

Post-enrichment award – Todos Santos Study Abroad

With the help of my enrichment award, I studied abroad at the CSU Todos Santos Center in Mexico earning credit towards my fish, wildlife, and conservation biology degree. The experience was life-changing not only because of the amazing wildlife that I saw but also because of the culture that I was surrounded by.

The Todos Santos Center sits in between the Pacific Ocean and dry, arid mountains. These two areas have distinct ecosystems, marine and desert, that I am unable to get hands-on experience with while living in Fort Collins. Most of the study abroad focused on the wildlife that lived in and the social aspects that surrounded the area. I learned about the wildlife first in the classroom: how to identify certain species, their adaptations to live within their environment, and how they impact the lives of local people. Then, on some weekends, the group would go on excursions and be able to see/interact with the wildlife. An example of this setup is when we had “fish week.” For one week, we learned about the adaptations that certain fish species have to survive in their environment and at the end of the week we were tested on our identification of thirty fish species. The following weekend, we snorkeled in Cabo Pulmo Marine Preserve and saw at least twenty-five of the fish we learned about. The snorkeling was fun, but I gained an immense amount of appreciation by being able to identify the fish and explain what they ate, how they ate, and their role in the ecosystem. I would not have been able to gain this appreciation without having this hands-on, in-person learning that I got from my study abroad.

Two other excursions that were unforgettable was when my group visited a ranch and when we went snorkeling with whale sharks. The ranch was a reserve that a family had been living on for generations. I have learned about sustainability in almost every single one of my classes at CSU, but I had not experienced it like when I camped at the ranch for a couple of days.

The family that lived on the ranch truly lived off the land and then they invited people to come and learn from them. I was able to make my own leather bracelet and eat (extremely bitter) roots used in medicine. It was an eye-opening experience and allowed me to connect it to the sustainability that I have learned on campus. Another excursion I was able to do was snorkel with whale sharks, the largest fish in the world. I did not appreciate their massive size and swift movements until I was swimming three feet away and struggling to keep up. In my major, there are so many different subject areas (fish, mammals, herptiles, birds, or a specific species or ecosystem) and there is just no way to gain a deep understanding about all of them given the short amount of time I have spent at CSU. These short excursions allowed me to value and respect all wildlife everywhere, even if my main interest is researching birds and mammals.

Although I was primarily on the study abroad to take classes, there was some down time at the end of the day (when I did not have homework) and on the weekends (when there were no excursions). The other people on the study abroad and I would explore the town and get dinner and go into shops. Exploring the town and finding new places to go was humbling, scary, exciting, and just an amazing experience. By the end of my time there, I had a routine and the town of Todos Santos felt like home. I met great people, picked up on some Spanish, and had some of the best food I have ever eaten. By being immersed in an entirely different culture, I have become a better communicator, a better networker, and, I hope, a better person.

Studying abroad in Mexico was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity where I met great people and explored an amazing part of the earth. I picked up and enhanced skills of independence, research, and communication. But, most importantly, I learned about incredible wildlife, and that no matter who or where you are, there is always a way to help conserve and protect the environment, which is what I think a fish and wildlife degree is all about.



Grey whale waving goodbye



Letting newly-hatched sea turtles make their way to the ocean



Sustainability at practice in town ("More mustaches, less straws")



Camera trap image of a black-tailed jackrabbit for my capstone research project



Swimming next to sea lions



Swimming next to whale sharks