



**PROJECT REPORT
GALAPAGOS ISLANDS VOLUNTEER TRIP
MARCH 12-22, 2017
Executive Summary**



Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP) organized and led a volunteer trip to the Galapagos Islands during March 12-22, 2017, visiting the Islands of San Cristóbal and Isabela. The 12-member volunteer group included ConservationVIP Trip Leaders Mark Hardgrove and Carol Clark.

A local guide from Ecuador Adventures, Andres de la Torre, assisted us throughout the trip. In addition, at different locations on the trip, local guides certified by Galapagos National Park Service accompanied the group.

The group's activities supported a sea turtle research project, which is being conducted by the University of San Francisco de Quito at the Galapagos Science Center on San Cristóbal.

The research project is investigating the impacts of boat traffic on sea turtles in the Galapagos Marine Reserve. The volunteers photographed sea turtles at four different locations in the Galapagos, to contribute data for the research database.



The volunteer group also worked on a variety of habitat improvement projects at Campo Duro on Isla Isabela, where Giant Tortoises are raised in a protected environment until they are mature enough to be released in a natural setting in Galapagos National Park.

Interspersed with the turtle research and tortoise habitat support, the group picked up trash on several National Park beaches in the Galapagos, a task that helps the National Park to protect the shore birds, sea turtles, sea lions and reduces ocean pollution, which negatively impacts sea life.

During the trip, approximately 576 hours were devoted to training, education, data collection and other volunteer work: 348 volunteer hours were dedicated to the sea turtle data collection and beach cleanup. In addition, more than 228 hours were spent at Campo Duro on Giant Tortoise Habitat Restoration.



Detailed Trip Report

Day 1: Trip Leaders and our local guide conducted an in-depth orientation and briefing at Casa Opuntia, our hotel on San Cristóbal Island, beginning at 2:00 PM. Following the orientation, the group collected trash along the walk to the Galapagos National Park Visitor Center, where volunteers had their first introduction to the Park and learned about the natural history of the Galapagos Islands.

Day 2: In the morning, the group travelled by bus to the Centro de Crianza, stopping on route to see El Junco, the only permanent fresh water lagoon in the Galapagos. The Crianza is one of the Galapagos National Park's breeding stations and sanctuaries for giant tortoises.

At the Crianza, we were introduced to the captive breeding programs, which the group would be supporting later in the trip.



After returning to the hotel, the group members were outfitted with wetsuits, flippers, masks, snorkels and flotation vests, and then tested the snorkel equipment in the hotel's swimming pool.

In the afternoon, the group was divided into two-person teams, and each team was issued a Go Pro Hero 3+ underwater camera. REI Adventures previously donated the cameras for use in the sea turtle documentation project. The group was instructed in proper use of the cameras and safety issues. It is difficult to concentrate on photography while also paying attention to the ocean and surroundings, so one member of each team photographs while the other team member is responsible for making sure that the photographer is safe and does not drift too far from the group. In addition, designated trip leaders and guides are responsible for watching the entire group in case any member requires assistance. This buddy system and oversight protocol was implemented each time the group snorkeled.



Snorkeling in pairs

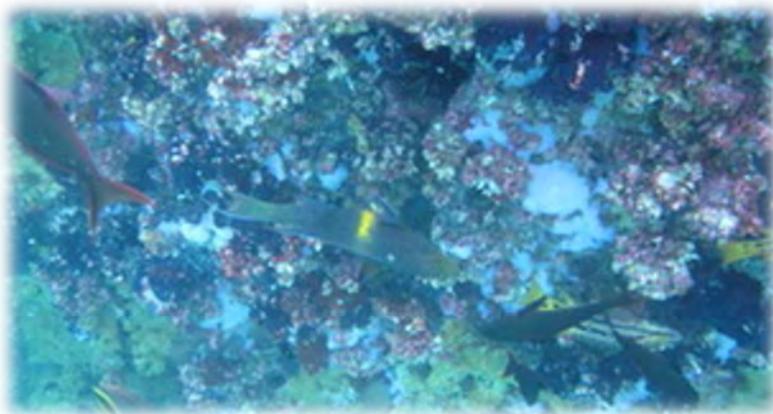


Sea Turtle at Carola Beach

After walking to the nearby Carola Beach and collecting trash along the way, the volunteers participated in their first sea turtle photography project. The group was new to the activity, and although the water was relatively warm (in the upper 70's) it was rough, and it proved to be more challenging than some people anticipated. However, the group was clearly eager to

do a good job, so they stayed in the water for as long as they were physically able to and they were successful in collecting some good sea turtle photos. Following the project, the group walked back to the hotel and was instructed in the proper methods for cleaning the gear so it would be in good condition for the next photography project. (The group followed these basic procedures after each snorkeling/photography session.)

