

Experience Report: Mamoni Valley Preserve, Panamá

I am studying a Master in Ecology, currently I am on my second year.

I did a research visit to Mamoni Valley Preserve in Panama, Central America with the Kaminando-Habitat Connectivity Initiative which is a Non-Governmental Organization from California, United States. In this report I will try to present my personal experience on this opportunity and at the same time giving some remarks or advises for interested students.

First of all you need is delimitate the field of study, if you have a certain topic already in mind, which modality covers your aim? : a semester abroad study, an internship or a research visit? If you are thinking about performing your thesis project you would become a research student. After this step, you can start looking for information about organizations, universities or research groups, try asking the professors on your faculty to see if they can recommend something to you, take a look on the leaflets at the International Office for Partner Universities or arrange an appointment and talk directly to one of the helpers there.

Now if the company/organization/university does not count with scholarships or subsidies, do not worry! you can look for them on the DAAD website if you are a European Union student you will have more options but if you are like me: an international student from elsewhere you can apply to two grant programs: ERASMUS which it has its own facility at the International Office or PROMOS. The first one supports you if you want to carry out your internship/exchange semester/ research visit in one of the countries from the European Union, and the second one covers the same objectives but outside this group.

When trying to reach the organization, I would strongly advise to contact it directly via e-mail or if possible by telephone or Skype. On my case at my Master's I could not find any professor who worked on my field of interest and I did not want to work with something I did not feel passionate about, therefore I started looking on the internet just in the Google search tool typing some keywords such as "Ecology Thesis Mammals", this thanks to my love for mammals' ecology. I also used the following websites: <https://www.findamasters.com/>, <https://www.masterstudies.com/Masters-Degree/>, <https://www.mastersportal.com/>, to check if they had open calls for master thesis. After several hours the majority of results were really old or did not fulfill my expectations, so I changed the keywords and incorporated also Facebook and LinkedIn on my pursuit. Then I sent a really long list of e-mails (always use your university e-mail if you want to be taken more seriously) to almost everywhere on the planet, from research groups (even if they were not offering a thesis) to non-governmental organizations, institutes, etc. And not right away but some of them months later, sent me an answers and all of them were negative, they did not have any project for me at the moment or they offered them just to certain universities and so on. I felt disappointed. But I kept searching, until one day I saw a post on a Facebook group for biology jobs in Mexico, and the NGO was seeking for a master's students that were interested on working with jaguars in Panama. I sent an e-mail almost instantly with no much hopes -I might confess- but their reply was positive!

Since that moment on I began to find out more about the Kaminando-Habitat Connectivity Initiative on the internet, I checked their website and became aware of the strong research and conservation objectives they aim. Despite being a small organization they have managed to get financial and technical support from different renowned conservation institutes. This organization is focused mainly on jaguar's research and conservation management, but also are interested on its cousins: puma, yaguarundi, ocelot, margay and northern tiger cat through Central America. Their headquarters are located in California. We agreed to work together in an ocelot project in Panama

in a private preserve in the middle of the rainforest called Mamoni Valley. It was a dream come true to me. The next steps were applying to a PROMOS grant, arrange the whole travel details and write the thesis proposal.

The person that I reached in Kaminando-Habitat Connectivity Initiative was Kimberly Craighead who is a conservationist from United States who co-founded this NGO with the Ecuadorian conservationist Milton Yacelga. They supported me while planning through Skype calls and e-mails, guiding me on the delimitation of my thesis topic and providing all the information they thought could help. The manager of the Mamoni Valley Preserve along with a worker plus Kimberly and Milton met me at the Panama City's airport and along with a huge group of high school students (that were going to have an excursion in the preserve) from United States we headed towards the preserve that was around 2 1/2 hours away. After a transfer from a bus to an all-terrain truck and crossing a river we arrived almost at night. After settle ourselves in one open air cabin we signed a Memorandum of Understanding with copyrights statements and the functions I was going to carry out during my stay.

As I am from Colombia I was already familiar more or less with the culture in Panama. So the whole opportunity of living in the jungle, getting to visit a really beautiful country, working on my thesis and at the same time follow my passion was unbelievable. I could stayed legally over three months in Panama due to my nationality, but my advice here is to check directly on the embassy, consulate or alike to be sure enough of the time you would be allowed to stay. Of course could be helpful to talk with the organization to see if they have some recommendations from a local perspective. Also be aware of the language they talk in your host country and even if you will not take studies there, it is better if you already have pick up some daily vocabulary to easy your stay. Another important point is to buy an international travel insurance which can cover your whole travel and if something comes up you will have medical attention. During my stay in Panama nothing further than a headache happened and fortunately my body was already used to hot humid temperatures and all the inconveniences that might rise when sleeping in a cabin with no walls in the middle of a tropical rainforest.

