

Otter Conservation with Ekko Brasil

Helen K's Final Report

## **Arrival in Florianópolis, Brazil - January 1**

### ***January 19***

**Q: What have been your initial impressions of your host organization/work site?**

**A:** Instituto Ekko Brasil is a pretty small site with the only long-term staff being the project manager, his wife, and my supervisor. These three are not usually around during work, but I have different volunteers helping me each week to feed the animals and clean their enclosures. For the first week it was just me, but last week two women joined me from São Paulo, and this week there were two students from a city just north of Florianópolis as well as a couple from France. This work is tedious and I feel more like a zookeeper and less like a researcher than I was hoping. However, now that the rain has stopped (Florianópolis declared itself in a state of emergency last week due to all the heavy rain) and the site has been getting more volunteers, we recently started taking more trips to collect field data on otter intensity around the south side of the island. These field trips have been my favorite part of work because we get to explore the island, relax at beaches, and try out new restaurants while working to provide data for a research project aimed at improving animal conservation laws. On another note, the first couple weeks, I would get really frustrated when I couldn't use language effectively to communicate with my supervisor and other volunteers, but I'm slowly becoming more patient in this aspect.

**Q: Provide a brief overview and thoughts about the kind of work you've started doing.**

**A:** I strongly believe in this organization's mission. Earlier this week, one of the otters on site died. The otter, Tupi, was the first animal to be put into captivity here after he was found orphaned in the wild. He had lived at the project for 10 years. Otters in the wild typically live about 8 to 9 years. Tupi's passing showed me how much everyone here really cares about

these animals. The project manager, Junior, has devoted approximately 20 years of his life to research aimed at changing policy to better protect neotropical otters. Like I said, I don't love the amount of zoo keeping I've been doing, but it feels good to be working for an organization with goals that I 100% agree with.

**Q: How does the work match your expectations, how does it match your goals?**

**A:** I was expecting to more research for work, but any time-consuming research project could interfere with my other responsibilities. Caring for the animals takes a lot more time and effort than I expected. It's not particularly interesting work, either. But when there are other volunteers to help me (which there usually are), I have a lot more time that I can dedicate to my own research project.

**Q: What stood out to you the most regarding your arrival?**

**A:** The lack of English. The language barrier has by far been the most difficult challenge I've faced in Brazil. I have trouble with directions and can't understand people well enough to ask for help. Often there is someone around who speaks English pretty well, but others don't know any at all. I'm slowly learning Portuguese because I want to be able to communicate with people here.

**Q: What was your greatest anxiety prior to departing and how do you feel about that now that you have arrived?**

**A:** I was most nervous about navigating around without being able to talking to people, but thankfully my supervisor picked me up from the airport and explained the bus system to me. However, I had to ask at least six people for help before I found an ATM when I visited Florianópolis Centro by myself. Learning words like "left", "right", and "street" in Portuguese

helped a bit. The language is still a huge struggle for me, but the majority of the people on site speak English very well.

***January 31***

**Q: How are things going at work now that you have settled in for a bit? How does this work align with your professional goals that you set for yourself? Knowing the site as you do now, what would you like to be sure you achieve by the end of your internship?**

**A:** My two main professional goals were to learn field work data collection methods and to conduct my own research project. I've been surprised by the minimal amount of data collected from each field expedition. It's basically just a 1 or a 0 (feces or none) for a trip that takes nearly the entire day. However, I have also told about intensive data collection trips in which we drive for twelve hours, stopping at dozens of bridges to look for evidence of otter presence. During these expeditions, which monitor various places throughout the year, we also collect data by classifying the location, taking pictures, and collecting the feces if they are fresh. The sample point for these expeditions are chosen through GIS mapping. Over a time period of approximately ten years, these expeditions will provide information about population trends of neotropical otters in the wild. I am also learning how data collection can be so easily impacted by logistics and weather. For example, since it has been raining so much these past couple weeks, the otter feces have been washed away from many sites. I am currently working on a research project of my own and I am learning a lot about how important preparation is in conducting research. The majority of the work is done before you even collect any data. By the end of my internship, I want to learn more about parasites and ecosystem services. These are the areas of research that the project manager is currently focusing on.

