Summer placement title: Easter Island: the unfolding history of ecological transformation beneath the sea

Places: Mexico, Easter Island and mainland Chile

Description:

My project focused on assembling qualitative data such as oral testimonies, old photographs and grey literature about the development of overfishing in Easter Island (aka. Rapa Nui).

I first went to south Mexico to meet Dr. Andrea Sáenz-Arroyo to design a proper questionnaire to conduct interviews to local fishermen, as she has great experience in this field.

Mexico was great. Very useful in terms of academic preparation and personal experience but not as good for my health. I caught there bad salmonella, with typhoid fever and some stitches in my head as I fainted as a consequence. However, staff at the local hospital took very good care of me and Andrea’s support was key for my recover. I sadly had to delay my arrival to Easter Island for 1.5 weeks. However, I still managed to make it with over 200 questionnaires in my luggage.

My stay in Easter Island couldn’t have been more interesting. I loved the experience I gained there, as it was very challenging. First to be accepted by the Rapa Nui community and secondly to get the access to the most experienced fishermen and make them speak. Callum gave me a contact there so I could start as soon as I arrived. However, this person was not in the island so I had to do everything by myself. It took me a week to understand the basics of their culture and to walk around enough by the docks for them to get used to my presence.

The Rapa Nui people are extraordinarily suspicious towards foreigners, especially westerners interested in their natural resources. So it is actually hard to make them interviews and it takes much more than a few weeks to gain their trust. I was getting more and more frustrated with my work the day I happened to bump into the Minister of the Sea of the Rapa Nui Parliament, a very unique person, whose friendship allowed me to dive into their community straight away. Thanks to him I managed to collect 35 interviews in 2 weeks. This allowed me to get sufficient data to get some interesting results.

Personally, this experience was incredibly enriching. I met incredible people belonging to such a remote and unique culture. I also demonstrated myself that I could be very happy living in one of the most remote places on earth! The challenges
I encountered made me stronger and I now plan to go back and continue to contribute to unfold their overfishing story, one more mystery of the many that prevail in Easter Island.

I was able to go thanks to the immense support of Callum and Andrea (personally and academically), PEW (financially) and Julie (administrative coordination).