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A Wholesome Learning Experience

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Jan Term Abroad- Literary Biology of the Sea of Cortez 2017

Introduction: Initial Thoughts and Feelings

While looking over for the itinerary and course description I was beaming ear to ear with excitement. I couldn't have picked a better Jan term abroad that tailored more to my adventure enthusiast personality and love for being in a warmer climate. Little did I know just how much this course would challenge me, and how greatly my knowledge about the natural world would expand.

As an exercise science major, I have little to no background on truly reading and analyzing literature. In fact, reading comprehension is something I have struggled with my whole life- as showed apparent on all standardized tests I have taken. Having taken Fundamentals of Philosophy earlier in college, I realized how tough it was for me to analyze various methods of knowledge. I was fully ready to indulge in areas far out of my comfort zone, and one that was more through experience than reading about it in textbooks. Having a full year of Principles of Biology fresh in my mind, and knowing that biology was also a strong part of the course, I sought comfort in this.

IDST classes were once a week in the fall. The professors were individuals I had just met. The other students were names I had heard, but hadn't really had any interactions with. The Log of Cortez and The Pearl were books I hadn't heard about. It was all foreign to me, and being a shy individual by nature it was all a little nerve-wracking for me, but again- I was ready and determined. We discussed the novel, learned all about the area we were soon to be traveling to, and how it looked through Steinbeck and Rickett's eyes in 1940. I remember talking about epistemology, and discussing the topic of a desk table and "how do we know and can confirm this table is solid?" I remember just sitting there thinking, "Because tables are all solid... duh!"

But my professors wanted more than that... they challenged us to go to the root of why we believe these things and what our methods for knowing were. Classes were drawing to an end, and it was time to dive into the real world and observe and experience how our methods of knowledge would change, or stay the same.

Part One: Stepping Out of My Comfort Zone

Having only been out of the country to Canada, and on a cruise to the Bahamas, from the get-go it was a whole new experience for me. I was seeing a new way of life- one I had not seen before. Toilet paper having to be thrown into a trash can instead of the toilet, only being able to drink purified water, washing my hands thoroughly very frequently, cleaning vegetables carefully with iodine- these were things I didn't need to think about before. The first town we arrived in, Santiago, was a quaint town where stray dogs roamed, and two small convenience stores packed with anything and everything. I ran into my first language barrier incident right away as I asked a clerk where the "banyo" was. As he began to ramble on in Spanish, I was grateful for hand motions- and it was awesome to know that even though we couldn't fully communicate through words, the worldwide use of hand motions allowed me to understand.

We spent the first few days camping in a remote area called Santa Rita. Having mountain camped many times in my life, I felt fully equipped. We went on two beautiful hikes unlike any I had done before. We climbed across, on top of, slid down, and even mounted these incredible glistening silvery granite rocks to get to our destinations. The multiple natural pools of crystal clear, light blue water made for great scenery and a refreshing dip after hiking in heat we were not yet accustomed to, having just come from freezing temperatures. Along the way I was introduced to new plants and animals I had never seen before. From various cactuses, to fig trees, from scorpions, to snakes and birds I was taking in all this new knowledge. Our two local guides

were a big part of the learning experience. The way they knew so much about the area and their culture and how excited they were to share it with us was a beautiful thing. I put my trust in their credible authority, and came to know not only more about Baja, but also Mexican history. After long, rewarding, and exhausting days there were hot springs within a rock throw of a campsite that we had the luxury of relaxing in during the night. Hot springs were something I had never experienced before but I had always wanted to. The smell of the sulfur, the natural radiating warmth, the fact that I was in Mexico- it was all so surreal.

We had our first class of the trip sitting around the campfire, headlamps on, underneath a million stars, discussing an essay on Scientific Epistemology. I can't think of a better setting to have class in. The break from social media, the crispness of the air, no distracting electronics, all made for a great environment to clear the mind to absorb and easily allow for new ways of thinking. This essay jumpstarted this new way of thinking for me, and I found myself beginning to break out of the comfortable security blanket I was wrapped in, and to question if my previous methods should be altered to new ones. We discussed how personal experience can give you a belief and trust in the fact that something will happen this way every time. At this part of the trip, I currently resonated most with learning through personal experience. Leaving the mountains I was stinky, tired, but full of rich new knowledge about the area I was in. It was time to experience life on the beach and what lies underneath the Sea of Cortez.

Camping directly on the beach was a whole new experience for me. Digging deep down in the sand to anchor the tent instead of pounding in stakes, the salty dew that put a gentle layer on the tent in the morning, the fact that no matter how hard you tried to keep the sand out- it was inevitable that it would cover everything- it was all new for me. Upon arrival, the beach was incredibly windy, which made anchoring the tent quite challenging. It was a great reminder that

as much as we wanted to be in control, we have to be easily adaptable in any moment, maintaining a positive attitude to accomplish the goal.