**Q: How are things going relative to your personal goals? In which areas have you made progress and where do you still have some room to expand? What will you do to ensure you are successful personally before you leave?**

**A:** I am struggling to meet people and to make friends, not that I have really been putting any effort into making friends. The people who I work with are very supportive and kind and I feel like I can trust them and confide in them, but it's hard to call them my friends because they are so much older than me. I would love to meet people outside of the project, but I feel like I am unable to do that until my Portuguese improves. I am still practicing the language. I'm happy with the amount that I have been able to travel on the weekends as well as during work. This kind of exploration was a huge goal of mine. I will continue to visit new places on the weekends and continue studying Portuguese so that I can talk to people.

**Q: How are things going relative to your cross-cultural goals? What cultural experiences have stood out to you so far? What do you want to ensure to experience before you leave?**

**A:** I'm slowly learning Portuguese. I've gotten multiple compliments from people on site, but I always get nervous and have trouble communicating with people off site. The cultural difference that has stood out to me most is that people always eat pizza with fork and knife here. Jokes aside, I've been fascinated by the little villages dotted around the island. The project helps some of the people in these villages by giving them food money. I've been amazed by how little these people need in their lives and it really highlights the excess that I'm used to back at home in the US. Before I leave, I want to have a conversation with a stranger in Portuguese and I want to go out dancing somewhere. I also would love to learn how to make some Brazilian foods.

***February 18***

**Q: Describe a day in your life:**

- **What is your work schedule like?**
- **What activities and tasks are you doing day-to-day?**
- **What do you do after work?**
- **How do you balance your time between work and exploring life outside of work?**

**A:** I wake up around 7:30, sometimes earlier to run, and start work around 8:00-8:30. We feed the animals and clean their enclosures every morning. Usually, we're done by 11:30 and take our lunch break until 2:00-2:30. During this time I cook, read, study Portuguese, or sometimes swim in the lake next to the site. In the afternoon, we work until 5:30-6:30, proving environmental enrichment, fishing, and working on various projects around the site. After work, usually I read or study Portuguese. Sometimes I go for a run or go to the beach which is just a ten-minute walk away. I don't feel that I have much time to explore during the week unless we are collecting field data for work. On these days, we hike to beaches and try new restaurants.

**Q: Housing:**

- **What is your living situation like?**
- **Knowing what you know now, are there other options you would have chosen instead?**
- **If you can provide some resources for future interns, that would be most helpful.**

**A:** I live in a small hostel on the site with 5 rooms. Most of the time, I have had a room to myself. The living situation kind of feels like a homestay because the wife of the project manager is so friendly and the daughter is always playing around the site (I'm here during their summer). They have invited me to eat with them multiple times and I run with my host mother at least once a week. I like living on site because it's so convenient and such a beautiful place, but living off site

would have been cool because it would have forced me to meet more people and to practice Portuguese more.

**Q: Finances:**

- **How is your budget working out for you?**
- **Are you spending more or less than what you expected?**
- **How much do you typically spend on food, recreation, travel, etc.?**
- **What would you do differently knowing what you know now?**
- **A:** Food and bus fare are cheap and I'm easily entertained by just wandering around new places, so staying within my budget is pretty easy. Groceries for the week are only about \$20-\$30 and bus fare is about \$1.40 per trip. Some things that I want to start spending more money on are rock climbing, sandboarding, and windsurfing.

**Q: Travel and Transportation:**

- **How do you typically get around town and to work? Are you satisfied with that choice?**
- **Would you recommend other options?**
- **Do you have time to explore the surrounding area on your time off? How do you manage that?**
- **Where do you recommend exploring?**

**A:** I only travel on weekends and during data collection trips. On weekends, I take the bus. It can get a bit confusing so I would recommend knowing enough Portuguese to ask for help. Also, it's better to leave early because traffic is bad in the summer. I recommend visiting Lagoa de Conceição, Costa de Lagoa, Centro, and all the trails and beaches on the south of the island. My favorite beach is Lagoinha do Leste. Florianopolis is a beautiful island and it's quite

large, but Brazil is such a big country that it's worth taking time to see more of it. You'll probably need to ask for a day or two off to make it worth the travel time.

