

Equilibrio Azul – Puerto López, Ecuador

Olivia's Final Report

When I first arrived in Puerto López, you could say that I had expectations, but mostly I was expecting the unexpected. Looking back on my time in Ecuador, the skills I used most often were flexibility and understanding. While I did all of the “required” research prior to my arrival, nothing could have fully prepared me for what I experienced. The more flexible I became and the more open-minded I allowed myself to be, the more I enjoyed my experience. And in fact, I came to enjoy the experience so much that I did not want to leave when the ten weeks were up...

My biggest anxiety prior to traveling from Guayaquil to López was to be on the bus. After everything I had read about bus travel in Ecuador, I was convinced that my backpack and all of my belongings would be stolen from underneath the bus. Although my bus transfer was hectic due to vendors and station attendants rushing me to the bus to López which pulled away the moment I stepped on, my backpack was not stolen and I in fact had a very interesting conversation in Spanish with a man sitting next to me. Beginning to trust Ecuadorians (at least to an extent) has since made me entirely comfortable jumping onto the bus and heading to nearby towns and beaches.

The day of my arrival to Equilibrio Azul, I took a motor taxi from the terminal terrestre (bus terminal) using the directions that had been given to me by IE3. I told the driver, “Calle San Francisco; 300 metres antes de Hostería La Terraza”. I had explored the street on Google Maps

from home, but Calle San Francisco is so small and steep that the camera had not gone up the street, so I had been unable to figure out which building was the correct one online.

When the driver reached a large compound that had a gate with whale tails carved into it, I assumed I was at the right place. I paid the driver, and he left me with my 40-pound backpack on the dusty corner. I texted and called my point of contact at Equilibrio Azul to ask if I was at the correct place, but she was not answering. After a few minutes, two men came out of the house, and I asked them if the house were “Estación de Equilibrio Azul”. They looked confused, and when I mentioned La Terraza they said it was a good distance up the hill, but walkable. I doubt that they realized how heavy my backpack was, because I then walked a third of a mile uphill until I finally saw a sign for Equilibrio. The staff were in the house, sitting at the table. I had told them I was coming, so I was glad to find that people were here to let me into the house, but I was frustrated by their lack of communication and feeling frenzied after my bus travel and long walk up the hill.

When I walked into the door of the house, I was surprised to find that all of the staff and current volunteers seemed to be waiting for me (although they were not). In fact, it was one of the few times where all of us were ever together, including the Quito and López staff, and all of the volunteers. I was greeted in mixed English and Spanish, but I attempted to speak as much Spanish as possible as I had heard from past interns about the potential to slip into speaking English. When I arrived, I knew I wanted to speak with more fluidity and be able to keep up in conversations. Therefore, even when some of the staff or other volunteers tried to speak with me in English, I would try to reply in Spanish, or even mention that I preferred to practice my

Spanish. As one of the other volunteers (who has since been hired as a research assistant), is also trying to learn English, we regularly helped each other to learn new words.

When the Quito staff were visiting López (as they do somewhat regularly), and with certain sets of volunteers, I practiced much more Spanish than when I first arrived. Although Cris and Felipe (the Quito staff) both speak fluent English and we occasionally spoke English together, they always helped to challenge my Spanish skills. There is a language school in town that offers classes for \$10/hour and has a free language exchange (English and Spanish) on Wednesday evenings. I did take one class but found it was not worth it given my level of understanding. I have taken eight years of Spanish classes and have learned all the grammatical rules and conjugations many times over. I realized then that what I needed was simply to practice speaking with locals. Although there were times throughout my internship when I had to simply sit back and listen during a conversation, I preferred being silent to having the conversation translated for me. And this did in fact help to improve my ability, and I generally came to live entirely in Spanish unless English was absolutely necessary.

One important realization for me has been that English to Spanish, or vice-versa, is not necessarily translated exactly word for word most of the time. Talking with Camila (the Chilean volunteer, now assistant) and the local staff has allowed me to learn some ways to make my speech feel less forced and more natural. One disappointment, at least at the beginning, was that since there are many volunteers did not speak Spanish proficiently or fluently, the common language of the volunteer house was English. I continued to try to regularly practice Spanish, as two of the staff do not speak English, and the majority of people in Puerto López only speak Spanish as well.

Learning to become proficient in this second language has required a willingness to make constant mistakes and receive critique, but also a sense of humor and an ability to laugh at those mistakes and move on. It greatly helped my Spanish skills to start keeping note of new words. When I heard a word I did not know, I would ask or look up the definition, and keep track of those new words in a journal. After this, using them in context felt much more natural, and they were easier to remember. Since arriving in Puerto López three months ago, I have greatly improved my Spanish and now consider myself proficient. When I first arrived, my conversations with Camila were likely 60% English, 40% Spanish. Now, I am able to hold full conversations in Spanish with Camila, as well as other friends and strangers, and have completed my personal research project entirely in Spanish. Continuing to practice these language skills is one of the huge reasons for my decision to stay in López for an additional two months following my internship.

