

Host university and country: Universidad de San Francisco de Quito, Ecuador

Academic Year: 2021

Subject and level (BA/MA): International Studies in Tropical Aquatic Ecology, M.Sc.



Damage of an abandoned fishing net on a coral reef in the province of Esmeraldas, Ecuador – the initial reason for my research.

I recently completed my research stay in the province of Esmeraldas, Ecuador thanks to funding from PROMOS. My trip abroad was a part of Ghost Nets Esmeraldas Project, a collaborative project between the Universidad de San Francisco de Quito and the Leibniz Centre for Tropical Marine Research. The overall project seeks to aid in reef ecosystem restoration in the Esmeraldas region of Ecuador, following damages caused by abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear (ALDFG) and other unsustainable fishing practices. My specific part in the study was to investigate the causes of ALDFG in the canton of Atacames, Ecuador. I achieved this task through the completion of interviewer led questionnaires and key informant interviews with artisanal fishers



Our local student assistant and me completing a survey with an artisanal fisher in the town of Súa.

in the study area in order to determine the causes of the problem of ALDFG and to understand the related socio-economic factors.

During my stay, I was accommodated at El Acantilado Beach Resort, thanks to a long-standing arrangement between my host supervisor, Dr. Judith Denkinger, and the owners of the resort. Whilst there, I shared a cabin with three other members of the project, who were incredibly helpful in terms of logistics related to my research, other issues, and additionally were great company. The resort itself provided nice facilities, good security, and a lovely living atmosphere. Transportation was provided by one of the project team members when possible, and otherwise we used local buses or taxis when the car was unavailable. Considering the province of Esmeraldas is one of the poorest provinces in Ecuador and petty thefts are frequent occurrences, we made sure to never go out alone and always stayed together at least in pairs. When my coworkers were unavailable to accompany me to perform my surveys and interviews, a local student and member of the project was hired to work with me to aid in the research. When required to work at night or in unknown areas, we also utilized the assistance of a local friend who is a part of a volunteer security patrol in order to further ensure our safety. By taking all of these safety precautions, we encountered no



Our cabin at El Acantilado Beach Resort

problems and were able to complete our research goals without any security issues.

This research stay was an incredibly rewarding experience. Although it would have been possible to obtain survey data virtually from this project, there is no way I would have gotten such a deep understanding of my research topic and the complicated factors related to the abandonment or loss of fishing gear in the canton of Atacames. By being there and having the ability to talk face-to-face with the fishers and hear their stories, I was able to build relationships with these people and gain access to the intricate details of the artisanal fishing industry there. These relationships led to further involvement with the community, as a result our project has the potential to have a greater impact. With the relationships already made in the few months I was there; we have already worked

with a local fishing cooperative to produce a preliminary research report that they will use to request assistance from the government to increase support of the artisanal fishers. Being there also allowed me to understand the culture of the community in which I was working, which of course relates to the social factors involved in my research. Additionally, by working with other members of the project, I was able to contribute to the other aspects of the project and as a result I have a much more comprehensive understanding of the situation regarding ALDFG in the canton of Atacames.



My co-worker and I in attendance at a members' meeting of the artisanal fishing cooperative in Súa.

The comprehensive, interdisciplinary nature of this project is the reason why I chose this particular host institution and my part within the Ghost Nets Esmeraldas Project. I am so grateful that I was able to be involved with this institution because they have a great reputation, are very well connected and collaborate with many other organizations at both a national and international scale. I believe my involvement with the Universidad de San Francisco de Quito and the project will open many doors for me in the future. This project, my research, and my overall experience during my research stay in Ecuador have absolutely changed my life. This was the most authentic travel experience I have ever had, and I can honestly say that I was the most immersed in a culture than I have ever been. It provided a clear lens with which to see the struggles and challenges that other people in the world face, one that I would not have been able to see otherwise.

This experience has taught me about the immense complexities that exist in relation to any ecological issue. I now fully understand the necessity to gather information regarding the social, economic, and cultural factors in relation to the location and issue. Through the work I did in this project, I gained valuable professional experience that will definitely contribute to my future career

goals and general life planning as well. I am very grateful to PROMOS for their financial support that allowed me to have this experience.