*February 28*

**Professional Learning:**

**Q: Describe the workplace culture at your host organization. How does your personal cultural lens work within the culture of your host organization?**

**A:** The work environment is pretty relaxed and we can be twenty minutes late without a problem, however there's been a little bit more accountability in this aspect since we have one volunteer who doesn't show up often enough. People take the time to help each other out and we try to all finish up at the same time. Sometimes one person will offer to stay a little bit longer on their own to finish up a one-person job like mopping the floors. I care about conservation and that's what my host organization is all about. Sometimes, I wish efficiency and planning were valued a bit more. Recently, we have been using a calendar on the computer to show our weekly schedule, which has helped me feel in-the-know and prepare for things like field trips in which we hike 15 kilometers.

**Q: What parts of your work have you enjoyed the most? Is there any part of your work that you find particularly challenging?**

**A:** I have enjoyed the kayaking, hiking, and swimming during field trip because I love exploring new places. It is also very rewarding to make a toy or set up a swing for an animal and watch them play with it, especially if they had been having problems with pacing. I get really tired of the repetitiveness of each day. I'm grateful for the help of other volunteers because they help complete some of the tasks that I am most sick of like scooping poop out of the otters' enclosures and cleaning their eating areas. I also find it difficult to come up with new ideas for

environmental enrichment (toys, new foods, etc.) and it's very frustrating when I spend a lot of time creating something and the animals doesn't interact with it.

**Q: Describe a professional accomplishment that you are proud of - be specific.**

**A:** I'm proud of the research project that I've planned relating to the behavior of one of the tayras. I planned out the question, methods, schedule, and everything else about the project myself and collected all the data myself. I'm glad that I didn't stick with my original project idea that involved measure the food intake of the monkeys because I was bored of this project after only one week. I'm also really happy with my improved patience in communicating with people. I've also gotten better at communicating with people as I've become more competent with the language.

**Cross Cultural Learning:**

**Q: Describe an event where you misunderstood something due to cultural differences.**

**A:** At one of the blocos in Rio, during Carnival, the police pepper sprayed the crowd and at another bloco, they started opening up the streets to traffic. I don't understand why they needed to break up these events since I did not observe any violence. Getting pepper sprayed really upset me. I also did not understand the women's reactions to extremely forward men at Carnival. Men would walk up and immediately go in for a kiss which, to me, is an invasion of personal space and a huge turn off. Other women would say no and act like they weren't interested, but then give in and start making out with a guy if he was persistent enough.

**Q: What did you do? What would you do next time?**

**A:** After getting pepper sprayed, I asked my friend why the police did that. I didn't get a satisfying answer, so I just stayed quiet for a while feeling upset. Eventually, I moved on, but I still don't like to think about that experience. Next time, I would try to shrug off the bad feeling



more quickly and not let it put any damper to my night. When I saw how forward the men were, I avoided making eye contact with any men in the crowd. If a man approached me, I immediately turned my back to him. Looking back on it, I think this was a bit unnecessary. I could have talked to a man and politely told him I had a boyfriend. I'm glad that I was with other women and if I was put into that situation again alone, I would have done my best to find another group of women to stay with.

### **Personal Growth:**

**Q: What are the most important things you have learned about yourself thus far through this experience?**

**A:** I've learned that I don't have to be busy and have all these cool plans to be happy. I've also learned that I really enjoy exploring new places by myself although, every once in a while, I find a place that I really want to share with someone. Those are the places that I plan to visit a second time. Some of my favorite experiences have been just walking around a beach or town by myself and admiring the world around me. I like being able to focus all my attention on observation rather than actively engaging in conversation or communication with another person. Especially in nature, I think I remember details better and notice things like scents and noises when I am alone.

**Q: What has been the greatest personal challenge? What has been the greatest reward?**

**A:** The greatest challenge by far has been the language barrier. It's been very difficult not being able to fully express myself to people. The most rewarding thing was meeting someone in Rio who could communicate with me because he spoke English almost perfectly and we had similar views. He was not born in Brazil, but had lived there for eight years, so he was able to help me understand the culture as well as many of the social issues in Rio. Another really rewarding feeling is sitting in a beautiful place (Brazil has many) and just meditating on how grateful I am

for the opportunities I've been given while I enjoy an outstanding view or listen to a waterfall. Also, making friends who only speak Portuguese is a great feeling. It shows that my work in studying so hard has really paid off.

