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Final Internship Report
Equilibrio Azul
Puerto Lopez, Ecuador

People are People

It came as just as much of a shock to me as it did for everyone else at the house that I had only a week left there. In the beginning everyone had told me “The first half of your trip is going to just crawl by, and the second half is going to be over in the blink of an eye.” Turns out they were only half right, because my entire summer was a constant blur of new faces, places, and experiences, and at no point did I find myself the least bit bored. Even now that I am back in my hometown, witnessing what has moved on without me in only 3 months, it doesn’t feel like I was gone for more than a few weeks at most. That’s not to say I didn’t enjoy myself, though.

Before this internship, I had never visited South America. I had only been out of the country twice, both times during my very early childhood, so early I can barely remember them. So in many ways, this was my first “real” trip outside the US. My introductions both to Ecuador, and to the internship site, however, were very positive. The directors of Equilibrio Azul, Andres and Felipe, (EA) went well out of their way to ensure I was comfortable and happy both immediately upon my arrival and throughout the duration of my stay. When I first arrived at the house, a room, bed, and dinner were waiting for me. The living conditions were simple but ample; over time I observed that EA actually rents one of the nicer and more well-kept homes in Puerto Lopez.¹ And whilst I must admit that the presence of an 8000-something-watt water heater in the shower that occasionally (and unpredictably) administers potent shocks to

¹ Just as I was leaving, EA was in the process of moving into a new house. It is larger, more private, and in even better shape than their former home, with equally excellent security.

unsuspecting showerers never actually grew on me enough to full heartedly say I enjoyed it, it did keep things exciting, even at home.

Though everyone there could speak some English, its safe to say that the staff of Equilibrio Azul speaks Spanish and it quickly became apparent that my language skills were not quite up to par. There is a different dialect of Spanish spoken in the coastal regions of Ecuador as well, utilizing gratuitous amounts of slang, words that don't exist in any dictionary, slurring of speech, and to top things off, they speak *very* quickly. All of this contributed to a very rocky first month as far as language was concerned, and though I progressed greatly in my language abilities, it remained a challenge throughout the internship.

Fortunately, much of the work that I did initially required minimal language skills. I started off working on the Shark Project, as many of their interns do, and continued to work with it throughout my entire internship. I spent more time working on the shark project than any other project there, and came to really enjoy both the work and the cause. Every day, I would wake up at 7:00 and with a few other people walk a few blocks to the early-morning fish market. The fishermen primarily fish with nets, and as a result catch many things they don't intend to. Many sharks are caught in this way, and there it was referred to as incidental kill. We would search the beaches for sharks the fishermen had caught, and try to identify, measure, weight, and obtain other vital statistics from them before they were sold or butchered. I say "try" because sometimes the fishermen would deny us permission, and sometimes the sheer number of sharks made measuring all of them impossible. We would usually return to the house around 11:00-12:00, as business began to slow and no more ships were visibly arriving. We would then input all the data we had gathered that day into a vast database that has been kept for over 9 months now.

At first, I didn't enjoy working with the shark project. I found the work to be disgusting, mundane, and exhausting. But the more I worked on it, and the more questions I asked, the more I saw the big picture. After seeing a particularly large catch of a very rare species of shark in late July, I wrote the following in my blog, which I believe explains the situation quite well:

The shark project is weird. Once you get past the initial disgust of being around constant butchering of sharks and every other type of fish, it's so mundane. And it simply breeds contempt. Essentially, working the shark project means getting up at 6:30 every morning to go and measure dead sharks and get covered in—including but not limited to—shark blood and shark semen. You write it all down and go home. Later it is put into the computer. Sometimes you see a shark you haven't seen before and that's kind of cool. But other than that, it's gross, it's boring, it's monotonous, and it's mundane. It's really hard to see the big picture.

But the longer I do it, the more I do. The more things I see like this black-tip reef shark capture, the more important it all seems. The more urgency it all seems to have. And I feel more and more drawn to the project; as if it is a responsibility or maybe even something more; an obligation. I feel like I am helping. Really helping. And helping something bigger than myself.

--Eric Krause, July 30th, 2008, www.eric-krause.blogspot.com

As I began to enjoy the project more, and see the greater importance, I was given more and more authority over it. For about two months I essentially ran the project; coordinating trips to the beach, overseeing data entry, training new interns on the processes, and I became the go-to guy for shark questions. Andres will attest to the degree of responsibility I assumed over the project during my time there; we were in a unique situation of not having any of the full-time staffers around who normally ran the project, and as such, I learned and did all that I could to keep it running without them.