Upon arrival, although I had read past intern reports, I was not fully aware of what my day to day would look or feel like. And to be entirely honest, the physical work (at least during nesting season from October/November – March/April) is absolutely exhausting. Although we did not work for too many hours per day, I constantly found myself feeling sleep deprived and grumpy, particularly when I had to work every other night at the beach patrols. For my first few weeks, I don't think I had one full night's sleep. On the other hand, after arriving, I also realized I had much more free time than I had expected. This, in addition to issues of co-workers, culture shock, and exhaustion, led to some moments and days of *major* homesickness. At times, I felt ready to pack up, travel for a while, and then return home early. But after talking

with my IE3 advisor, the head advisor, and a past intern, I felt much more prepared to take on these challenges. I settled in more, particularly by finding ways to fill my free time.

My work schedule varied greatly from day to day and from week to week, but a general day involved one to three tasks, sometimes none. Typically, I had between 3 to 8 hours of daily work. The primary project for Equilibrio during my first eight weeks was their nightly turtle patrols. On nights where I was scheduled to work night turtle patrols at La Playita (a beach protected from the public and only used by Equilibrio for turtle research), we left the volunteer house at around 6:30pm, and returned around 7am the next morning. We headed out by taxi, typically with two volunteers and one staff, and we took 3-4 hour shifts patrolling the 2km beach looking for turtle tracks or hatchings while the others slept. If a turtle was found (and I have only seen one turtle in the four patrols I have done), we would call by radio to wake up the others, and we would work together to count the eggs (and move them to the nursery if necessary, depending on the nest location), measure and tag the animal if necessary, and measure the tracks. Of course, this meant sleep deprivation for everyone, especially if a turtle came during someone else's shift... My easiest nights at Playita allowed me to sleep for 5+ hours consecutively, and on my worst I slept for about 1. When we returned from the beach, however, we almost always have the day off, so we could nap, relax, or otherwise enjoy some free time.

On the days when I did not have Playita, and particularly when we were low on volunteers, I was usually scheduled to go to the fish market and identify/count shark by-catch. Each boat is only legally allowed to carry a certain number of sharks (for certain species), but

they are allowed to sell their bycatch. Of course however, all of this is poorly managed and laws are not enforced well. I was originally surprised with how close we are able to get to the sharks, at some points even being sprayed by their blood as the “cutters” do their work. I anticipated that the fishermen would be very hesitant to allow us to get close, as many see Equilibrio Azul as invasive and a danger to their livelihoods. On slow days I would see between five and ten sharks, but on busy days sometimes there were 150. The market would go from about 8am until 11am, after which I generally went to get breakfast or a coffee on the malecón (tourist area near the beach).

Every Wednesday, all of the volunteers and the three local staff (Caro, Ricky, and Lucho), would head out by water taxi to a boat in the harbor to do green sea turtle captures. We would hang fish off the sides of the boat and (essentially) fish for turtles. If we saw one, Lucho (who has been a diver since he was a boy and is a PADI certified Dive Instructor), would dive into the water to catch the turtle and hand it up to us on the boat. There we would measure and tag the turtle, weigh it, and release it again.

We did have additional work as well. Occasionally, I was scheduled to go to Los Frailes, the beach just to the north of Puerto Lopez, to look for turtle tracks from the past week. Through Equilibrio’s research, it has been determined that La Playita is the most important nesting site for Hawksbills in the area (and perhaps one of the most important in the world), which is why have people go there every night. However, they still check two or three surrounding beaches at least twice per week. The organization keeps track of when nests were laid, and after 60 days of incubation and 3 days of margin, we also open nests to see how many

eggs hatched, at what stage in development some stopped growing, and if there are any viable babies still alive.

On Saturday mornings, Caro, Camila, the volunteers, and I work with Equilibrio's environmental education program called EcoClub. During my first few times with these children, it felt hectic and disorganized, particularly given my experience working in very structured environmental education programs and summer camps. We would go to two separate barrios where we pick up 20 children between the ages of four and ten, and head to the beach or to the volunteer house, where we do crafts, games, and activities related to marine life. My first impression of EcoClub showed me quickly that the management of the children is not very effective, and that the activities are not very useful towards the eventual goal of wanting the students to understand marine conservation and Equilibrio's projects. I was disappointed with my first conversations with the staff about the environmental education project, as this is something I am very passionate about, and I have a lot of ideas for improvement. I felt shut down, and like my goals for the internship (at least regarding EcoClub) were no longer possible.

