Placement Blog

For my placement, I was extremely lucky to go to Japan. I was selected for the UTRIP – the University of Tokyo Research Internship Program – which invites international students to come to Tokyo for 2 months to conduct a research project with one of their professors. The year I applied, there was an opportunity to study coral reefs and environmental change with Professor Hajime Kayanne, who created his own laboratory (dedicated to coral science) at the university. The reason I consider myself so lucky is that not only is the University of Tokyo renown worldwide, which means this was an excellent opportunity; the internship was also entirely funded, from flights to pocket money.

My introduction speech – I was quite nervous!
The UTRIP had 28 participants, which were split into two groups of 14 that came to Tokyo at different times. I have met some incredible people from all over the world in my cohort, which have become my friends and I am hoping to keep contact with. The whole programme was incredibly well organised. For example, we got a campus tour on our first day, a Japanese language class was arranged and field trips were organised. All of this really made me feel at home right away, despite being so far away.

My laboratory had 6 members, including two master students who helped me get used to the new environment the most. It was not always easy to communicate, as their English was not perfect, but everyone was making big efforts to try their best. I soon got introduced to my topic, trained at pool sessions to know the Japanese skin-diving standards, and attended all lab meetings.
My research focused on coral islands and their future in light of climate change. As their name suggests, coral islands are islets entirely made up of coral skeletons. Possible increased storminess, sea level rise and coral degradation in the near future make them one of the most threatened landforms in the world. My study therefore aimed to look at the past and current geological characteristics of a coral island, Ballast Island, and to make predictions regarding its future maintenance (or disappearance). Ballast Island is only about 200 meters long and 30 meters large, and is situated north of Iriomote, which is part of the Ryukyu archipelago. Its shape and position have widely varied in the past; this is due to the fact that it lies on a typhoon track and therefore regularly becomes reshaped by wind and wave action. Being small, easily accessible and having been studied by the Kayanne laboratory in the past, it was an ideal study site to provide answers to some of the questions the scientific community has regarding coral islands’ future.
To do this, among others, I performed a topographical survey of the island, past satellite and aerial pictures of the island were analysed using ArcGIS, an ecological survey of the coral community was completed and chamber experiments were performed.

The main coral species forming Ballast Island: branching *Acropora* species
Staying on this paradisiac island was an amazing experience I cannot put into words. I have learned so much from my internship. One of the most important things is the fact that in science, things never really go to plan. And I have learned to adapt to that, and to improvise.
My time in Japan has also taught me how to work autonomously, which is so important in research. My professor is very busy and regularly had to travel to conferences and meetings. He therefore left me to figure things out on my own many times. Although this seemed tough at the time, this is how it works in real life, and I guess the sooner you learn it, the better.

Travelling to Japan had been my wish for a long time, and being able to combine this with my research still seems like a dream come true. All in all, despite the issues I sometimes had with experiments not working out how expected and the language, I would do it again any time. It was a mind-opening, enriching experience.

Lastly, I could not resist putting up a picture of what we were typically served for dinner on the island. Some of the most delicious (and bizarre) things I have eaten in my life
All photos were taken by myself and Akari Nagoshi, one of the Kayanne laboratory’s MSc students.