coastline. In the afternoon we visited the Centro de Crianza, the Giant Tortoise Center of Isabela, and learned about the National Park's captive breeding program. The Center houses several sub-species of tortoises endemic to Isla Isabela. We saw both hatchlings and the older breeding animals in action.

Day 6: In the morning we took a bus to the marina and boarded our boat to the islet of Tintoreras. We saw sea lions, sea turtles, marine iguanas, penguins and blue-footed boobies. Following our visit to Tintoreras, we snorkelled in a bay adjacent to the marina, where we observed and photographed more sea turtles. The photos were submitted to Dr. Denkinger to enable her to expand her census area to include the area near the Puerto Villamil marina. In the afternoon we returned back to the shore and rode mountain bikes approximately 12 miles round trip to the Wall of Tears. This wall, towering 65 feet in places, was constructed in the 1940's by convicts when Isabela was a penal colony. We stopped numerous times for giant tortoise sightings, beautiful sunsets at Playa Amour and climbed an observation tower for a bird's eye view of Isabella Island.



Volunteers learning more from our guide at the National Park Breeding Center, Isabela

Day 7-9: Travelled by open bus to Campo Duro where we had lunch and settled into our tents, which had been previously set up for us by the Camp staff. Campo Duro is an Eco-Camp located in the foothills of the Sierra Negra Volcano. Campo Duro is an enchanting location set in the cooler lush, tropical highlands. We enjoyed the fully equipped sleeping tents with mattresses with bedding, outdoor private showers, bathrooms with flush toilets, and a thatched roof restaurant and bar. Most of the fruits and vegetables served are grown organically in the on-site gardens and our food was cooked in wood fired stone ovens.



Project site with Giant Tortoise awaiting the commencement of our clean up efforts, Campo Duro

Campo Duro works in concert with Galapagos National Park, providing a reserve to help raise tortoises from 3 to 8 years old. After lunch on our first afternoon we explored the camp and examined our projects at Campo Duro. Our volunteers wanted to start work that afternoon, a day early, so we started weeding and replanting Papyrus plants. The group worked two and a half days mostly in the shade due to high heat and humidity. 14 volunteers removed exotic vegetation in 2.2 acres of tortoise habitat. The 2.2 acres were also mowed using a motorized weed eater. A complete tortoise fence survey was done and 30 feet of damaged fence was repaired. 100 meters of fence line was trimmed with machete. Twelve trees were pruned. 25ft tree was uprooted and replanted. The Conservation VIP

pond was weeded and eight 5' tall Papyrus plants were transplanted around the pond. Downed trees were cleared from the Tortoise Interpretive Trail. Eight downed trees were removed from inside the tortoise enclosure. Heavy rains cancelled the afternoon work project on the last day at Campo Duro. The last evening we had a campfire, made fresh local marmalade (on the campfire) and learned more about the "Enchanted Islands" called The Galapagos.



Plants being placed around the Conservation VIP pond



Campo Duro – BEFORE weeding and trimming



Campo Duro – AFTER weeding and trimming. Tortoises seemed much happier and were roaming around more freely.



Day 10: Our Volunteers travelled by bus to the Sierra Negra Ranger station where we hiked up the Sierra Negra trail and were treated by a view of Sierra Negra volcano. The direct route trail has been reopened on the way up to Sierra Negra so we were pleasantly surprised. The return hike is down the clay road which fortunately was mostly dry. We hiked approximately 5 miles up the trail to see the caldera rim, returning to the Ranger Station for our transport back to Casa Marita in Puerto Villamil for our last evening together. Volunteers spent a free afternoon further exploring Isabela and that evening we met for a farewell dinner at the hotel sharing memories of our time in the Galapagos.

Day 11: Taxi Transfer from Casa Marita to Airport. First group of 7 passengers flew EMETEBE from Isabella to Baltra at 7:30 and the second group followed flying 8 passengers on EMETEBE on the 9:30 flight from Isabella to Baltra where our volunteers all said our goodbyes and boarded their flights home.



Social Interaction: The team of volunteers worked and “played” extremely well together and friendships were quickly formed. At the end of each day an EQ (Emotional Quotient) rating was taken to determine the overall spirit of the group. We all ate breakfast, lunch and dinner together each day and we enjoyed each other’s company.

Safety: We started each day and each new project with safety briefings and safety reminders and we all worked together to watch each other for dehydration, safe tool use, use of protective equipment and safe work practices. No incidents or accidents were reported during the work projects or sea turtle project thanks to the good work of our Leadership Team and Volunteers. The team readily and cheerfully adopted all safety guidelines for tool usage and tool transport. All personnel wore required safety gear while working in the tortoise habitat. Volunteers cordially and occasionally reminded everyone to adhere to all safety guidelines throughout the workday.

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Our final evening was spent together at our farewell and thank you dinner at Casa Marita; an evening that most will remember with special people, in a special place with lasting memories and friendships.

Mark Hardgrove, Director

Janice Ballak, Director

Conservation Volunteers International Program