Two of my major goals related to my personal research as well as development of environmental education curriculum. I hoped to perform a survey of at least 50 individuals regarding the correlation of family livelihoods and threats to marine species in Puerto Lopez by the end of my sixth week here. After talking with an advisor in Corvallis, the logistics of the survey became slightly more complicated than I had hoped. But I had a plan, the first goal of which was to perform an interview with the staff to understand the most pertinent environmental problems and the desired outcomes of the environmental education program. I

tried to facilitate an interview with Caro, Lucho, and Ricky - the local staff - and was met with diversion, defensiveness, and frustration. One person, in particular, was very sensitive to my simple questions such as, "In your opinion as a marine researcher, what do you believe are the most dangerous threats to marine life in this area?" This person insisted, aggressively, that they could not answer most of my questions because they only work with sea turtles and sharks, not directly with the fishermen. I felt myself needing to ask leading questions such as, "Are there issues related to tourism? Overfishing? Climate change?" but still felt uncomfortable, as though I was stepping on toes and being intrusive. When I asked about the EcoClub program, the same individual was almost more defensive, saying that they didn't want the children to go home and share information with their parents because, "It isn't natural for children to change their parents." They said that they didn't want to change people or tell them what they are doing is wrong. They continued to act as though I am naïve, culturally-insensitive, and immature. I anticipated issues of cultural differences, but I did not expect to be shut down by the staff of the same marine conservation project for which I am working.

However, some of my favorite parts of the work were when Cris and Felipe (the volunteer coordinator and program director) visited from Quito. Possibly because they are from the city, or possibly because they have traveled and studied internationally, they approach their work very similarly to those in the United States (aka. very seriously). This is enormously different from most people I have met on La Costa, who care about their work but do generally work more slowly and are more lackadaisical with their schedules and meetings. When Cris and Felipe are in town, we go out in Ricky or Lucho's boat to do carey (Hawksbill) turtle captures. We would generally go out to Isla Salango (the nearest island), where we snorkel along the

shore. If one of us sees a turtle, one of the staff follows it and free-dives to catch it and pass it off to Ricky in the boat. At times, we have even had three turtles in the boat before we all come aboard to tag, measure, and weigh the turtles. Cris works hard to keep Camila and me engaged, and even lets us tag and weigh the turtles ourselves.

On one particularly special occasion, we captured a large male carey, and realized he had a tag from the Galápagos sea turtle research station. After Cris spoke with the station there, we found out that not only did the turtle travel almost 600 miles to the Ecuadorian coast, but he also had not been captured since 2003, when he was only about 10 years old and about a foot long. It was apparently the first time a turtle from the Galápagos has been seen on the mainland, so it was a very exciting day for all involved.

My schedule constantly varied from week to week, and pretty regularly would change last minute. When I first arrived, I struggled with some of lack of communication between the staff and the volunteers, but it has helped that I had an Ecuadorian phone number with WhatsApp so that Caro could be in touch with me with changes, if and when she remembered. However, issues that exist in regards to communication between the Quito program staff and those in Puerto López create a top-down effect and in turn affected me and the other volunteers. Understanding cultural context through the research I did prior to arriving in Ecuador definitely assisted in my transition into this organization, however I was still not fully prepared for this culture of communication. Schedules and assignments are very fluid, and many times we prepared to do a task such as captures, even brought the equipment down to the fish market, only to find out that the staff had decided to change the schedule. Often, and particularly when I first arrived, I felt out of the loop, and sometimes extremely frustrated. At

times, this style of work comes across to me like the staff do not value integrity as much as other organizations I have worked with, as sometimes tasks are cancelled just because someone “didn’t feel like it” that day. But all in all I have come to appreciate the fluidity and relaxed nature of our work.

Additionally, I think it is worthwhile to mention workplace safety. Safety standards in Ecuador are, of course, extremely different than in the United States – especially regarding seat belts, lifejackets, food safety, etc. – and Equilibrio Azul is no different from the rest of the pueblo and the country. However, in my experience, the amount of focus on safety was appropriate for the cultural context and for the type of work we were doing. For instance, Caro always assigned at least one man to go on night patrols, so that there were not two or three women going to the beach at night on their own. Equilibrio as an organization generally does not take unnecessary risks, and they encourage the volunteers to do the same.

Towards the beginning of the internship, I did struggle with having too much free time, and found myself feeling very bored and homesick, so I created a calendar on Excel to keep track of my work schedule, my personal research project, due dates for assignments and applications (like scholarships/job applications at home), and personal/academic/career-related goals for each week. This allowed me to be more productive than I was during my first few weeks, as it showed me how little time I actually had in López! Especially after I started creating these schedules, I found myself more motivated to find things to do during my free hours and days off.

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While the daily research is extremely important and vital to the success of the organization and its efforts towards marine conservation, I found myself wishing I could have more conversations with the locals regarding those issues. The first times I worked with Cris, as well as conversations with a past intern, helped me to understand the importance of this day to day work. I also had the chance to speak with Cris about the deeply rooted issues of shark bycatch and why laws have not been able to protect those animals as well as they should. Additionally, in order to prepare for our first carey captures, she gave us (myself and two new volunteers) a presentation on Hawksbill sea turtles and the importance of this region in terms of their long-term survival. She kept referring to the volunteer orientation, saying things like “They’ve already gone over this information with you,” but in all honestly, I had never heard the projects described so thoroughly. While in town, Cris also read my survey and was refreshingly honest with information about environmental and social issues in Puerto Lopez. Many of the environmental issues I had anticipated prior to my arrival are in fact true, and had simply been avoided or outright diverted in my conversations with another staff member. Cris also assisted me in translating the survey, which helped to improve my Spanish even further. I finally felt as though my survey was on the right track and could actually be extremely useful research. Especially when working on projects related to conservation, Felipe and Cristina are fantastic resources. While the local staff are very knowledgeable and experienced, they can be very sensitive to questions, and I had major struggles in communications with one of them related to my project. However, it is still important to gain permission from Cris or other managerial staff to implement a survey like this, because Equilibrio Azul does have a delicate relationship with

the community, and the town is small enough to where people (particularly fishermen) quickly came to recognize me as an Equilibrio volunteer.

