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Student “Galápagonian” Shenanigans

04/01/2013

Hola mis amigos! Cómo estan? The month of March has been fun, filled with crazy adventures and awesome volunteering experiences! The first Saturday in March, the weekend after I started my volunteering class, all of the GAIAS students decided to have a massive, island-wide scavenger hunt! Everyone separated into groups of about six or seven people and a couple of the students created a long list of fun and silly things to accomplish by the end of the night. The entire evening was filled with outbursts of laughter, bear hugs and pictures to document it all! Yet, the best part of it all was probably our costumes; yes, we created themes for all the groups and dressed up! I was in “Team Lone Star,” other known as “Team Western/South”. Needless to say we all dressed up as a bunch of cowboys and cowgirls. The morning of the scavenger hunt, my group met up and cooked a magnificent southern brunch, scrambled eggs, bacon, biscuits, corn bread, black sweet tea and all! The scavenger hunt began at four in the afternoon and finished up at eleven at night. It was the most fun I have had in the islands since arriving in the Galápagos. It was a fantastic bonding experience and was the first activity that brought all of us students together. Even some of our volunteer friends joined us in the festivities! The activities including everything from singing a love song to a stranger to eating eight bread rolls in a minute or less to random dancing for thirty seconds! The locals all had a good laugh upon seeing and interacting with a mixture of cowboys, Howgwartz students, and drawn-on mustaches walking, running, skipping and giggling down the boardwalk. The last task on the scavenger hunt was to create a food dish to bring to share with everyone when we regrouped again! It was a fabulous idea putting that in the scavenger hunt because after seven hours of shenanigans we all had grumbling tummies (even after shoving eight bread rolls down our throats in under a minute).

In terms of class, I had an amazing time volunteering with the Galápagos National Park, which was extremely rewarding. The National Park defines itself as responsible for the conservation and ecological integrity of protected areas of the Galápagos Islands as well as the rational use of their resources. I find the concept of the national park in the Galápagos pretty intriguing, since the majority of the islands are protected; yet there are still people that inhabit some of the islands. It’s an interesting juxtaposition between nature and society where people have had to learn how to coexist with nature. Our activities included beach cleanups around the island and counting sea lions in a census. Each day we began our day bright and early with two park rangers who took us out in our own boat to the volunteer sites. During the beach cleanups, we spread out and walked from one side of the beach to the other, picking up trash articles such as plastic beverage bottles, plastic gasoline cartons, synthetic rope material and old fishing materials such as netting and fishing lines. We found the most trash nearest to the main town Puerto Baquierzo Moreno (where our university is located); however, as we progressively moved farther away from the town, there was less evidence of human impact. It was a sad reminder of the influence we have on the environment around us. The world perceives the Galápagos as “pristine” and “untouched” nature, but the human refuse scattered amongst the golden sand said something very different. Our day helping with the sea lion census was much more light-hearted and carefree. We were lucky to have some free time during our volunteering, so the park rangers told us we should go snorkeling with the sea lions! I have never swum with any creatures as playful as sea lions. They swim around you, interacting and playing with you as if you were one of their own. One juvenile even grabbed my ankle, toying with it in its mouth as they often do with each other. This month has been truly exhilarating. I feel like I have gotten to know the island and its people on a much more personal level. Volunteering and giving back to the community and island had a lot to do with that and I strongly recommend volunteering during your study abroad experience. You get educated on local issues, see your host country from a new perspective, and feel closer to the land and people. I didn’t come to Ecuador just to be a tourist. I wanted to become part of something new, part of the culture here, and a part of the people.