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Week One in the Galapagos

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Michael McGrath Galapagos 2/16/16
Week One in the Galapagos



A girl from the Yasuni indigenous community in the Ecuadorian Amazon with her pet owl, named Tamo.

I have officially been in Ecuador for over a month. I wish I could express sufficiently how amazing of an experience it has been already.

Within my first month in Quito, I was able to see and climb part of Volcan Cotopaxi, one of Ecuador's (and the World's) tallest active volcanos. As well, I was able to visit several ecologically conscious and sustainable farms such as Hacienda Verde in the Guyllabamba Valley (where I was able to see the true equator line), and the Mashpi cocoa plantation in the Rio Mashpi community of about 150 people. Even more, I was able to visit the Páramo ecosystem at the Antisana Reserve, where my classmates and I saw several of the Andean Condor, a bird that has a population of around 80 here in Ecuador.

Lastly, I was lucky enough to spend a week at the Yasuni research station in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Originally, the plan was to visit the Tiputini Biodiversity Station, a station owned and operated by Universidad San Francisco in collaboration with Boston University, but this wasn't possible. When we arrived in the Amazon, the part of the Tiputini river to access the station was severely low, due to the El Niño event that has been distressing nearly every part of the country and its several ecosystems in one way or another. Luckily, another station (Yasuni) was able to accommodate us, and we were even able to meet with some local guides and visit their community, where I was able to observe and speak with the children, and even some of the older community members, about how they felt regarding 20+ random strangers turning up in their community of around 15 families. Some of them felt very strange and, I could sense, violated, for which I couldn't blame them at all. I just wish I was more proficient in Spanish to have a constructive conversation through our translator about how well-intended our visit was. Others, though, were incredibly warm and welcoming, especially the children. In the photo above is a little girl with her pet owl named Tamo. He seemed quite affectionate, but only towards her, though.

We then flew here to San Cristóbal on the Galápagos and I have spent a little over a week here already. No photo I have ever seen was able to provide justice to the beauty of this island. Across from my university's campus is a beach, Playa Man, where I have snorkled nearly every day and have seen dozens of different tropical fish and so many sea lions I have lost count. Another beach just a 15 minute walk away from my campus is Playa Corola, where I spent 20 minutes in the water and saw four separate green sea turtles in that span of time. I am starting to see the great expanse of the island contract into the 3,000 people that inhabit it, where everyone is familiar or knows everyone else, and you always say "Hola" or "Que tal" to everyone you walk by on the street. It's a stark cultural, socio-economic, and ecological difference from Quito, in just the span of a 3 hour flight. Last week was a celebration of Carnival on Playa Man, as well as

the crowning of the queen of San Cristóbal, which everyone in residence attended. It was an overwhelming sight to see, to say the least.

My classes have been rigorous and interesting. The one I'm currently taking is all centered around climate change, its effects on society, and the future of our planet. It has really aroused some critical thinking about my personal significance with the issue of climate change, as well as what I think needs to be done on a systemic level to truly address those that are most affected by the products of our changing climate.

I consider myself so incredibly lucky to be where I am for the next three months, and have been actively trying to take in everything that I see as an anthropologist, and critically challenging my previous viewpoints and assumptions for ones that I never thought to explore. And I'm excited for a moment to truly distill all of these observations, thoughts, and notes into an actual cohesive recollection and account of my time here.

Michael