Additionally, before my conversations with Cris I did not have a full understanding of why the environmental program is structured the way it is now, and she was able to explain to me the current issues with integrating environmental studies into school curriculum. One staff member was always very defensive regarding her program, and insisted that she does “not want to change anyone, or their behavior”. Cris feels the exact opposite, as do I. In my opinion, the main point of environmental education is a mindset change. Learning about sea turtles and whales is nice, and making crafts of course is important for creative development, but deeply rooted change is what is effective in the long-term. My conversations with the fishermen, with Cristina and Felipe, and with other locals have also allowed me to get a greater understanding of the problems that Puerto López is encountering, which in turn is helping me to understand how the environmental education program could be directly to solving these issues. My conversations with Cris and her investment in my project have been particularly gratifying, and I am looking forward to what will happen in the future. I will be staying here independently for an additional two months to continue this project, and I am already thinking of when I can plan my next trip to Ecuador.

Before I left the US, my mom had expressed a worry that I would be bored and/or lonely in Puerto Lopez, given that it is a small fishing town with little to do. I had no worries about this, as I figured I would be distracted by my work and have things to do every day. However, during my first few weeks in Ecuador, I struggled with the worst bout of homesickness I have ever experienced, including when I left home for 6 months of independent travel. I had many

conversations with my IE3 Program Advisor about these feelings, as well as later about my struggles with one member of the staff. Jamie consistently supported me throughout the ups and downs of my experience in Ecuador in tangible and emotional ways. When I was feeling homesick, I did not recognize my feelings as culture shock. However, when Jamie shared with me a document describing the symptoms of culture shock, I was showing every single symptom, including “extreme homesickness, desire to avoid social settings, physical complaints, insomnia, depression, difficulty concentrating on tasks, hostility towards the host culture, boredom, fatigue, excessive frustration, and crying fits”. Only then was I willing to recognize these feelings as culture shock, which helped me move into a stage of acceptance.

However, this is not to say that I became entirely adjusted to the culture here. Particularly at the beginning of my time in Ecuador, I found myself getting particularly tired of the machismo attitudes. During my first three days in Guayaquil, I tended to see all men (and some women even) as predators and potential threats to my safety. When I arrived on La Costa, I did relax somewhat, and for a while I was willing to say hello and smile to anyone on the street. But particularly during the times I became exhausted and grumpy during my first few weeks in López, I started to see all the men as predators again, to the point of being angry with them. When I walk down the street or when I am working in the fish market, the men are always interested in talking with me. Although every driver in Ecuador honks at everything, and the men always whistle to get each other’s attention, it tends to be heavily aimed at females. I even noticed a difference of how many honks or whistles I get from the way that I wear my hair. I continued to hear comments such as “muy guapa”, and I have had kisses blown at me from men on motorcycles and cars. One man who works for a tour company on the malecón

used to see me every morning that I would walk back from the fish market. Every time his greeting (the traditional peck on the cheek), was slightly too long to be comfortable, and he barely would let go of my hand, even when I would say something like, “Buenos días, pero una amiga me espera ahora”. We had met and only talked for about two minutes the first time before he very assertively asked me out for a drink. I tried to be nice and say that I wasn’t sure if I was free that evening, and that my schedule changes all the time... After he continued to insist, I finally had to say, “Nos vemos aquí, bueno?” and he finally let me walk away. I eventually started to avoid walking past his shop.

I have at times felt as though I constantly having to prove myself because I am a woman. Even if I am able to do something, like lift a heavy turtle, all the men have to say is “¡Wow, que fuerte para una mujer...!” Even in my interactions with some of the male staff and volunteers from Ecuador, who I know respect me and know I do great work, are typically surprised when I can do something that is typically “men’s work”. We once had a party with all of the staff and volunteers, and I made a fire in our BBQ, which surprised and impressed Lucho and Diego (another volunteer). In fact, when Diego had first arrived, he immediately frustrated me with the way he constantly tried to help me, and seemed to act as though he knew more than me even though I had been with Equilibrio for over a month. Eventually during moment of utter frustration at La Playita, I had an outburst towards him. I described that although I knew he was trying to be helpful and support me, I am a strong woman capable of anything that a man can do. I told him I had been here for almost five weeks, and I did not need him to tell me how to do things. Looking back, although I think my reaction may have been harsh and it might have

been better to wait until a calm moment, after that conversation Diego showed much more respect for me.

