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Honors Research: Swimming with Sharks

May 1, 2019



1 Colton Borresen (blue shirt, left)

Ever since the release of the 1975 film *Jaws*, sharks have suffered a negative reputation that leaves many people clinging to the shore. There are some people, however, who say sharks are misunderstood. Second-year student Colton Borresen (biology '21) is one of those people, and last summer he joined them in their natural habitat as he worked with the Coastal Marine Education and Research Academy (CMERA) to conduct research about shark and stingray populations.

Borresen holds fond memories of traveling to the beach with his family when he was younger. He often went snorkeling in places such as Florida, Mexico and Aruba where his fascination with marine life began.

"I remember drift snorkeling around the Exumas in the Bahamas with sharks and stingrays only a few feet away," he

said. Naturally, majoring in biology at college was his primary choice.

Borresen heard about the internship with CMERA through the Department of Biology, and was intrigued by the summer program they have in Clearwater, Florida. He especially liked that who worked on research for four weeks or longer would have their name on any papers published by CMERA for that research.

During this internship, students attended morning lectures on topics such as shark and ray anatomy and physiology, ecology and conservation concerns. In the afternoon, students actively participated with research efforts by tagging, measuring and collecting relevant data on both sharks and stingrays that were hauled onto the boat using long lines and tangle nets. The team could bring in as many as 18 shark and 10 stingrays per day which kept them busy. After the animal was pulled onto the boat, the team worked quickly to record this data as well as irrigate the creature to keep it alive before releasing it back into the ocean.

"Because this is a catch and release program, the safety and handling of each animal was a priority," Borresen said. Smaller animals were fitted with an identification tag while larger animals were fitted with a satellite tag to track their location. The team encountered a variety of shark species including "bonnet heads, scalloped hammerheads, great hammerheads, black tips, tiger sharks, and nurse sharks" he said. They also caught many species of rays including smooth butterfly rays, southern stingrays, spotted eagle rays, bluntnose stingrays, and cownose rays.

Although there were many exciting experiences, Borresen singled out one day in particular. "One of my most memorable experiences on the boat was catching a 7 ½ foot tiger shark," he said. "My heart was pounding, but there was not much time to think about it because we needed to work quickly to return the shark to the water. We tagged the shark with a satellite tag, which was provided through generous donations, to track its location."

Borresen believes this internship will help him with his future ventures in marine biology and plans to join CMERA again this summer for more internship experiences researching the creatures that many people simply misunderstand.

Project Pura Vida: An Honors Legacy in Costa Rica

May 1, 2019



2Back row, left to right: Jaymin Patel, Matthew McGrath, Bodie Fox, and Moriah Harris. Front row, left to right: Jacey Thomas, Tabitha Lowe, Kelly Lesh, Jessica Kolman, and Caitlin Shelby.

Costa Rica has become a popular spring break destination for many college students in recent years. Countless planes fly into the capital city of San José where passengers depart and make their way to the closest white sandy beach in the most popular resort hotels. There are some students, however, who have taken a different path after entering the country. Some of those students are from Georgia Southern, and for the past five years, they have flown into San Jose and then made their way to the small town of La Carpio where they have dedicated their spring break to serving the Nicaraguan refugee community.

“Project Pura Vida! Honors in Costa Rica” is led by Doctora Leticia McGrath (Spanish), who approached the University Honors Program in 2014 to develop a volunteer trip in partnership with the Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation, a group she had met on an earlier study abroad trip.

“I continue to be inspired to watch Georgia Southern Honors students who are willing to give up their free time, their spring break, no less, to serve others and to bring the lessons they’ve learned back home and apply them here locally,” Dra. McGrath said.

That approach also defines the focus of her Honors First-Year Experience (FYE) courses as well, and those discussions have prompted students in the class to join in the trip, often during their freshman year. Bailey Kirk (mathematics '18) was one of the students who went on the very first Pura Vida trip. Her time in Dra. McGrath’s *Hispanic Culture through Film* FYE course sparked her interest in global citizenship and gave her the perfect opportunity to fulfill one of her dreams of travelling with Georgia Southern University.

Kirk’s participation in this first trip inspired her to go again the next year as a trip leader. “My responsibilities focused on keeping the group organized, prepared, and involved. When we were volunteering or in the community, I would make sure that the group was comfortable and knew exactly what to expect,” she said.

Of the numerous opportunities and adventures she had on these trips, her most memorable experience was being able to watch baby sea turtles hatch on the beach at Manuel Antonio National Park. “It had been an emotional trip and this felt like a sign that it was all worth it and this trip was meant to never be forgotten. Plus, it was amazing to be walking and just randomly stumble on an unknown sea turtle nest beginning to hatch,” Kirk said.

Other students have participated in this trip and been inspired to become trip leaders as well. Bodie Fox (writing and linguistics '20) wanted to go a second time, but as a trip leader so that he could teach some of the new students about what he had learned the year before.