Day 3: After breakfast, the group travelled in taxis to Playa Loberia, named after the sea lions (lobos), which frequent the beach. While we waited for the best tide to snorkel and photograph, most of the group hiked roughly two miles roundtrip along the coast to see the cliffs where swallow-tail gulls and boobies nest. Along the way volunteers picked up trash.



of a variety of sea life, including colorful fish.

Once back at Playa Loberia, the group donned their snorkel gear, paired up for safety, and drifted in the bay taking photographs of sea turtles for the research project. The water was calm, and clear so the volunteers captured excellent turtle photographs. In addition, they were treated to sightings



The group returned to the hotel to clean and store gear. After lunch we walked to the Galapagos Science Center, University of San Francisco de Quito, for a tour and presentation by Dr. Judith



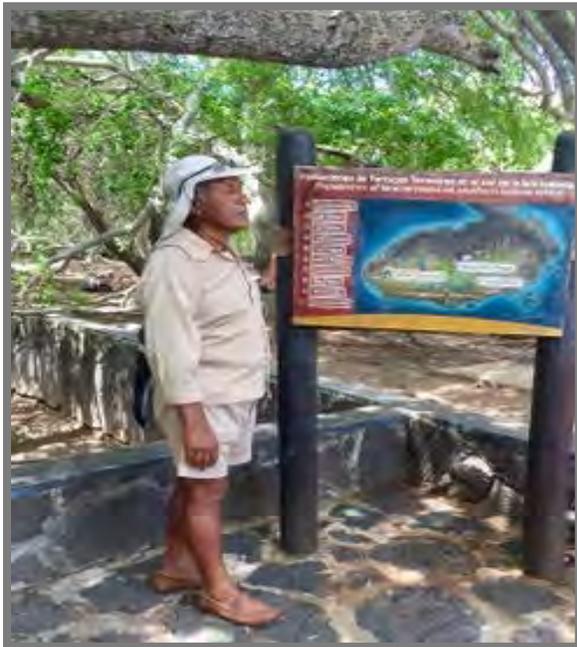
Denkinger, Marine Biologist, on the sea turtle census and research project she has been leading. At the Science Center, they use computer software to identify individual turtles by their unique facial patterns and study each turtle's carapace to identify injuries. The purpose of the research is to determine the impacts of increased boat traffic on sea turtles.

The group also heard a presentation about the research the Center has been conducting on plastics and other types of ocean trash and its effects on sea life. The startling statistics clearly impressed the group and motivated them for trash pick-up chores later in the trip.



Day 4: After breakfast the volunteers, guides and Dr. Denkinger boarded the boat trip to Kicker Rock. We all boarded one boat and went straight to Kicker Rock where the group snorkeled and photographed sea turtles. Later the group walked the beach and picked up some trash at Playa Manglacito. The group noticed that the water at Kicker Rock was warmer than expected, so the group was able to stay the full hour in the water. In addition, because the water at Kicker Rock is too deep to even see the ocean bottom, it was harder to get close-up photographs of the sea turtles. Still, some turtles were photographed and the volunteers appreciated the "magic" of snorkeling through the channel between the cliffs of rocks and were energized by the sight of sharks and the visit of playful sea lions.

Day 5: The volunteers transferred via air shuttle in two groups from the island of San Cristóbal to Isla Isabela. The EMETEBE and Fly Galapagos flights were scheduled for 7:30 a.m. and 8:00 a.m., and left on time. All baggage went with passengers without delays.



We spent our first two nights at Casita de la Playita, our small ocean front hotel on Isla Isabela in the village of Puerto Villamil. After checking into the hotel, we met our local guide Fausto, who led a walk to the Centro de Crianza, the Giant Tortoise Center on Isla Isabela. He gave a presentation on the captive breeding program there, which supports several sub-species of tortoises. We saw older breeding animals, adolescents, and hatchlings.