Men in Ecuador simply do not pick up on the same clues that an American man would interpret to mean “no”, and almost always are trying to help you and make you more comfortable. I have found that polite assertiveness is the best way to deal with these situations, both friendly and romantic in nature. Particularly in the development of personal project and through my conversations with the locals, my attitude towards Ecuador and its machismo culture improved greatly and I now have many friends and acquaintances around town. But of course like any foreign culture, it was extremely difficult to get used to, and I am anticipating just as much (if not more) culture shock when I return home.

During the worst of my culture shock, I found myself getting very frustrated at the fish market one morning. It felt loud and overwhelming, and I was more annoyed than normal with the way the fishermen take a long time to finish their transactions and get the sharks off the boats. There are always cars and motorcycles blasting music and honking for people to get out of the way, and I even found myself in one moment thinking, “If you choose to drive your car in the middle of a busy market on the beach, you don’t get to honk at people to get out of the way...” Throughout this time, I was struggling to connect with the community. It was difficult to talk with the women because most of them are shy, and it was hard to talk with the men because I was constantly afraid of giving them the wrong idea about my intentions. I found it particularly ironic that on the same day that 3 million people in developed countries around the world marched for women’s rights and against hatred, discrimination, and isms of all kinds, I

had to tell the same guy four times in one night that I wasn't interested in dancing with him.

We have a lot to work towards in the United States and in other developed nations, but we are *bounds* ahead of countless communities and cultures around the world in their behaviors towards women.

However, throughout my experience in Ecuador, I have gotten used to some aspects of the culture, and I have experiences now that in the beginning would have felt predatory, but now feel harmless and sometimes even charming. One particular example of this began during my first week here. Every interaction I was having with men here was making me uncomfortable, particularly because the question of, "¿Es soltera usted? ¿Casada?" (*Are you single? Married?*) always came up. They are typically surprised that I am traveling alone, given that many women marry very early here, and a woman traveling alone is generally unheard of. I have even learned in some cases that it is simply easiest to say I have a boyfriend. I have generally received fewer marriage proposals through this method. But before I had realized this, I simply became frustrated with the question. The first time I went out to La Playita with Lucho, who from my first day seemed like a very interesting guy that I anticipated being friends with, and we had a great conversation, one of my first fully confident conversations entirely in Spanish. After the third volunteer had gone to sleep, we continued talking throughout my shift, and eventually of course the question of whether I had a boyfriend came up. I actually laughed out loud, and I told him that I had been thinking he might be the first person to not ask me if I was single. He asked, "¿Porque?" and seemed genuinely confused, so I explained that in my culture that question is somewhat personal. He immediately backtracked and said, "No, no, no," and that it is simply a part of normal conversation in Ecuador, something as simple as

“where are you from?” or “what do you do for fun?” He explained that he wasn’t asking if I *wanted* a boyfriend, but simply if I had one, to get to know me better. Of course, sometimes people are asking to see if you want one, and I have had some awful experiences of men hitting on me and not picking up hints that would seem obvious in the US, but that question generally makes me feel less uncomfortable than it used to. I even once threw the question back at someone, and asked if he was married. He seemed a bit taken-aback, but chuckled and said yes.

All of this being said, I have had my fair share of dating while in Ecuador. It has been an interesting experience, because as this is a machismo culture, women are generally expected to be compliant and follow instructions given by their boyfriends. The men always have the final say, and at parties, the women cook and clean while the men relax, which is a concept so antique and foreign to me. In comparison to relationships I have had in the United States, it has been interesting having a man try to tell me what to do, and to experience such basic differences in the ways that women and men interact. Of course, the interactions in a relationship depend entirely on the individuals, but I would highly recommend to future interns that they step out of their comfort zone and try dating here, if they so desire. However, it is not for everyone, and definitely takes a certain amount of self-confidence to be able to stand up for yourself and express your needs. Additionally, you must be very aware of the potential mishaps in communication, particularly if there is a language barrier, as this can easily lead to hurt feelings. Ecuadorian men (at least on the coast) are generally not used to having a women tell them what to do, and very good communication is key in these types of cross-cultural relationships.

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Likely one of the most important things I have learned about myself in Puerto López is that I struggle with being happy where I am, because it is difficult to know and recognize when you are happy. Only very late in my internship (around week 8) did I start to realize how happy and lucky I was to be where I was, doing what I was doing. For my first few weeks in López, I stumbled and struggled, and did not take advantage of opportunities when I could have. My greatest struggle throughout the internship was feeling continuously denied and looked down upon by one co-worker. Although I never confronted her about our tense relationship, I learned slowly to have a diplomatic relationship with her, and to enjoy all the other aspects of my job, the town, and the people I work with. I realize now how important it is to make opportunities for yourself, even if this means stepping out of your comfort zone. For me, this has meant having the confidence to invite myself to go out and do things with the other volunteers and the staff. And of course, I realized this late in my internship, and the time went by much too quickly.

