
COMING ALIVE IN THE DESERT

Earth Expeditions in Baja California, Mexico—July 2016



At some point during the 2015-2016 school year, I decided to look for a summer program that would get me out of my comfort zone while teaching me something I could apply in class. I was hoping for adventure, but wanted to stay within the confines of biology-minded academic programming. The options seemed endless: A river cruise in the Amazon? Island-hopping the Galapagos? Arid ecology in the Mediterranean? I finally settled on Earth Expeditions, a program run through Miami University that enables educators (among others) to travel to exotic locations and learning about the ecology of the region while completing coursework on communicating environmental themes. Given that the coursework and program goals were similar across all of the potential locations, I chose my preferred locale based mostly on timing and figured that, in doing so, the first part of my adventure would be finding excitement and novelty regardless of the familiarity of the place. After receiving my admission into the program and narrowing down the choices to Baja California, I became even more excited to dive deeper (quite literally, I would find!) into an environment that seemed like the Sonoran Desert's cool, eclectic cousin. I had lived in Phoenix for the majority of my life, and though I love its unique flora and fauna, I longed to see its derivatives and variants. How did the other species in this nearby ecoregion evolve? How are they different? What similar features did they retain? I anxiously awaited my introduction to this quasi-familiar place.

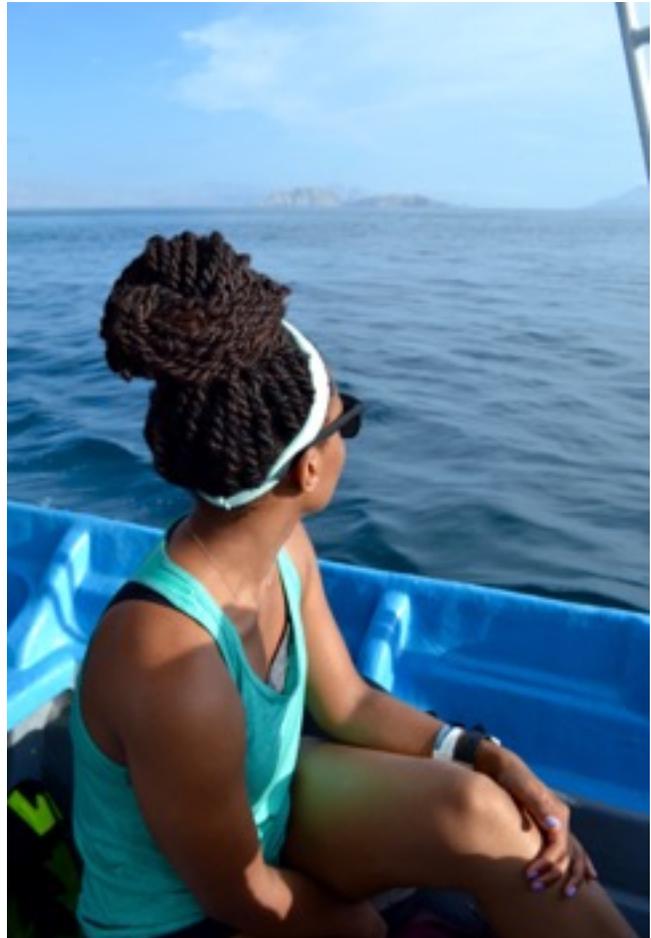
Left: a whale shark is visible close to the surface as another group prepares to jump in. If you look very closely, you can see a coyote and reddish egret in the background! Right: Students Michelle Race and Emily Dubicki explore the mangroves on a desert island.

Even before the vans were loaded up and we began our drive into Mexico,



the trip seemed special. There was clearly a genuine appreciation of the in-country partners and their relationship with the program. Our introductions to the course leaders and to each other were followed by a heartfelt explanation of the program by one of its directors. It was clear from his tone and sincerity that this program meant something to him, and that he believed it would mean something to us, too.

Looking back 3 months later, the trip feels like a remarkable bubble of adventure and connection amongst the flurry of change that I went through this summer. The surroundings were spectacular—at times, otherworldly. It is a surreal thing to be in the middle of the desert, surrounded by mangroves, just a few feet away from the ocean. I experienced perhaps the most awe-



Left: Rancho San Gregorio, our first locale. Right: Fellow student Michelle Race looking out at the islands on a trip at sea.

“...twirling around with sea lions, swimming alongside of a whale shark, watching the sun rise...”

inspiring moments of my life on this trip: twirling around with sea lions underwater, swimming alongside of a whale shark, watching the sun rise and illuminate a series of islands from a perch on a mountain. But even in the midst of these seemingly unreal moments, the biggest takeaway from the trip was the connection I felt to my peers, professors, and facilitators. I left feeling awakened by the mutual sense of awe and inspiration we gained together on our trip. Looking back, these connections were the most exciting part of my day. It wasn't so much about seeing wildlife as it was experiencing these new joys with other people, and learning to navigate the

strange and sometimes unruly landscape together. I now understand the reason for the all-knowing sense of excitement exuding from veteran facilitators, and I feel so grateful to have been a part of its latest edition. Thank you to all who helped make this trip come together, and all the best to those who will embark on this trip in the future!