This year I was fortunate enough to be able to travel to Goa, India for the second time. I say fortunate, but I really mean months of scrimping and saving and an apparently persuasive application to the QMUL expeditions fund. The purpose of the trip was to volunteer, again, at an organisation called The Primate Trust. Located in rural Goa, it was established, by Jo and John Hicks, as an extending branch of International Animal Rescue Goa (IAR) to care for and rehabilitate injured monkeys that would be unsuitable for release in the wild. Sometimes this unfortunate reality is a result of injury caused by abuse, or trauma caused by years of being kept as a pet.

I had previously been to The Primate Trust for a month in 2015, and I first discovered it through my ongoing search for opportunities to work “hands-on” with non-human primates. I have never known an organisation to take volunteers so willingly, to not charge them for their free labour and to immerse them so well in the day to day practises of a working rescue centre. I would eagerly recommend volunteering there to anybody who cares about animal welfare. Just check out their website: www.primatetrustindia.org!

Daily tasks at the centre included: cleaning the enclosures of the monkeys, feeding and watering them, and also bringing out some individuals for social time with other monkeys and simulation with the outdoor environment.

Above: Babysitting this beauty was a dream come true, but Kochi was an illegal pet and has been left traumatised, meaning he needs constant care and attention. He is gradually making friends with other monkeys but his sad story is one of many and a reminder of the positive changes humanity needs to make regarding planet Earth.

Most of our time was spent crafting small puzzle toys and even large climbing frames, or anything else that would provide enrichment for the monkeys. If monkeys can’t be returned to the wild, the staff aim to make their days at the centre as enjoyable as possible! We could also go to the market and gather food to feed the animals and had the chance to learn about what it takes to run the centre, as well as walking dogs at the IAR. My favourite “chore” was babysitting the baby monkey. All to often, monkeys are orphaned and need extra help in recovery.
Meet Aaji, she was a much loved pet and even arrived at the Primate Trust with a suitcase of her own clothes. She was spoilt rotten, but her weight reflects this. Unfortunately no amount of love and fancy human food can replicate a wild lifestyle for a monkey. Hopefully with a balanced diet and new friends at the Tree House, she will flourish!

The Primate Trust houses over 40 bonnet macaques, rhesus macaques and langurs; as well as 18 cats and 5 dogs. Jo has been a champion of animal rights since the 60s and she has been known to nurse any animal she finds back to health… I have witnessed her care for injured crows, frogs and even hand feed a humming bird until it was strong enough to fly away. There are no ends to her generosity and dedication to animal welfare and working for her taught me so much.

This time round it was both easier and tougher. I felt at home at the Tree House, comfortable with the staff -who I feel I can now call my good friends- and I was confident in my ability to provide the best care possible. However, my new responsibilities and understanding lead me to see the harsh side of animal rescue work. I attended the euthanising of a baby langur and a cat that we had tried so hard to nurse back to health. These were heartbreaking moments but I think they were certainly necessary for me to witness so that I could gain a deeper appreciation of the gravity of the problems that the organisation face. Over-worked and under-resourced, the organisation battles on and provides excellent care, but sometimes that is not enough. I learnt that improved forestry legislation and conservation needs to become prioritised if monkeys like this are to face a fair chance in life. I believe that there shouldn’t be any need for centres like The Primate Trust (despite their brilliance), and I feel truly inspired by Jo Hicks to make a positive difference to the treatment of animals and conservation of wildlife and habitats.

I am very grateful for the help I received from QMUL in the form of a bursary and I think it is an important part of the university. Not everybody has the chance to travel globally, and personally, I have had to make sacrifices to be able to do this. The bursary lifted the financial pressure and can encourage other students to get out there and experience all the wonders that the world has to offer.

By Isabella Eddington