

## KRET Report

In the summer of 2014 I travelled to Sri Lanka to do 5 weeks of turtle conservation. I had signed up to a 6 week project with GapGuru so the first week was an induction in Kandy where I learnt about Singalese culture, as well as visiting a festival and some famous Buddhist monuments of the ancient city. When I headed down to the south of Sri Lanka I was thrown into some conservation work straight away. There were two small conservation centres close by on the beach at Ambalangoda and I learnt from other volunteers how to feed the disabled



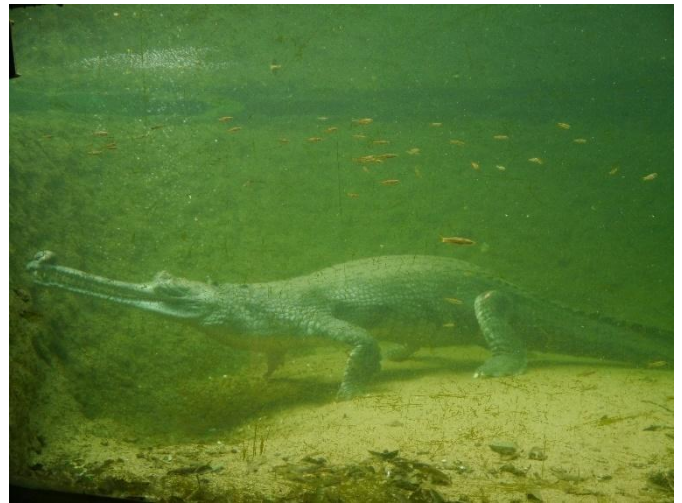
sea turtles at both of them. During the week we would alternate between scrubbing tanks and cleaning each turtle separately. Sometimes the turtles would catch lice so we picked them off with tweezers to ensure they remained healthy. As sea turtles are very sensitive to saline water we would learn about the different species of turtle on the rainy days in August. Now that I have a better understanding of protecting olive ridley turtles it motivated me to compete in a 5km run whilst I was in India to raise awareness of the endangered species, i.e. The Ridley Run. One of the best parts of my turtle conservation work in Sri Lanka was releasing baby sea turtles into the Indian Ocean. It was the first time I had travelled alone and although I experienced homesickness, I managed to deal with it better by talking to new people. Being honest with my family about it helped as well.

In the first week of September, I flew into Bangkok to see some relatives on my way to Cambodia before eventually meeting a local representative from my volunteering organisation. I was given an induction of Battambang because of the week-long festival. In that time the locals go back to visit their families in the countryside and us volunteers were invited to a family's home. The first week of my project allowed me to ease into the habit of teaching English as I received some help from a translator. Once I felt comfortable teaching kids on my own I would teach half an hour of life skills and two hour sessions of English. It was always very enjoyable as the kids were a pleasure to teach and I learnt some active games from other volunteers to engage the students in learning. Working around a structure of hangman at the beginning and singing songs at the end usually made a very productive lesson. When the school hours finished I would head to the field to coach football sessions as we realised that Cambodians were incredibly passionate about sport. As the weeks rolled on, more and more people turned up to play. The highlight of this part was eventually setting up a huge tournament by the end of the project with goals that we'd made out of bamboo. The only negative issue was having to run around in 30 degree heat. I'll remember all the volunteers that helped me, especially the ones that I shared a trip with to Phnom Penh to witness the killing fields and water festival. I also enjoyed visiting the great temples of Angkor Wat, admiring their beauty as well as understanding the importance of Hindi and Buddhist beliefs



incorporated into its construction.

I reached India by New Year's Eve at the Croc bank in Chennai, South India. In my first meeting I was allowed to choose my data collection projects for when I wasn't helping out with feeding and cleaning. My main project was based on Gharial crocodilian species where I had to take note of how much time the male specimen spent under water, at the surface and basking on dry land. This Indian native species is greatly endangered so it was an honour to do a couple hours of data collection every day at the aquarium. My other data collection project involved taking note of temperature readings in



the juvenile Gharial enclosure at set times during the day. Once again, this was to document the relationship between basking and sunlight intensity. As the Indian summer came along, I noticed that the peak temperature would never be below 32 degrees! Luckily the conservation centre was densely populated with trees so I could continue to educate the public in the park on the different reptiles when it got hotter in March. Every Saturday I had the pleasure of educating people about the famous Aldabra tortoise whilst they snacked on their veggies and papaya. At midday I would check up on the captive iguanas for any eggs that had been laid, as well as spray them with water. We would have freshly cooked curries prepared for us every day and have more work at 1:30 which sometimes involved catching a live crocodile during the mating season so we could measure the weight and height of the pregnant female. We were lucky enough to collect the eggs from the enclosures as well as check the fertility in the lab. At other times I helped out with cleaning snake cages, then watch the feeding of the largest captive crocodile in Asia. Towards the end of my project I travelled to the Western Ghats with an English volunteer to experience the rainforest conservation scheme (Agumbe R.R.S) which is set up in partnership with Croc bank. Volunteers at this research centre were collecting data on king cobras and flying lizards so it was great to take part in their work. Fortunately I left the subcontinent before the hot season came about.