On his second trip, Fox appreciated the shift to more direct service that made a visible impact in the community. He also enjoyed being able to spend more time with Gail Nystrom, director of the Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation, and being able to ask her more direct and focused questions on the operations of the Foundation.

One of the most rewarding experiences that Fox had on the trip was being able to help a woman and her family move into their newly built house. Fox connected with this family due to their passion for books. “It was so rewarding to hear how proud this woman and her children were of their book collection, which totaled over 500 books,” he said.

Throughout the years of this trip, Dra. McGrath has been able to see rewarding changes throughout the La Carpio community. “The most notable change is the fact that many of the children who have been educated in the Montessori

school run by the Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation are now in high school and are succeeding,” she said. “Watching the children grow year after year has to be the most rewarding experience for me. That, and knowing that they are thriving and being cared for in a safe environment.”

Kirk also noticed some of these changes in her multiple years of participating in the trip. She said, “It was amazing for me to walk around La Carpio and see how much had changed in just one year, even though there were things that seemed so simple, such as bagging their garbage and bringing it to a specific area. There was also the difference in buildings becoming permanent and being able to see the investment people had made to continue growing their community.”

While these students are clearly making an impact in this community, the experiences and lessons that they learn in Costa Rica are being brought home and implemented in these students’ communities, as well.

McGrath said, “We have communities in our local hometowns that are often ignored or discriminated against, just like La Carpio, and it is clear to me that this experience has inspired my students to return to their own cities to seek ways in which they can provide hope, encouragement, and a helping hand where perhaps before they had never thought to do so. Student’s newfound perspective is the direct result of their having the opportunity to view this in another country with different ethnic groups and removing themselves from the equation to step back and see how universal the issues of poverty, discrimination, and immigration truly are.”

Georgia Southern’s continuous involvement in Project Pura Vida has had a tremendous impact on the community of La Carpio as well as on the students who have participated in the trip over the years. “This and other Alternative Break Trips offered at Georgia Southern are amazing opportunities not only to travel, experience culture, and have an adventure, but also to be able to have impact on people’s lives and be able to see life from a different perspective,” Kirk says.

Honors Program Travels to Memphis to Present Research

May 1, 2019



Honors Program students from the Statesboro and Armstrong campuses traveled by bus to Memphis to present their research at the annual meeting of the Southern Regional Honors Council (SRHC). Led by Dr. Steven Engel and Dr. Jonathan Roberts, 49 Georgia Southern students participated in poster presentations and paper panel sessions. SRHC is

comprised of honors colleges and programs across the southeast, and for the second year in a row, Georgia Southern had the largest contingent of students presenting.

For many of the Georgia Southern students, this was their first experience presenting at an academic conference. Anna Hassett (exercise science '19) left her first poster presentation feeling like she had expanded her knowledge on things from her field of study as well as other varying fields that she normally would not encounter. "I felt inspired to continue my research as well as other outside research projects," she said.

Jim Walker (mechanical engineering '19) and Kelley Nemeć (information systems '19) were also first time participants in the event. They both enjoyed the opportunity to present their honors thesis research and receive feedback from other honors students.

Nemeć said, "My research is something I've spent a lot of time with, personally, and being able to tell people about it was very gratifying."

Walker agreed, "It's always inspiring to be in a group of individuals that are all driven and actually care about what they're doing, and I think that's something that's relatively difficult to come by."

Many of the students were also excited to travel to a new city. Memphis provided a new environment for these students to take in and helped to expand their curiosities beyond the conference presentations.

Kira Breen (rehabilitation sciences '20) was inspired by the city of Memphis and felt it added to the interdisciplinary environment of the conference itself. Being able to explore a new city and all that it has to offer helped to spark an invigorated interest in all that the world has to offer and encouraged students to further pursue their passions.

Both Dr. Steven Engel and Dr. Jonathan Roberts recognize the opportunity to travel and to present personal research at a recognized and respected conference. Dr. Engel said, "I think it was great that we were able to bring such a large group of students from both campuses and give them the opportunity to present their research in a professional setting. This is the kind of experience that the honors program provides and contributes to the students' personal and professional development."

Dr. Roberts continued, "I think it is a great opportunity for students to not only present their own work but learn about what other people from the Southeastern United States are researching."

Overall, honors students from a variety of disciplines came together to support and to learn from each other. This experience gave students connections and experience explaining and defending their research.

Katherine Barrs Wins Barry Goldwater Scholarship

May 1, 2019



Katherine Barrs, a second-year biology and mathematics double-major, won the Barry Goldwater Scholarship, the nation's top scholarship for undergraduate students engaged in research in the sciences.

Barrs has worked on research that brings together mathematics and biology in labs here at Georgia Southern and on a National Science Foundation Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) at University of North Carolina – Greensboro last summer. This coming summer she will participate in another REU at Yale University.

Please read more about her award and experiences [here](#).