In the afternoon, volunteers cleaned 2 miles of local beach for 2 1/2 hours for trash cleanup, motivated by the presentation on damage to sea life from plastics in the ocean.



Day 6: In the morning we took a bus to the marina and boarded our boat to the Islet of Tintoreras. There we had an introduction to the different forms of lava on the islands, learned about the mangrove trees, and saw some blue-footed booby, penguins, marine iguanas, and the white-tipped reef sharks for whom the islet is named.



Following our visit to the island, we snorkeled in a bay adjacent to the marina, where we observed and photographed many sea turtles. The photos were later submitted to Dr. Denkinger to add to her census count near the Puerto Villamil marina.

In the afternoon, we returned to town. The trip leaders bought some tools needed for the next volunteer projects, and then the group rode mountain bikes approximately 12 miles roundtrip to the Wall of Tears. Convicts constructed this wall, towering 65 feet in places, in the 1940's when Isabela was a penal colony.

Day 7: In the morning we travelled by open bus to Campo Duro, the location for our next volunteer project. Campo Duro is an Eco-Camp located in the cooler, lush, tropical highlands on the slopes of the Sierra Negra Volcano. Campo Duro works in concert with Galapagos

National Park, providing a protected reserve to help raise giant tortoises approximately 15 years old.

The group worked for 2-1/2 days on a variety of projects to improve the tortoise habitat at Campo Duro. On the first day, after a tour of the facility and settling into our tents, we:

- Removed large pieces of dead wood from tortoise enclosure
- Cut big pieces of deadwood into size suitable for camp firewood using the chainsaw recently purchased by ConservationVIP and stored at Campo Duro
- Began digging holes for fence posts around tortoise enclosure
- Watered new plants that had been recently planted to help form hedge around tortoise fence enclosure
- Cut cabbage leaves in the organic garden and carried them to the tortoise enclosure to feed the tortoises



- Raked leaves and pulled out inedible plants in the tortoise enclosure. Leaves were hauled in tarps and piled around the base of the trees in the enclosure to mulch the trees. The cleared ground will now be able to grow grass for the tortoises.



The Tortoise Enclosure before and after cleaning

- Installed two signs commemorating the work ConservationVIP has done to provide ongoing support for the tortoise habitat at Campo Duro



- Dug the new fence post holes and relocated 120 feet of fence to expand the tortoise enclosure area also repairing a weak section of fence
- Cut PVC pipe purchased by ConservationVIP into lengths to make 31 new fence posts
- Dug a trench 1 ft. deep by 120 feet to bury the new fence.
- Set and filled 31 PVC pipe fence posts with dirt
- Using the chain saw, trimmed low-hanging limbs from 20 trees along the walkway around the tortoise enclosure
- Repaired and wired old sections of fence





Working so close to the typically silent and slow moving tortoises, at times it was easy to forget they were there. But at moments, their poses were so absorbing, it was easy to grab the camera and forget about the work.

Day 9: In the morning, the group continued with the tortoise habitat projects:

- Relocated trash pile full of old logs and 10 cubic yards of brush
- Cut more cabbage in the garden for tortoises
- Organized and inventoried tools for future projects
- Completed planting the plant cuttings along the new 120 ft. section of fencing
- Completed raking and tortoise count – 11 Tortoises counted this trip.



After lunch the group packed up, said goodbye to the appreciative Campo Duro staff, and returned to the hotel in town.

Day 10: The Volunteers travelled by bus to the Sierra Negra Ranger station where we had a more extensive introduction to the volcanic origins of the Galapagos Islands and hiked up the trail for a view of Sierra Negra volcano. The skies were initially clear, offering a perfect view of the caldera and it was good to walk and stretch our legs. As we were leaving the skies darkened and light rain began to fall. We ate lunch under cover of the Ranger Station picnic pavilion. On the way back we stopped at Cueva de Sucre and walked through the Tunel de Lava. In the afternoon while the storms flooded the streets, the hotel manager and cooks gave an Ecuadorian cooking demonstration. That evening we met for a farewell dinner sharing memories of our time in the Galapagos.

Day 11: We had two early morning taxi transfers from the hotel to the Airport, where we boarded EMETEBE and Air Galapagos flights to Baltra. There we said our goodbyes and boarded flights to head home.



Galapagos Volunteers and Campo Duro Intern at Cueva de Sucre

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