MEM Placement 2013: Rarotonga, Cook Islands

For my MEM placement, I was lucky enough to spend two months in Rarotonga, Cook Islands. Rarotonga is a small volcanic island in the middle of the South Pacific. I was one of two MEM research assistants for a University of York PhD student. We were investigating the effectiveness of Rarotonga’s locally managed marine areas, a form of MPAs which are collaboratively managed between the government and local community. We used the underwater visual census technique to measure, identify and count lagoonal reef fish and invertebrates. This meant I got to spend every day snorkelling or diving in tropical lagoons!

Once we had collected all of our data, I used the reef fish data to evaluate if biomass and densities of fish were greater in the protected areas compared with open-access control areas. Undertaking this project improved my data analysis skills greatly and has made me a confident user of the R statistical package. During my time in Rarotonga, I was also involved in a local outreach programme where we taught Cook Islands children about the importance of coral reefs and protecting them. We made a video for this event and it is now being used in local schools!

Although it took 30 hours to get to Rarotonga, it was completely worth it! I learnt a wide variety of fieldwork techniques and was given the opportunity to meet and talk to lot of local islanders. Overall, this was the most incredible two months and I feel very lucky to have spent two months living in an island paradise! I made some fantastic friends and will never forget my two months in Rarotonga.