Volunteering trip to Jaguar Rescue Center, Costa Rica

This summer the Expedition Fund supported me in undertaking a 6-week trip to work at an animal rescue centre in Puerto Viejo on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica. As an aspiring conservationist it gave me the opportunity to learn a huge amount about the country’s biodiversity and its conservation efforts, and provided me with valuable work experience which I can use in the future. Costa Rica is a conservationist’s dream for many reasons. It holds 5% of the world’s biodiversity, despite only forming 0.03% of its land mass. It’s home to over 500,000 different species, of which more than 300,000 are insects. However, what makes Costa Rica truly unique in its fight to protect its natural wealth is the fact that the government is at the forefront of the efforts. It channels funds from a fuel tax, car stamp duty and energy fees to pay for nature reserve management and environmental services like clean air, fresh water and biodiversity protection. Landowners are paid to preserve old-growth forests and to plant new trees, and as a result, forest cover has risen from 24% in 1985 to close to 46% today. When you consider that 20% of the Brazilian Amazon rainforest has disappeared since 1970, this is incredibly impressive.
I decided that Costa Rica was the place I wanted to work, and after a lot of research I discovered the website for the Jaguar Rescue Center, a rehabilitation centre for injured and orphaned animals, including monkeys, sloths, toucans, parrots, snakes and many more. One of the main reasons animals are brought to the rescue centre is electrocution. As a result of the way Costa Rica has developed, exposed power cables often run through the jungle, and animals use them as a way to travel from tree to tree. In many cases, mothers carrying their babies are electrocuted by the cables. In other cases, baby monkeys and sloths fall out of trees as a result of being rejected by their mothers or other members of their troop. An example of this is Rico, a mantled howler monkey who I was lucky enough to spend a lot of time working with during my time at the centre. Rico was attacked by members of his troop who were trying to approach his mother, and as a result he fell out of a tree and broke his shoulder. He was rescued by staff at the JRC who operated on his shoulder and he is now learning how to be a “real” monkey so he can be released in the future. This is what makes the JRC special and is why I chose to volunteer there - every single animal brought into the centre is rescued with the intention of release, whether the rehabilitation process takes two days or two years.

There are very few cases in which this doesn’t work, and animals are only kept at the centre if it is thought to be in their best interest, as is the case with Blackbeard, a white crowned parrot. Blackbeard was born without eyes. He was found abandoned on the ground in the forest, very weak and unable to fend for himself. While animals in this kind of condition would usually be put down, staff at the centre noticed that he liked sitting on the shoulders of volunteers, leading them to believe he had previously been a pet and had lived comfortably around humans before being abandoned. He’s now living out the rest of his life at the centre in luxury being hand-fed the finest Costa Rican fruit.
When animals are ready to be released, it isn’t simply a case of taking them to the nearest tree and letting them climb to freedom. There is a nature reserve attached to the JRC called La Ceiba where animals are gradually given more and more freedom to explore the forest until they feel comfortable going in to the wild permanently. Their enclosures are left open so they can go in and out as they please, but they have food left inside as many of the animals have not yet learned to scavenge. Thousands of animals have now been released this way and have successfully reintegrated back into life in the wild - in fact many have been seen with a troop, and some even with babies of their own.

The JRC prides itself on being an ethical rescue centre, where the animals’ needs are put first and where any money earned goes back into the running of the centre and the care of its residents. The centre, along with the Costa Rican government, have banned the publication of pictures of humans with animals on social media, as pictures of this kind promote the removal of animals from their natural habitat for the sole purpose of parading them for money. Instagram is now supporting this campaign, so if you search #slothselfie on Instagram (change slide) you will now see a warning like this (change slide).

The main topic I was educated on during my time at the JRC was the effect of unethical tourism on the biodiversity of a country like Costa Rica. I was taught the “three pillars” of ethical tourism so I could educate others and help promote touristic activities which are not damaging to animals or their habitats.
Firstly, do your research. For a wildlife tourist attraction to be considered ethical, the animals must have what are called the “five freedoms”, which include freedom from hunger and thirst, freedom from discomfort, freedom from pain, injury or disease, freedom to express normal behaviour and freedom from fear and distress. Also, as a general rule, if a place is charging you for a selfie with a wild animal such as a sloth, that is not ethical, as the animal would have had to be removed from its habitat to be marketed in this way.

Secondly, enjoy wildlife from a distance. There is absolutely nothing wrong with visiting a place where animals live, for example on safari, as long as that animal’s normal life isn’t impacted by tourists.

And finally, leave only footprints. If you’re on a beach in a place like Costa Rica, make sure you’ve picked up even the smallest bits of rubbish, as down the line an animal could eat it and be seriously hurt.

This trip was genuinely the best experience of my life so far and has inspired me to spend a large part of my year abroad working at another animal rescue centre in Costa Rica and undertaking an internship in conservation education. I am incredibly grateful to the Expedition Fund for supporting my trip and my future career prospects, as without it I would not have been able to further explore my greatest passion – animal conservation.