When I reached Nepal by mid-April I was lucky enough to take part in a week long trek in the Annapurna mountain region. On the third day of the trek I climbed up to 3000 metres with my guide. It was an unbelievable experience and I hope many others enjoy it as well. I started teaching at the rural school the next week on the Monday after a welcome reception. A great moment was when I helped out with the sports day event where they had all kinds of creative games, such as the marble and spoon race. Since coming home early from Nepal I have been fund raising for the charity I was volunteering with. I hope to go back this summer or the next when it is safe to continue my teaching



project as I was only there for a couple of weeks.

How did it benefit me?

Meeting new people in Sri Lanka and travelling by myself for the first time was a unique experience. It's exciting making friends from different countries, plus I now have a great incentive to travel to other parts of the world in the future. Eventually I learnt that the best part about travelling was the types of people I came across. Something that might not have been possible had I travelled without a purpose. It's easier to connect with people when you're volunteering. You usually meet the best kinds of people as well.

I believe the range of volunteering roles I experienced have helped decide the type of working environment I wish to pursue. This didn't come intentionally, although I got to work with people who loved their jobs for different reasons. At a time where students are choosing their degrees at university it helps to expose yourself to as many working environments as possible. For instance, whilst I was working in crocodile conservation in India there were senior members of staff who dreamed of working at the conservation centre since they were kids. The volunteer work at Crocbank involved lots of hands on work which I enjoyed because I like being active. You won't see me working in an office in 5 years' time, that's for sure! From the talks I gave to tourists on feeding days I've improved my public speaking skills as well. This has been a problem for me in the past and recently I have enough confidence to give a talk to St. John's school about the Nepal earthquake.

Another skill which will prepare me for university is learning how to budget as I had to do in Cambodia. With all the Australians on their time off from studies in Cambodia, as well as opportunities for travelling at weekends, I would have to note down my spending so I didn't go over my limit. There were valuable lessons with frequent travelling, such as always carrying your passport, packing as light as possible and trusting yourself.

How did it benefit others?

I felt in Cambodia that my presence as an English speaking teacher attracted more kids as they wanted to learn. All the locals wanted to speak to me as they understood how important it was to practise good English. My Grandma travelled to Germany by herself but managed to speak the language fluently by learning from the locals which proves my point. Our idea to form an afterschool sports club was valued a lot by the locals because it kept kids active and healthy.





My placement at the Sea Turtle conservation site helped spread awareness of the project to my family and friends. There were times where we had lots of volunteers and not so many so the workload was greater in times of less volunteers. Therefore any volunteer's contribution helped with time management. I was one of the volunteers who oversaw the transition period each week to the next allowing me to teach new volunteers the basics.



As an artist, my drawing skills were used to full affect with designing cards, posters and signs. Since being in the UK I'm working on a calendar for Crocbank which they can sell in their store. It's taught me how crucial it is for me to incorporate my skillset into my work so that I can be of higher use. Finally it's worth noting that my geological awareness was practised during the Ghorka earthquake as I knew what to do in this type of situation. I helped locals make shelter from small amounts of resources and kept individuals calm during the event. These types of unpredictable events are sad and hard to deal with but I realise that there are natural events that can't be prevented, even if it makes life harder.

Why everyone should take a gap year:

I think it's important for most students to take a year out from their studies or paid work and do some aspect of volunteer work abroad because I'm a good example of how much it's helped. I've travelled by myself for only a week at a time at the most. If you travel for a great period of time you learn to rely on your intuition; something that can't be taught.

By doing a range of volunteer projects it's been very easy to meet new people. Travelling is fun but volunteering whilst you travel has a better and more fulfilling purpose in terms of creating great memories. When you meet new people you get reminded of your strengths and weaknesses. I feel this is helpful because you notice how to improve your current lifestyle and which aspects you're unique in. A student might defer an entry for a maths or science degree but then realise they must be pursuing a different hobby. I had enough time to realise that a geology degree was the best thing for me as I took more and more interest in my surroundings but at the same time I'd be prepared to get involved with some NGO work later in life.

Finally, all students have this unique gap between study and higher studies/ paid work. They say that you should travel as much as you can when you're young, therefore we



have a duty to take risks before it's too late.