Being in Puerto López has also forced me to slow down. I have realized I take myself much too seriously sometimes, and I usually feel like I always need to be doing something to stay sane. However, I have learned how to allow myself to do nothing sometimes, and to value self-care. I go to sleep when I feel like I want or need to, and I am reading much more than I do at home. I never would have imagined myself to be able to simply sit and do nothing, but I have slipped into a much slower lifestyle. I am learning to appreciate the moments of blissful nothing. I have always been afraid of deep water (even in pools), and I had always told myself

that I would never go diving, snorkeling, or surfing for fear of sharks. But a huge goal during my time here was to become accustomed to working in the ocean and be less afraid, by actively participating in all snorkeling or other research where I would be directly in the water. Even the first time I went swimming at the beach here, I did not go out further than knee-deep water, and was terrified by every rock, plastic bag, piece of seaweed, and wave. I was also very nervous before I snorkeled for the first time, but I was glad to have gotten two days of practice (one with just another volunteer in the harbor, and one with a tour company on Isla de La Plata) before we went out as a research group for the first time. The waves were huge, but I was not scared at all – only a healthy amount of nervous. I now feel very comfortable swimming, snorkeling (even diving down to get closer views of turtles and tropical fish), and surfing. My absolutely greatest reward of working for Equilibrio Azul and living and playing in coastal Ecuador has been the replacement of my irrational fear of the ocean into a deep respect and reverence. Now, I never want to get out of the water.

Another of my main goals for this internship was to be able to complete research on my own accord, for my own personal interest. Before I left the US, I worked with a professor from OSU to develop a survey about how family livelihoods in Puerto Lopez may or may not be affecting human-induced threats to marine biodiversity. He helped me to write the survey and given me ideas of how to effectively distribute the survey. There were been ups and downs with the planning and it took until week 6 or 7 to actually start delivering them. Once I began the surveys, I started to realize how complicated the environmental and social issues are in López. In Puerto López (and along the coast of Ecuador in general), the environmental issues are inherently tied to issues of human rights and livelihoods. Fishermen, for example, have

incredibly difficult and *dangerous* jobs to do. They barely sleep and do not eat well when they are out at sea, and I am sure that many of them struggle with mental and physical issues, including anxiety and depression. When they return to land, they make enormous amounts of money off of their catch. I have seen fishermen in the market casually hand someone an amount that could feed a family here for a month. And of course, they feel wealthy, so they go and spend this money on drinking, drugs, and prostitutes. The wives of these men are not generally happy with this situation, so there are high rates of cheating, separation, and divorce. There are many single parents because of this, as well as many young parents because of the general lack of sex education.

Yet, there are essentially no other industries besides fishing and tourism in which people can find work. Fishing is how to make a livelihood here, and when you know you can make \$120 off of one pelagic shark, of course you will aim to catch sharks. When manta rays were legal, of course the fishermen would hunt them because they are incredibly high in value. However, after the fishermen return and have spent all of their money, they are again “poor”, and have used this description of themselves to fight against legal action taken by the Ministerio de Ambiente and Parque Nacional Machalilla, as well as any data shared by Equilibrio Azul. The fishermen intimidate the workers from the Ministerio, and there is a lack of education for the workers to understand why their job of managing marine resources here is so important. The fishermen return to sea and of course, the cycle continues.

All of this is to describe the most important knowledge in my field for this internship has not been the hard science of ecology or biology, nor even of my understanding of the language. While these of course are useful – particularly my language skills when performing my research

– the most important knowledge has been my understanding of environmental justice and human interactions with natural resources. This knowledge has helped me to realize that big change is needed here, and it needs to start from the ground up. The environmental issues will not be solved by simply creating laws and fines or more enforcement. And the issues of human livelihoods and survival will not be solved by simply providing monetary aid. There needs to be local buy-in, and this need to start from an early age. Education is what Puerto López *deeply* needs, and a well-structured environmental education program that was available to as many young people as possible could likely change the fate of the ecosystems here within the next generation. It is for this reason that my knowledge of curriculum development has also been incredibly useful. It has allowed me to participate and generate some ideas for the program while I am here, but more importantly I am able to mentally critique the program and understand where there are gaps. However, it has also been extremely important to simply participate in Equilibrio's projects to better understand cultural context, before attempting to progress the program.

Equilibrio Azul as an organization, while structured in theory, lacks something in practice. Being in regular communications with Cris regarding my personal project while being physically present in Puerto López and working directly with the López staff has given me some interesting perspectives on the structure of the organization and the interactions between the structural layers. Felipe Vallejo is the director of Equilibrio Azul, while his partner Cristina Miranda is the volunteer coordinator. They both live in Quito and have other jobs, but occasionally visit Puerto López to check on the projects, the staff, and to perform carey captures. Additionally, there are three regular staff based in Puerto López, and Carolina (Caro)

Lemarie technically has the title of Field Coordinator. Luis (Lucho) Mera is the diver for the team and Ricardo (Ricky) Gonzalez is the boat captain. However, all of the staff here take equal responsibilities in the day-to-day patrol work. Caro manages and shares the collected data to Felipe and Cris. The only other major differences in their responsibilities occur during captures, when they take their roles as diver and captain.