## **Return - March 21**

### ***March 11***

#### **Q: Professional:**

- **Have you learned about any new possibilities for career paths?**
- **Have you done any informational interviews (formal or informal) to learn about the field?**

**A:** Working at Instituto Ekko Brasil has increased my interest in marine biology. I have not talked to any marine biologists during my time here. Honestly, though, I still have no idea what I want to be when I grow up. I'll be happy as long as my career involves taking steps to solve any of the world's environmental problems. I am especially interested in the fields of wildlife conservation and sustainable agriculture.

#### **Q: Cross Cultural:**

- **Looking back at your pre-departure journal or notes, how have your impressions of the host culture changed?**
- **What is the most frustrating aspect of your host culture? What is the most rewarding aspect?**

**A:** Brazil's culture is much more westernized than I expected. English is very prevalent and American music and movies have a very strong influence in developed areas. Brazilians pay attention to American news more than I thought they would. I found three articles about Trump while I was flipping through a nationally distributed newspaper. One of the friends I met in Rio thoroughly questioned me about technological and business developments of American

companies. People care about getting involved in politics and making their voices heard much more than I expected. Brazilian politicians are incredibly corrupt, but most people are thoroughly aware of that fact. I saw a lot of political graffiti, especially denouncing Temer, the current president. For me, the most frustrating aspect of trying to adapt to my host culture was the language barrier. The two most frustrating things about the work culture are the repetitiveness of the work and the uncertainty of the work schedule. Another frustrating thing about the culture here is how socially acceptable it is for men to be so forward and persistent with women (especially during Carnival) and also how women confuse the situation by refusing a man multiple times before they "change their mind". The most rewarding aspect of my journey in adapting to Brazilian culture has been getting to know new people who are so welcoming and hospitable and happy to share their clothing, food, drink, knowledge, etc.

**Q: Your Culture Curve:**

- **The period of cultural adjustment is often represented by a “W” curve with various peaks and valleys: Honeymoon (peak); Initial Culture Shock (valley); Cultural Adjustment (peak); Further Culture Shock (valley); Further Adjustment (peak); Re-entry Shock (valley).**
- **Outline your personal W Curve or cultural adjustments starting from when you arrived in your host country to the present-marking the highs and lows with approximate dates and descriptions of events that represent some of these phases (recognizing of course, that you are still in process of adapting to life back home).**

**A:** I'm assuming here that cultural adjustment is synonymous with the level of comfort experience in a new place. I fell in love with Florianópolis immediately because of the beautiful beaches and trails, but I was really terrified of going places with lots of people. Even walking down the street in my safe little town made me nervous because I didn't want anyone to try to talk me. For the first week or two, I felt like everyone was staring at me when I walked places. I was so insecure about my inability to fit in, to say hello correctly, to wear normal clothes. After

the first week or two, when I was finally comfortable just walking around, my feelings of cultural adjustment were much more dependent on the situations that I put myself in rather than dependent on time. For example, my comfort level went down if I entered a crowded place or tried to talk to someone. I would get especially uncomfortable asking for help because sometimes a person's good intentions were wasted on my inability to understand. In my 6th week, someone starting talking to me at the bus stop. I had not engaged in many long conversations with people who did not speak any English, so I was happy to have someone to practice with. I found out the bus wasn't coming for another hour and he invited me in his home. We talked for about half an hour and he made me a caipirinha (an alcoholic drink) and offered to make me lunch, but he was a little bit too affectionate for my liking, so I left. The next day, my boss told me that he had come to the work site looking for me and that I should watch out for him because he has a bad reputation. This was by far the most maladjusted I felt during my time here. When I was talking to him it was really difficult for me to distinguish between creepy and friendly. I didn't think it was that weird that he was calling me beautiful because my supervisor does the same. Also, I don't know when my discomfort is warranted or not because the cheek kissing greeting makes me uncomfortable every single time, but it's so normal for everyone here. Another time that I felt extremely uncomfortable was during my 7th week when I attended a bloco in Rio that ended with the police pepper spraying the crowd. I felt upset, but after people stopped coughing, no one else really seemed that bothered. I'm still uncomfortable spending time alone with men because I'm scared that they will assume I'm interested in sexual activities. This could be a problem in the U.S. too, but to a lesser extent because I'm more likely to recognize flirting and to be able to shut it down. Another time I felt very maladjusted to the culture is when I went forro dancing because I was so bad at it, but this wasn't a bad experience. Trying a new style of dance pushed my comfort zone in a good way, as did trying a capoeira class.