For tropical countries like Panama or Colombia, it is highly recommendable to have your vaccines updated, depending on the place you will visit the government authorities can ask you to show them a vaccination carnet. The most common are the Hepatitis, Tetanus and Yellow Fever, do this research in advance due to the possible necessity of multiple shots. It is important to highlight that Panama even though is a Central American country it is more expensive than the majority of nearby countries such Colombia for instance. Their currency is the American Dollar and its capital city is a huge metropolis, so if you are planning to travel there you should look for places a bit further the city center. Specifically the Mamoni Preserve offer accommodation and boarding as is a remote place you cannot go to supermarkets and get provisions (each round trip to the nearest town could easily cost 50 USD). The place is entirely safe I did not have any problems regarding this, but in the Panama City things tend to be different, as it is a big city you should take care of your belongings more and try to ask directly in hotels or official places not just on the street if you are looking for accommodation o public transport. In general try to inform yourself of the place you are going to stay and if possible arrange everything before you get there.

Going back to my routine in the Preserve, this was mixed: some days I went hiking and other days I worked on a database in the cabin. My thesis involves density population estimation of ocelots, which is a medium sized cat or in simpler words we set cameras to the trees to take images of the ocelots and this way could count how many individuals are in the area and how are they distributed along the Preserve. Therefore I needed to be in the field frequently, exploring the area looking for animal tracks always with a local guide or one of the Kaminando members. They taught me different

methods for the cameras setting and remained always open to any question or doubt I could have during my stay.

As I already had experience working in the field in Colombia, I adapted really soon, even some tourists that came into the Preserve thought that I was working in the preserve since quite time ago. Another curiosity that happened, one lady that were visiting Mamoni Valley with her family ended up to be from Bremen and her mother lived close to my house, what a small world we thought!. It seems that anywhere you go you can find at least one thing in common with someone, even if you are on the remotest place.

During the hikes I got overwhelmed by the Panamanian biodiversity, which reminded me of my country. Every day I saw different bird species that got sometimes next to my bed and I could hear by the night the frogs and toads singing. For example, one day we were working on the cabin with the Kaminando members and all of a sudden a monkey (cotton top tamarin) appeared hanging from a tree branch just a couple of meters from us, stayed a couple of minutes and then reached its troop. I remember getting very excited because this was the first time I saw a wild mammal that close! I even saw my first sloth when we were arriving to the Preserve, it was quite graceful. The high biodiversity of the Panamanian Jungle gave more reasons to keep working for conservation especially in the tropics where lots of research and actions are needed.

Another plus was getting to know local inhabitants, how they lived, how was the way they saw the world, every family or person I met always made me feel like home with that warmth that characterizes them. In parallel I could also participate in some activities of the high school group of students, like a natural tattoo course with jagua which is an ink derived from a plant that lasts in your skin around a week and it is part of the Embera indigenous people culture. In fact the people that worked in the kitchen belonged to this indigenous tribe and prepared delicious typical dishes every meal. They had a different menu for vegetarians but most of the times the menu had no meat so that way everyone could eat.

A last remark, would be what should be avoided when doing a research visit/internship:

- Do not get to your host country without previously having booked the accommodation and if it is possible try to look for a plan B if the first option is not what you expected
- Do not isolate yourself in your room go and share with other students or local people, immerse, try new things!
- Do not drink tap water if you have not ask a local, you can get sick really easy and ruin the beginning of your stay.
- Always be careful and aware of the paperwork you need in order to be legally in your host country and in the institute or university you are going
- Have in mind the location of an embassy of your country just in case something comes up
- Do not give up. If you cannot find the topic you really want, keep looking and something will appear and surprise you!

In conclusion, the whole experience in Mamoni Valley Preserve was far better than expected. It was completely enriching, nourished my knowledge as a Biologist and as a human being. Allowed me as well to create a professional link with Kaminando-Habitat Connectivity Initiative, having a strong support for my thesis and as the same time following my passion with mammals. Panama itself came to me as a place of hidden wonders, stunning landscapes, highly biodiverse and full of kind people. At the beginning it is frightening to take the leap but after you finish you want to repeat the whole experience and relive all those special moments that made you grow.

Photographs



Learning from Kimberly Craighead how to configure a camera trap



Setting a camera trap to a tree trunk



Black tailed trogon



Members of Kaminando organization in a hike



An ocelot's footprint



Cotton top tamarin



Three toed sloth



Some typical food: passion fruit, coconut and tamales



Laughing falcon



Tourist group crossing a river during a hike



The cabin were I stayed



Sunset in Mamoni Valley Preserve