

## **Jordan S's Final Report**

### **Ekko Brasil**

When I found an opportunity for an internship abroad at Ekko Brasil Institute for Otter Conservation, I knew that I had to apply. I have wanted to go to Brazil since I was 12 years old, and I have wanted to work with otters my entire life. So seeing this opportunity immediately peaked my interest. I prepared and perfected my application for over a year, revising and rewriting all of my answers and essay questions until I thought they truly reflected how enthusiastically I wanted to participate in this opportunity. Of course, when I was actually accepted into the program it hit me how scary this opportunity would be as well. Before this internship: I had never traveled alone, I had never been outside of North America, and I had never actually worked with wild animals before. I knew this experience would change my life, I just didn't know how.

I prepared for this internship by learning a few basic phrases in Portuguese, as well as reading a few papers that the program creator had published specifically on Neotropical Otter research. In addition, I frequently talked with the previous intern and she gave me some tips on helpful things to bring and a few of the tasks that the internship entailed. I also began to go to the gym a couple times a week because I was worried that my body wasn't prepared for all the physical labor I would be doing and I did not want to miss out on any activities due to lack of endurance. Along with these personal preparations, I attended an IE3 Global Internship orientation for Latin American internships, as well as one specific to my site at Instituto Ekko Brasil. These were very helpful in preparing for the physical act of traveling and what to expect when I was actually in Brazil.

The day that I left was really hard. Not only was it nerve wracking to travel for 28 hours by myself but also, I found it really hard to leave my family. But I knew this was going to be a once in a lifetime opportunity that I would cherish forever. Luckily so much time on the planes and in airports gave me a lot of time to get my emotions and thoughts into check. I decided to take on a "go with the flow" attitude during this internship to help me stop overthinking so I could enjoy every moment that I could.

However when I finally landed in Brazil, I couldn't help but feel a little out of place. I was quickly caught off guard by how little to no English was spoken in the airport. Nor did I know where I was supposed to go after arriving in Florianopolis or who I was supposed to be looking for. Luckily despite being clueless my coworkers found me at the airport; I was welcomed by my supervisor, Marcelo, co-worker, Priscila, and the project's veterinarian Rogério. They all seemed very friendly but they were also very respectful of the fact that I was adjusting to a new place. The car ride to the project was a little difficult because neither Priscila nor Rogério spoke much English, and Brazilians like to talk and get to know the people they will be working with. This was my first of many indications that I did not know nearly as much Portuguese as I needed to know. Still they were very friendly and tried to communicate as well as they could. Once arriving at the project I was allowed to explore the area by myself that way I could become comfortable with the area, and the animals at my own pace.

The next day was my first official day of the internship. The day started at approximately 8am when everyone met in the kitchen to prepare breakfasts. This was a good time to discuss the plan for the day. Afterwards Priscila taught me the morning feeding and cleaning routine. This consisted first of cutting up various fruits in small pieces for one Golden Parakeet, and two Saguís (de Tufo Preto), a type of small monkey. After, we prepared each animal's individual food plates, which consisted of frozen fresh water and saltwater fish for the six otters, and rats and fruit for the two Iaras. Their food was weighed individually because animals receive 5% of their body weight in food in the morning. After all the food was prepared it was set on the windowsill and the platters of food were

taken one by one to each enclosure. At each enclosure we closed the otters in their adjacent *cambiamento*, small caged area separate from the enclosure, and fed them. Once they were closed off from the enclosure we entered it and cleaned the area. This consisted of scooping up any feces, cleaning the pool and pool filters of leaves, cleaning the windows and rinsing down the platforms with clean water. After the enclosure was fully cleaned the otters were released back into the enclosure and we would move onto the next. After feeding and cleaning of all the otter enclosures then we would do the same with the *liraras*, raccoon, monkeys, and bird enclosures. Followed by cleaning of the food prep kitchen and the *cambiamentos*. This was the daily task from about 8:30am-11am every day. After this I was given my official orientation presentation, where Junior, the head of the project, presented me with the history and purpose of the project. This allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of not only the work that the others there were doing, but also the work that I would be doing in the weeks to follow.

From approximately noon to two o'clock in the afternoon I learned that we would have a break to eat lunch and relax before doing more work in the afternoons. Some days we wouldn't have this break and that would be because after morning duties we would go on hikes around the island, or kayak around the lake, to do research work looking for otter frequency through presence of feces in designated areas. After two in the afternoon if we stayed on site we would work on various projects. My first day we deep cleaned the kitchen, because that is what Monday afternoons are for. Other afternoons we would clean the veterinarian laboratory, work on enrichment activities for the animals, cut down bamboo to use for building materials, remove overgrown plants, or other tasks needed to be done. By five o'clock we were finished with most afternoon activities and Priscila taught me the evening routine. This consisted of preparing food again for the otters, *liraras*, as well as the raccoon this time; the raccoon received food 10% of her body weight in fruit and meats (fish, or rats) only once a day because she is nocturnal. This time we fed them by throwing the otters food into the otter pools and placing the *liraras* and raccoons food around their enclosures because they like to search for their food. Once these evening activities were finished, we were done for the day, usually by six o'clock pm. Overall the first day was a lot of learning, but I honestly loved every minute of it.

This feeling continued throughout my entire internship. Everyday I was learning new things, and every week I got to go on new hikes and explore more of the amazing island. For me the most challenging part of this internship was the hikes. I am not a super active person and some of the hikes were really steep and exhausting. But from these intense hikes it allowed me to realize that it is ok to stop to catch my breath, and even when I don't think I can go any further, I can with support. Luckily the people I was constantly working with were very supportive and understanding. As time went on I learned that many Brazilians, at least where I was, were all very friendly and genuinely caring, and this characteristic showed through in many of the people I met. In addition to the amazing support of my coworkers and people I met in Brazil I also had the support of my IE3 advisor from my home campus.

All in all, this experience was incredible, and I would encourage anyone who has the opportunity to participate in a similar internship to take advantage of it. I have no regrets when it comes to any part of this internship because even the moments of confusion due to the language barrier, or moments of fear due to unknown circumstances allowed me to figure out how to overcome those moments and grow as a person. I have learned so much about not only a career in zoology because of this internship but I also learned more about expanding my horizons as a person. I will always remember and cherish my time spent in Brazil, and I really hope to return someday soon.