

Internship Report 2016

This summer I was given the opportunity to intern with the Vieques Conservation and Historical Trust. Vieques is an island in the Caribbean located eight miles east of Puerto Rico with a population of less than 10,000 people. The island of Vieques was occupied by the U.S. Navy for over 60 years. After the Navy left, the majority of the land became a national refuge. The Trust has dedicated the last 30 years to the conservation of the natural, historical, and cultural resources of the island and has been the largest non-profit organization in Vieques. I worked at the Trust for eight weeks. During my internship, I participated in children's educational programs, scientific data gathering, environmental awareness, and historical research.

The Manta Program is an educational program offered by the Trust to local students with the purpose of creating young environmentalists. My responsibilities during the program included coordinating activities and communicating with parents, along with participating in everyday learning lessons and helping with the organization and care of the students. The program was a great opportunity to put in practice what I had learned about conservation and marine life during my time in Vieques. We ran several beach cleanups and promoted awareness about littering. Some issues came along the way, but I was able to develop problem solving skills and improvise with the sources that were available to me. At the end, Manta was a complete success.

One of my favorite tasks on the intern's list was the collection of water samples from the bioluminescent bay. Every Wednesday night we would go to Mosquito Bay to monitor the water

quality with the Sonde and at the same time collect water samples to take to the laboratory.

Through this sessions, I was able to learn an immense amount about the waters of Vieques and the tiny dinoflagellates that reside and cause the luminescence in the breath-taking bioluminescent bay. We monitored the water to make sure everything in the water was in place. We tested the salinity, pH levels, temperature, turbidity, oxygen levels, etc, and recorded them on the data logger as well as in data sheets to keep a digital and paper copy of this information for later references.

The town of Esperanza, where the Trust is located, has many restaurants and bars on the Caribbean. This causes a lot of the litter from the restaurants to end up in the sea being a great danger to the marine life. The Restaurant and Service Industry Waste Reduction Project consisted of running surveys across 12 of the establishments in Esperanza to determine their use of plastic and waste management practices in order to provide them with more efficient ways to dispose of their waste. My responsibilities during this project consisted of contacting the restaurants and collaborate with running the surveys. We incorporated this project into one of the Manta sessions and allowed the students to help when doing the surveys. With the idea of reducing the waste on the island, I also volunteered with the Recycling Program to provide local businesses with individual recycling bins and setting stations with a compost, a recycling, and a trash container during events or festivities in town.

Every intern at the Trust gets the opportunity to explore a topic of personal interest and do research on it. In my case, I chose to investigate about the history of the sugar industry that existed from the 1840's until the 1930's. As an intended history major, it was incredibly

interesting to learn and explore the history that surrounded me during my time on the island.

Besides interviewing a local historian about the sugar industry, I was also able to visit the remains of the abandoned sugar mills in which the sugar production took place. During my time at the Trust, I also worked with the curator of the small museum at the Trust on relabeling and translating to Spanish the descriptions and history of many of the historical pieces that the Trust possesses.

The Trust claims to have “the smallest aquarium in the world”. I do not know if this is true, given that I have not been to all the aquariums in the world, but it sure is small. As an intern, the upkeep of the aquarium was another of my responsibilities. My duties in the aquarium consisted on cleaning the tanks, feeding the fish, monitoring the water levels and quality, giving tours to tourists, and, my favorite, capturing and releasing creatures to the sea. The idea of the Smallest Aquarium in the World is to teach the public how to treat and deal with sea creatures in order to not harm them. At the trust, we also worked on promoting the consumption of the invasive lionfish that is slowly killing the reefs in Vieques. Every creature in the aquarium is released within two to three weeks, since we use the animals for educational purposes, we do not want them to get used to human life. The only creature for which we hold a special educational tank and do not release back to the sea is the lionfish. While working at the aquarium, I learned about the sea life in Vieques and the rest of the Caribbean and how to take care of it. I learned and taught many visitors and Manta students about what global warming is doing to the sea and how to prevent it. Working at the aquarium gave me a look into

oceanography and marine biology, a field in which I thought I would never be interested in and ended up loving.

As an additional project during my internship, I also got the opportunity to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Refuge regarding the conservation of sea turtles. Vieques has a number of nesting beaches in which the endangered leatherback, hawksbill, and green turtles lay their eggs every year. The turtle monitoring program consists of finding the turtle nests and keeping track of when the hatching date will be. Once the nests have hatched, the nests are opened to save any turtle that may have gotten stuck and to count approximately how many turtles were in the nest. Once a week, I would spend the morning walking the beaches with an expert on turtles from Fish and Wildlife looking for turtle nests, checking the nests that were due, and learning about this magnificent animal.

My time working at the Trust was a period of action and learning. The hardest part about my internship was adapting to the pace and the roll of activities, given that new issues came up at unexpected times. However, I caught up fast and soon I was another member of the Trust team. The best part was being part of the change. I was part of many different projects, that although they may not make a change instantly, they eventually will. During this time, I also got out of my comfort zone and dared to explore new fields. This internship helped me realize that I truly enjoy environmental work. However, it also helped me discover my love for Spanish history and culture.