Snorkeling in the only living coral reef in the Sea of Cortez, Cabo Pulmo, was an incredible experience in itself. However, being able to compare Steinbeck's descriptions from the 1940 voyage to 2017 made it more unique and come alive. He quotes, "One small piece of coral might conceal thirty or forty species, and the colors on the reef were electric" (65). I would have to say, the second day's snorkel experience proved this to be true which is very refreshing. I witnessed so many types of fish ranging all the way from a pufferfish, to butterfly fishes, to a lazy stingray resting on the bottom of the sea. No matter where you looked, there was a fish to be seen. I found myself fully relating to Steinbeck in a variety of ways. He discusses his amazement of the pufferfish, and it's amazing to think, here I am... 77 years later gawking over the same fish. I think about Steinbeck's journey and I compare it to ours, and there are so many comparisons to be made. We both have the same purpose of simply wanting to explore this beautiful area and understand more about the culture, and flora and fauna that grace the area. Whereas Steinbeck also learned more about his crew each and everyday, I too am learning more and more about these individuals I once knew nothing about. Camping does that to you. You are more vulnerable, and you create a family. Lastly, we are learning how the weather can dictate our adventures. We had to hike a ways to find a snorkel spot where the water was less choppy. It's all about learning to adapt, and appreciate the beauty in it all- the whole process.

Part Two: Extreme Kayaking, Seeing the Natural World in a New Light

I have kayaked quite a few times in my life, so naturally I felt pretty confident going into our 6-night, 7-day kayaking circumnavigation of the Island of Espiritu Santo. Boy, was I wrong to assume that a couple hours of kayaking on daytrips would be remotely similar to this week's

expedition. It wasn't until after all the information and briefing about this journey we received from our two local guides did I begin to realize what a mentally, physically, and emotionally challenging week this would be. I just couldn't get it out of my head that we were literally packing everything we needed for a whole week into kayaks... tiny compartments in kayaks... what?! From sleeping bags, to food, to kitchen utensils, to personal clothing items, to tables, to sleeping pads...we had it all. Let me tell you, packing a kayak every day is a workout and it was like a game of kayak Tetris. After shortly being out on the water, my arms began to grow a little tired, the sun was beaming down strong, but the water was clean, beautiful, and so clear. We were blessed with amazing weather while we were on the island- our guides kept having to remind us that we were incredibly lucky because they had not seen it like that in quite a long time. The wind was there, but not nearly enough to make it significantly more challenging for us. The first leg of the trip was shorter paddling days with breaks in the middle of the day, while we worked our way up to the very last paddling day which was the longest.

On the day of the longest paddle, what I thought to be just seasickness turned out to be the start of my four day struggle with Montezuma's Revenge. Something I had eaten the night before really did not agree with my body, something I could no longer control. On this day I was pushed in a way I had never been pushed before. There was no way to give up- that was simply not an option for me nor did it resonate with my personality. I was to push through the nausea, the headache, the stomach pains, to maintain a positive attitude, and to remain determined to reach the next campsite without slowing down the group, or letting my partner down. As you could imagine, the feeling of reaching land after leaving around 9 in the morning and arriving around 4 was the most marvelous feeling of accomplishment. I learned just how strong I truly was, and how comforting and accepting the people I was surrounded with were.

With all of that aside, the sunrises/ sunsets, the incredible rock formations, natural caves, beautiful teal water, and pristinely kept sandy beaches were simply breathtaking. I saw unbelievable birds, jellyfish, starfishes, and worms that I never even knew existed. The island radiates natural and pure beauty because of the laws that allow it to be protected. I took full advantage of turning over rocks in tide pools, snorkeling with sea lions, hiking, swimming, and fully divulging myself into this remarkable place. The island was a reminder of how naturally beautiful places can be when humans aren't allowed to pollute it, or harm it in any way. This goes back to personal experience. Little did I know just how beautiful beaches could be naturally until I saw Espiritu Santo. It made me want to be even more careful making sure I never leave any traces behind, or pollute the area in any way possible. It was also unique to see the difference between the sides of the island. Where the south side was more pink sandy beaches and clear water, the north side had more caves to be explored and rocky formations to observe.

Part Three: A Series of Humbling Events

The first of the many series of humbling events began with swimming with sea lions. This is something I never thought I would have the opportunity to do. You jet around the Sea Lion Rockery via boat and observe the alpha males barking and fighting, while other sea lions are sun bathing, some going back and forth between the water, some cuddling. However, once you dive into the water it is a whole other world. There are diverse schools of fish that seem to not be bothered in the slightest by humans. Never did I imagine that sea lions would be such playful, curious, energetic creatures. They would glide through the water so gracefully and do flips here and there; they would nibble on your flippers, or even come right up to look into your mask. However, once an alpha male would swim by it was a big reality check that you were interrupting their territory, and to remain respectful.