**Q: Articulating your Experience:**

- **Please write one paragraph to sum up your experience, touching on the professional, the cross-cultural and the personal. Discuss your learning, the rewards and maybe challenges of the program. You may think of this as a summary you might give in an interview, or to a fellow student who was asking you about your internship.**

**A:** Most days, the work was physical and repetitive, but it usually didn't take more than three hours to finish this part of the job. There was not much direction, so I had to be self-motivated to create a project of my own. The project manager, Junior, helped me brainstorm after I went to him with some ideas in mind. I based my project on monitoring animal behavior in response to environmental enrichment, which Junior often stresses the importance of. I learned a lot about environmental enrichment by making toys for the animals or feeding them with new foods and observing their various responses. Outside of work, I learned about government corruption, social inequality, and the strength of America's cultural influence over Brazil. I learned that real attempts to understand social issues require inputs from many different perspectives because people vary greatly in their priorities and resources. I learned learning a place's or a person's history can really help in understanding the present. Personally, I think I have become more patient and more forgiving when communicating with people due to the constant struggle of having a language barrier. I've learned that I really like the slow, calm, relaxed lifestyle and I think the rush of life in Seattle may be difficult to readapt to. I think I will notice American excess in a lot more places than I did before. For example, people in Brazil don't usually use a dishwasher or clothes dryer, which saves water and energy. I know that I want to continue to travel to new places and push the limits of my comfort zone. I also learned that I want to spend several months intensively studying the native language before I visit another country.

***April 5***

**Q: What words of advice do you have for future interns as they prepare for this internship and living in your host country/culture?**

**A:**

- 1. Learn Portuguese:** Learn as much Portuguese as you can before you leave as this will make you feel a lot more comfortable hearing and speaking the language when you arrive. Portuguese pronunciation is very different from English pronunciation, so practice by listening and speaking. I would recommend listening to artists such as Jorge Ben Jor, Anitta, Jota Quest, and MC Kevinho. Watch movies like “Cidade de Deus” and “Cidade Onde Envelheço”
- 2. Look for events:** You can use Facebook and do a Google search to find local events. Florianópolis is a pretty big city, so there’s always something going on. I would definitely recommend looking for dance classes or a bar where you can learn samba or forró. I would recommend trying capoeira as well. You’re very likely to see people doing capoeira around centro (downtown Florianópolis) and you’ll have a greater appreciation for this mix of dance and martial arts if you try it yourself.
- 3. Surf:** Even if you’ve never surfed before (I hadn’t), you should take a lesson or find a friend to take you surfing. Floripa (Florianópolis’s nickname) is a surfer’s paradise and tourists come from all over Brazil to surf and enjoy the beaches.
- 4. Try a caipirinha:** Caipirinhas are the national drink of Brazil and they’re delicious. Also, if you want to buy cheap beer at the beach, buy from a vendor carting around a cooler rather than one of the kiosks.
- 5. Travel to another part of Brazil:** If you only stay in Florianópolis, you can’t really know anything about the country as a whole. I believe that seeing other places in Brazil will help you appreciate how beautiful the island of Santa Catarina is. Floripa is one of the wealthier and safer places in Brazil. If you really want to see the stark inequality and poverty that

exists in Brazil, you need to travel somewhere else. I traveled to Rio and I didn't like the city very much, but it taught me a lot about social issues experienced by Brazilians.

6. **Read Brazilian News:** This will help you understand the extreme level of corruption in the Brazilian government. You will see graffiti that says "Fora Temer". He is the president of Brazil and a lot of people do not like him, do not trust him, and do not want him to be in power. Police forces can be very corrupt, too, especially in Rio.
7. **Spend a lot of time observing the animals:** I completed a research project that required me to observe one of the tayras, Coda, for five minutes every hour, ten hours each day, for over a week. I took notes on his behavior and after spending so much time focused on him, I felt like I could begin to understand him much more than any of the other volunteers.