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A Summer Internship with Turtles

August 31, 2016

This summer, Anne DeLua (geology '17) spent two months as an intern on St. Catherine's Island, a privately-owned island fifty miles south of Savannah dedicated to research and conservation. Run by the St. Catherine's Island Foundation, the island is not open to the public. Instead, its only human activity comes from professors and students, many of them from Georgia Southern, who visit the island to participate in classes, internships, and various conservation projects. Conservation of endangered wildlife is the St. Catherine's Island Foundation's chief concern. In fact, they even work with the New York Zoological Society, occasionally hosting their endangered animals and working to increase their numbers. During DeLua's internship, the island was home to several ring-tailed lemurs given free range of the island's 14,640 acres, which they shared with alligators, who were frequently sighted waddling around the island, taking unexpected dips in the ocean and once even holding up traffic.

The main attraction for DeLua, however, was the sea turtles.

As a sea turtle conservation researcher in St. Catherine Island's Sea Turtle Conversation Program, DeLua took part in an effort to preserve the country's dwindling sea turtle population. She spent each day searching the beach for signs of sea turtle nests, which are usually concealed by sand. Once she spotted signs of a nest, DeLua had to dig until she found it, and then either mark its location or move it to a place where it would not easily get washed away by high tide.

"The beaches on St. Catherine's Island are eroding badly," said DeLua, "so the sea turtles there often put their nests in places that would've been okay a couple of years ago, but aren't any more. So we had to move them and make sure they were in safe spots."

After saving the nests, DeLua also had to count the hatchlings and help them out to sea, which was her favorite part of the experience.

"Finding your first nest is great, but it's really rewarding to see the baby turtles safely returned to their environment," she said.

DeLua was part of a forty year effort by St. Catherine's Island to take sea turtles off the endangered species list. Fortunately, the population of sea turtles is currently on the rise, and DeLua reported that the Sea Turtle Conservation Program enjoyed a record-breaking year, saving more nests than they ever have before.

By acquainting herself with the island this summer, DeLua was also able to get a head start on her honors thesis.

"I'm actually going to be doing research with the geology department on the island for my honors thesis," said DeLua. "So this was really great, because I got to know the island beforehand. I'll keep working there this year, just not with sea turtles. Instead I'll be doing geophysics."

DeLua's honors thesis will involve many wells Georgia Southern keeps on the island's interior, which are inexplicably filling up with salt water. Using ground-penetrating radar, DeLua hopes to discover the source of the salt water intrusion and its cause.

Even though her research will not bring her into contact with turtles again, DeLua still feels fortunate she had a chance to participate in a conservation project.

"I'm interested in conservation in general," said DeLua. "I think everyone should help conserve, and this was my chance to be able to help out, make the world a better place, and save some sea turtles."



Ann DeLua with turtle egg

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Animal-Assisted Therapy at the Council for Undergraduate Research

August 31, 2016



Each year, all honors freshman take part in a year-long First-Year Experience (FYE) class tailored toward preparing students for success in the Honors Program. Among these classes is Animal-Assisted Therapy, an intensive exercise in research methods and service-learning taught by Dr. Jerri Kropp and Dr. Trent Maurer. While learning how to utilize both physical and online databases and look at findings from an international perspective, students also participate in a hands-on service project that pairs them with either a certified therapy dog or a local therapeutic horseback riding program, Stirrup Some Fun. Students emerge from this class fully prepared for tackling future research projects, such as their honors thesis; some are even inspired to continue working with therapy animals. For Caroline Lathi (health education & promotion '18), the class provided her with the opportunity to

attend the annual Council for Undergraduate Research (CUR) conference in Tampa, Florida this summer as one of only a few students in attendance. Alongside Dr. Maurer and Dr. Kropp, Lathi helped deliver a presentation titled "Integrating Scaffolded Research with Service-Learning into a First Year, Two Semester Course Sequence."

The presentation focused on applying scaffolded research methods to a classroom setting, scaffolded research being research that builds on prior knowledge held by the students.

"We set up our class based on a model by Dr. Jenny Shanahan, the director of undergraduate research at Bridgewater State University, that provides thirty research skills for students," said Dr. Kropp. "This is a process that could take four years for a student to accomplish, but one of the things that we are proud of is that we do all of them in the two course sequence, and with freshmen."

Both professors wanted to share their unique, rigorous approach to teaching research in a condensed timeframe, but they felt a student voice was necessary for their presentation.

Dr. Maurer said, "Although CUR is focused on undergraduate research, very few of the presenters are actually undergraduate students, so getting that 'voice' represented is extremely important. What we wanted was someone who could speak first-hand to what he or she got out of the course. When we thought about our prior year's FYE class and which students would be good fits for this, Caroline's name very quickly rose to the top."

Dr. Kropp agreed. "Of course we had many great students in the class, but I think Caroline also had the confidence to speak to an audience. She also seemed to really embrace the service-learning and get the research component, and we thought she'd be a really good representative for the class."

Lathi had just completed the course, but she jumped on the opportunity to present research just after the completion of her freshman year, an experience very few students have.

"I ended up loving the class and working with therapy dogs, so I was happy to be able to share my perspective," said Lathi. "I was really nervous going in because I was addressing these professors whose careers are dedicated to undergrad research, but once I started talking it was very easy to speak to the crowd. It was fun."

Preparing for the presentation proved slightly challenging, since the conference was at the end of June and Lathi was attending a leadership retreat the week before. While the group had discussed their plans before the semester ended, Dr. Kropp and Dr. Maurer did not see Lathi's contributions to their PowerPoint until the day before the presentation.

"This was not an accident," Dr. Maurer said. "It was because we completely trusted in her ability and her professionalism—based on her performance in our course sequence—and we knew whatever she created would be a perfect fit for the presentation. I can't think of a greater testament to her abilities than placing that kind of trust in her."

The presentation was an inevitable success; in fact, Dr. Shanahan, whose research made the animal assisted therapy class possible, was actually in attendance.

"She's someone we look up to as a mentor, so we were really pleased that she came to our presentation," said Dr. Kropp.

Once the presentation was over, the group was able to enjoy the rest of the conference, which included listening to panels and, in the spirit of global citizenship, meeting researchers from around the world. Lathi was able to meet the presenters on Dr. Maurer's other panel: one faculty member from Canada, one faculty member from the U.K., and one undergraduate student from the U.K. While encountering many new people and ideas, Lathi was also able to see her own experience as a student researcher from another viewpoint.

"I liked going to the other presentations as one of the only students there," she said.

"Being a student and listening to professors talk about how you learn is very interesting. It was cool to receive that different perspective."

Lathi's student voice was just as valuable to the professors in attendance. Dr. Maurer said, "Student voices are important to the conversations had there, and certainly very, very welcome, but they are few and far between. Students like Caroline help those of us who work with undergraduates on research to see the impact of our work. Being able to give any student an opportunity like that is a rare and precious thing."

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