In my experience Caro does not treat the staff as her employees, nor do Lucho or Ricky treat Caro as their supervisor. We never know when the Quito staff will arrive in Puerto López and their plans regularly change. There are some cultural differences between the Quito staff and the Puerto Lopez staff, as each has their own way of doing things and expectations of how duties and when should be done.

Again, as I said, the organization is definitely lacking something in terms of structure. However, much of this can be attributed to simply a different way of running things in Ecuador. Things are constantly changing in this country, particularly with this organization. Even the time of year you come to Equilibrio may affect the type and amount of work you will be given, so it is very important that future interns remain very flexible in their anticipations. Things *will* be different from how you expected or imagined them to be, and projects that a past intern did may have changed and may not be the same as what you end up doing.

For instance, my living situation was, to be honest, a little frustrating at times, particularly during the beginning of my internship. The large, beautiful volunteer house is up above the town, with an enormous and outstanding view of Puerto López, the beach, and out towards Isla de La Plata and westward into the Pacific. At times, there were only two of us living

there, and at other times the house was full with six volunteers (some from as close as Cuenca, Ecuador, and others from as far away as Melbourne and Montreal). All three López staff live in their own houses down the hill in the pueblo, but somewhat regularly come up to the house to process data, say hello, or finish tasks. As the typical length of stay of the volunteers is a month, for a while I was nervous that I would be alone at times in the house, which would have made my exhaustion and homesickness even worse. However, Camila, a volunteer from Chile, who has been here since November, decided to renew her visa and stay here until June. Her company has entirely changed my experience here, and I rarely feel lonely anymore. In fact, I came to greatly enjoy the nights I have to myself in the house.

In the house, there are two bedrooms with three bunk beds each, and at times I shared my room with both women and men. We never had enough volunteers to where we were forced to use the upper bunks, so most of us used the extra bed for storage. There are two nice bathrooms, which are also gender neutral, but there is no hot water. The living space is a large indoor/outdoor patio overlooking the town, with a couch, table and chairs, and two hammocks. When the doors are open, the kitchen overlooks onto the patio. In the kitchen, there is a shared fridge, stove, coffee maker, and fresh water dispenser. We have to keep all of our food in plastic boxes because there are mice. In this same room, there is a large board that displays the work schedule, some books (including some in Spanish and English, dictionaries, children's books, and guidebooks) to borrow, and a small loft with a computer. The computer is normally only used for research and data processing, but if need be volunteers and interns are also welcome to use it. There is wifi in the house, but it is not always reliable and typically has

terrible connections in the evenings. If possible, it works best to schedule Skype or Facetime dates in the morning or midday.

The absolutely beautiful view and immeasurable numbers of unbelievable sunsets came with their own tradeoffs, however, as being up and away from López meant that we were about a 15 or 20-minute walk from town, even to get to the grocery store. At times, being so separated from the town made me feel very isolated, and it was occasionally hard to find motivation to go into town. The distance from the town made the house feel somewhat separated from the community, and at times added to the feelings of isolation and loneliness I felt. But then again, I felt entirely safe at the house, which was particularly helpful when I am home alone. In the worst case scenario, if I was in a rush or feeling lazy, the motor taxis (or “motos”) that buzz around town only cost \$0.50 in any direction and distance during the day, and \$1 at night.

I did try to go into Puerto López at least once a day, and I came to find certain small restaurants and shops that I liked to go to. The malecón has many shops and restaurants, although it is more expensive than the rest of town because it is aimed at tourists. Puerto López is actually most famous for being the gateway to the Isla de La Plata, which has some of the same bird species as the Galapagos Islands, including the famous blue-footed boobies and frigate birds. Tour companies in town have day trips out to the Isla that include lunch and snacks, a naturalist guide on the island, and snorkeling in the afternoons before returning to López. Caro was able to put me in touch with a friend of hers who gave me a discount on a trip (\$31, when the typical price is about \$40). I have also gone with other volunteers (and alone) to

the nearby towns/cities of Montañita, Olón, and Manta for day trips. I would stress to any future intern the importance of getting out of town. Especially for those of us from larger cities like Seattle or Portland (or even Corvallis), Puerto López can feel very small and boring at times.

For any future interns to note, the house does not have an address, and therefore cannot receive/send mail, nor can you give the moto or taxi driver an exact location. The best way to direct them (especially upon your arrival) is to say that the house is “cerca de La Terraza” (a hotel just up the hill). When you are coming from the López bus terminal, they will turn off the main street and pass the Centro de Salud Público on the left. They will make a left turn up a large hill, and when you are almost to the top (about 1/3-1/2 a mile), you will see a large wooden structure on the left side of the street with a blue sign that says, “Equilibrio Azul”, where you can ask them to drop you off. Keep in mind, while the motos cost \$0.50 going around town, they cost \$1 per person from the bus terminal, even if there are two people going to the same location.