The day finally rolled around where we had the opportunity to swim with whale sharks, something I was most excited about. We geared up, and began the search for these magnificent megafaunas. Once we found one, the emotions that surged through my body were very powerful. From excitement, to anxiousness, to a hint of fear- nonetheless, I quickly found myself jumping into the water and swimming as fast as I could to catch up with this surprisingly fast animal. The first round was not ideal for me, as I accidentally swallowed a bunch of water, and kicked as fast as I could to only see a faint blur of a massive swimming object. I was determined on this next round to get the best view I could. However, it was not until the third round I accomplished this. As soon as I heard “Jump!” I pushed off the boat with a determined look, and kicked as fast as I could. To my surprise, this whale shark was going at a reasonable pace. I was able to keep neck and neck with him. As I started at the head, I took a good long look all the way to his back tail and it finally then hit me that I was swimming next to a shark that had to be around 12 meters long. It was incredible. I saw everything so clearly, the scrapes on his dorsal fin where a boat had struck him, to the white spots on his body, to his unique filter-feeding mouth. It was amazing that he was not even bothered in the slightest by us, or so it seemed anyway. It continued to blow my mind that we were not that far from La Paz, in the shallow waters, and here was this incredible animal just swimming along. As humans we usually rarely encounter people or creatures greater than us that seem more powerful. It was truly humbling to swim next to such an incredible and graceful animal; you really felt not much bigger than a tiny ant.

As we began our next kayaking journey around Magdalena Bay, partners from before were split up, and new kayaks were to be used. As a creature of habit, this was challenging for me. Before, I was in a double kayak, which we nicknamed, “The Caddy,” and my partner and I paddled really well together and were unstoppable. This new kayak was to be the kitchen boat. I

was given a new partner, and this kayak was significantly heavier than the last one. The paddling over the course of the next few days was a different experience for me. My partner and I found ourselves to be dragging behind the group the majority of the time. We also encountered stronger winds, and various tide patterns that made for some tricky maneuvering of the kayaks even for our guides. It made me realize just how spoiled I was on Espiritu Santo. The weather was perfect; the tides were never an issue, and the wind never strong enough to become very noticeable. Once again, Mother Nature swooped in, and reminded me that I was not in control.

Part Four: Working With Incredible Creatures and Encountering New Ways of Life

Experiencing the hospitality of the people at Red Camp was an incredible experience. From arriving to tents with beds inside, to full meals, and snacks, to cleaning our dishes for us... we were treated like royalty. Having the opportunity to work with their team and Don Chooley in aiding in turtle conservation research was a day I'll never forget. I have seen sea turtles in the distance and snorkeled with them before, but it wasn't until that day did I see them in a whole new light. Little did I know what intricate shells these creatures have, or what the texture of their soft and gushy skin felt like, how they take big gasps of air, or how just putting a beanie over its head and rubbing the back of its neck would calm it down. It wasn't until I helped lift one up to measure it did I realize how heavy and strong these creatures are. I also saw how they can move on land, but the second they hit water they swim away so gracefully. I also helped in removing barnacles off their back, which was a very rewarding experience. I have seen thousands of animals in my life, but this trip has allowed me to observe them in a whole new way. I've been able to observe what various animals look like in detail, how they move, how they breathe, and what its natural instincts are. This has definitely given me richer insight about the natural world I hadn't really encountered before and experienced firsthand.

We spent the last few days exploring the area of Sierra de La Giganta with true Mexican Cowboys. Our guide, Trudy, explained to us she was almost certain that we were taking the same paths and exploring the same exact areas that Steinbeck had and that is why she chose the places we went to carefully. This really made the connection with the book and our adventuring come full circle for me. These cowboys were so fascinating. From the way they confidently controlled their mules, to the intricate pieces of clothing and boots they had hand-made all by themselves, to the way they carried themselves, and used all the surrounding plants and animals to their benefit- they were so captivating. I experienced a whole new way to live- such a simple way to live.

Conclusion: Tying it all Together

I couldn't be more grateful to have had such an awesome, eye-opening month of learning in Baja California Sur, Mexico. I went into it, not confident in my ways of knowing, and philosophical beliefs. I came away from the trip with a whole new appreciation for the natural world- for the intricately made creatures that inhabit the area, for the natural-crystal clear pools of water, for the beautiful granite rocks, and that mother nature is always full of surprises. I can confidently say I will now focus more on why I believe in certain things, and get down to the deeper core, instead of just stating, "I believe it because that's what I believe." I have a stronger desire to want to get to know the plants and animals that surround me everywhere that I go, not just on a broad level, but a deeper level. Observing how every whale shark we had the opportunity to swim next to had gashes from boats, and how easy it can be for Sea Turtles to get tangled were just a few of the eye-opening discoveries I didn't pay much attention to prior to the trip. Seeing how mindlessly humans are harming these animals has inspired me to make a difference in improving the quality of life for animals, and not contributing to harm them in any

way. I also have a new appreciation and understanding of compost and making sure waste is disposed of correctly. Seeing how easy it is to pollute beaches makes me want to be more careful, to dispose of all my trash correctly and give back to the natural world in a way that is respectful and pleasing. I'm ready to take my newborn knowledge and a newfound outlook on the world back to my daily life here in Oregon.