As the required personnel returned, I was granted a bit of freedom from what had, at that time, become a full-time job, and to provide me a break, Andres and Felipe organized for me to spend a great deal of my remaining time on the Isla de la Plata. On my previous trips the island, I had been helping other directors with their projects, ranging from tagging sea turtles to

monitoring nesting albatross locations via GPS. During my last month at EA, I spent more than half of my time on the island, but I wasn't assisting other directors. I was doing other work; namely spearheading the newly-created island monitoring project, which aimed to record essentially everything that happened on the island; how many tourists visited, daily water and air temperatures, illegal fishing that was occurring in the park, and anything unusual that took place on the island. During these weeks, the only EA personnel on the island were myself and another intern, Andy, who had been appointed to help me. Together we were able to put a lot of quality work into the project, as well as brainstorm new ideas about how to make it work more efficiently. This was one of the highlights of my time in Ecuador.

Throughout my time there, I strived to be precise and efficient, and I came up with many ideas that were later incorporated into the work of EA. It was very gratifying both to be heard and to know I was providing useful ideas. I approached all of my work with fervor and enthusiasm, and I did absolutely everything I could to ensure I was always filling in where it was needed most. I am thankful I was there when I was, as well; during a time of need due to short-staffing; so that I could really make a difference. Additionally, and likely as a result of my commitment to my their causes, I was treated very much as an equal. Andres repeatedly reminded me that I had the option of refusing any of the work they did, and that I wasn't expected to work all the time—though I can't ever remember exercising this privilege. It's safe to say I worked like I was getting paid, and I would encourage all future interns to do the same; a good attitude is vital to having a good time. Incoming interns should want to do whatever is necessary to help the foundation, and not be expecting to get a free vacation out of it. An attitude like this will be appreciated and rewarded both by EA and by nearly everyone else in life.

Also to future interns, I would urge anyone who is interested in this internship to apply regardless of Spanish skills. First, most of the staff can speak English, and second, you will learn a lot there, only if you stay a few months. The coastal dialect is very difficult to pick up, and as a result, as soon as you travel away from the coast, you will find that people speak very slowly and clearly, and are very easy to understand in comparison. Basically, if you can understand the coastal dialect, you can understand anyone.

I wish I had known more about the climate before I left. Being stationed basically on the equator, I assumed it would be quite warm there, but when I asked Andres and Felipe what the weather was like, they told me it got very cold, and that I should bring pants, coats, sweaters, and lots of socks and other warm clothes. I followed their advice, and in doing so, made two mistakes. First, I should have done the research myself, and second, you should never trust someone from the coast of Ecuador when they say it's cold outside. Not once did I wear pants, a sweater, socks, or any of the cold-weather gear I was advised by them to bring. During my entire stay there, I seriously doubt the temperature fell much below 75, which, being an Oregonian, is definitely not pants-sweater-coat weather. Fortunately, it never went much above 90 either, and that was only on very warm days. June-September is a very nice time to be on the coast; its about 78-80 every day, with hardly any rain—so pack accordingly and remember there is a cheap laundromat right in town.

Another tip to future interns is regarding money; the expensive part of a trip to South America is the plane ticket. The \$400/mo paid to EA for room and board covers all basic expenses, and if you were so inclined, you could survive paying only this. I would advise money for a snack here and there, or to travel to a nearby town on the weekend, but just know that \$20 goes a long way there (about 2 weeks or so).

Overall, I had an excellent time with Equilibrio Azul. I was happy to work with them and I am happy to have helped. Though, I must admit that I had ulterior motives. I approached my internship not only hoping to do some valuable work in my field, but also to live in Ecuador for three months. I wanted to learn the language; I wanted to immerse myself in a different way of life in a culture other than my own. Because of this attitude, even on the slow or difficult days, I was able to keep my head up with no problems, since I was still accomplishing these goals. As I wrote soon after my arrival:

People are people wherever you go, and whatever language they speak. We always have more in common than we do in opposition. This something I knew to be true before coming here, but have now had it strongly reaffirmed with real experience. The scariest thing about leaving my culture was the idea that this one might be completely different, but even after this one experience I doubt I will fear that again.

--Eric Krause, June 30th, 2008, www.eric-krause.blogspot.com

My experience with Equilibrio Azul was a life-altering one, and I came away from it having done valuable and important work, exposed to a new culture, with a newfound interest in learning Spanish, and with new friends all over Ecuador and the rest of the world. In short, it was worth every second.