I typically use a moto in the mornings on the way to the market to save time, and I walk back after getting breakfast in town. If it's raining or much too hot to walk around, or if I'm carrying a lot of groceries, I also use a moto. But otherwise I try to walk as much as possible. If I go to nearby towns or beaches either for fun or for work, it is easy to jump on a bus going in that direction and tell them your destination. The buses do not typically have a time schedule however, and sometimes do not come for an hour, while at other times three pass by in 15 minutes. I always try to give myself some room for margin. The buses typically cost about \$1 per hour of travel, but heading to Frailes or Ayámpe (both less than 20 minutes away) has cost me \$0.75 at times. Worst case scenario, there are also taxis that head north and south along

the main coastal highway and are relatively inexpensive. (If I share with other people, it typically costs me between \$1-2 one-way to Ayámpe, for instance.) For a while, I considered going to Quito or to Baños for a weekend, because I originally only had 10 days of travel time after my internship. The bus to Quito is a 10-hour bus (either night or day), and to Baños is even further given the necessary transfer in Guayaquil. I decided instead to spend my weekends here and around the province to save money and time, and asked permission to leave three days early to have more time to travel (although this was before I had decided to extend my time in Ecuador).

In my free time, I loved enjoying the beaches, swimming a lot, sunbathing, and eating fantastic food. I sometimes took the bus out of town – which definitely helped distract me from small, dusty Puerto López – to Ayámpe, a seaside town about a 20-minute bus ride from here. Because I was interested in learning how to surf, I paid \$105 for a pack of five lessons through a surf school called Otra Ola in Ayámpe. While the classes are on the pricier side, they are long (an hour and a half) and taught in English. Although I'm still terrible at surfing, I had a great time. At the same school, yoga classes for an hour and a half cost \$10 each. To travel around town, I likely spend about \$3-5 per week, not including trips to Ayámpe or other towns. In terms of recreation, my spending entirely depends on the week and what I am interested in doing.

As much as I would like to say that I had a specific budget in mind before I came to Ecuador, I simply anticipated spending less than I do during a term in Corvallis. I generally tried to be as mindful as possible with my money while still enjoying myself, so that I could use the money left over at the end of the term to travel around the country before returning home. In a

week, I typically went to the grocery store once or twice, and never spent more than about \$20-30/week. I preferred to buy produce from the outdoor market near the house, and fruits and vegetables are *incredibly* cheap. A pineapple, a couple onions, a pepper, a cucumber, and some bananas would cost me around \$2-3 in total. I occasionally would go out for meals or drinks, which are pricier in the tourist area, but can cost as little as \$3/meal. The most I have ever paid for a meal in Puerto López was \$8 plus drinks. I particularly recommend “almuerzo” de La Costa, which is typically a two-course meal of fish or meat soup, and a second course of rice and lentils with some form of meat. You also get a juice and sometimes patacones (fried savory plantains), all for a total of \$3-4.

Housing was my most expensive cost, particularly because they asked for me to pay the entire sum up front. Of course, it does not cost \$550/month per volunteer to pay for water, internet, and other house needs, so much of the income from housing goes to the research, staff salaries, and supplies. IE3 had estimated that I would need to pay for three full months of \$550/month, however Equilibrio only required that I pay for 10 weeks (or 2.5 months). In the end, I ended up paying a total of \$1350 for housing for the term. Additionally, we occasionally had to pay for taxis or other transportation to/from work, or water for the house if no staff are present, but we were always paid back at the end of the month.

Additionally, to any future interns, if there is a mural outside of the Fondo Azul office, I did that! (Hopefully it will be there soon, as Lucho and I plan to start painting this week.)

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Generally, I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know the staff, the organization, and the community, particularly in my last few weeks here. Although I had major struggles with a co-

worker, culture shock, and homesickness, I greatly appreciate the support I have received from Cris, my IE3 Program Advisor and other staff, past interns, and other personal and academic support from home. Having Camila as a friend and companion in the last few weeks of my internship greatly helped me to feel productive, communicated with, and a part of the community. We often run into Lucho in the town (as his new soft-top Jeep is *very* recognizable, particularly by the sounds it makes), and we all occasionally go out for dinner or drinks in the evenings. As the workplace culture is very relaxed, we have had community dinners at the volunteer house with the staff and their families somewhat often, especially when since we have recently only had Spanish-speaking volunteers.

I just returned to López from a two-week vacation in the Galápagos and Quito. To all future interns, if you have the chance to go out to the islands, you *cannot miss it*. Particularly for those interested in biology, geology, and other life sciences (but also for everyone else), the Galápagos may very well be the most unbelievably fascinating, unreal, breathtaking, beautiful, bizarre places you will ever travel. I also plan to travel to Baños, Riobamba, Puyo, Latacunga, Quito (again), Mindo, and Otavalo, before returning home in May. While there are dozens of reasons why I have decided to stay in Puerto López for two more months, they can be simplified into the fact that I have learned bounds about myself while in Ecuador, have made great steps towards my personal, professional, and academic goals, and I absolutely love this weather. I simply am not ready to go home yet.