



Work Overview

I lived in Sabacché, Yucatan from June to August of 2012. During my time there, I worked as both part of a team and individually for the ecotourism project being implemented by Cuerpos de Conservación. I was responsible for the following duties and objectives:

1. Advise about the use of biodegradable products in the project area.
2. Implement project objectives for the maintenance of the project area.
3. Taught English to both children and adults in the community.

Work Accomplished

With the support of Experiential Learning International and Yucatan Exchange Services, Cuerpos de Conservación and I worked together to accomplish the following:

1. Advise about the use of biodegradable products in the project area.

I was responsible for addressing the requirements of one section of a government reference document, NMX-AA-133-SCFI-2006, which is an evaluation form used by ecotourism projects to verify if the project is meeting specific requirements the government has established that the project must meet in order to receive funding. The requirements and specifications are intended to help promote sustainable ecotourism in Sabacché.

The particular requirement I worked on was the use of biodegradable products in the project area with information about the benefits of using such products which are environmentally friendly and non-toxic to humans. The report I submitted to my supervisor was about the dangers of using commercial cleaning products to clean the tourist facilities and cabins. In my report, I went into detail about the toxins and dangerous chemicals that are found in commercial cleaning products and why natural cleaning products such as baking soda and vinegar provide a safer, biodegradable alternative.

2. Implement project objectives for the maintenance of the project area.

A group of six students from a university in León were responsible for designing different aspects for the maintenance of the ecotourism project in Sabacché. The objectives this summer were to:

1. Remove debris and cut tree limbs in the nature pathway.
2. Pick up garbage in the ecotourism project area and houses in the community.
3. Conducted activities with school children.

The university students had about one month and a half to work on the design of the different objectives of the ecotourism project before a group of roughly twenty volunteers came to Sabacché to help implement the different projects. At the end of July, I worked with the volunteers for two weeks to achieve the project objectives.

One of the objectives was to remove debris and cut tree limbs in the nature pathway so tourists would not harm themselves when walking or biking to the cenotes. The nature pathway is approximately 10 km from the cabins (where tourists can stay overnight if they wish) to the cenotes which is the tourist attraction that draws people into Sabacché. Tourists are encouraged to walk or bike to the cenotes so that they can enjoy the wildlife and beauty of the area, but more importantly so more money can be brought into the community by tourists renting bicycles. Because the location of the ecotourism project is in the jungle, there is significant rainfall which causes the plants to grow rapidly in the area. Different groups of volunteers took turns removing debris such as rocks or limbs from assigned sections of the 10 km path. Also, we had to cut tree limbs and the tips of henequen plants (which are very sharp) that obstructed the easy passage of tourists.

Another objective was to pick up garbage in the ecotourism project area and houses in the community. There is a lack of services in Sabacché to pick up resident garbage so that oftentimes residents throw packaging or any other type of waste not only on their plots of land but also in the ditches along the main road passing through Sabacché. Five houses in the community were selected to be cleaned up with both the help of volunteers and the people living in the house. Before house residents began to pick up garbage that had accumulated on their land, they were

informed of the benefits of keeping the area clean for health and sanitation reasons. It was important to inform them of the purpose of what we were doing so that hopefully in the future, they would be encouraged to properly dispose of garbage.

The other objective of the project was to conduct activities with school children. This was important for two reasons. It included young members in the community in the objectives of the project so that they would see the importance of the work being performed to sustain their community. Also, it helped build connections between volunteers and children so that volunteers could share their knowledge and a bond was formed where volunteers could be positive role models for the youth in this struggling community.

3. Taught English to both children and adults in the community.

One of my daily tasks was to teach English to both youth and adults living in the village so that they would be able to communicate with tourists who were oftentimes from European countries. I was impressed to learn that even in a community as small as Sabacché that students are taught English in addition to Spanish and Maya.

At first, it was hard for me to establish a set schedule with individual families to teach them English. Because the university students were implementing different aspects of the ecotourism project, it was hard for me to find the time to work with individuals because they would be helping the students clean up garbage from the project site or their own households, or remove vegetation from the nature pathways. Also, it was hard to schedule time to work with adults in the community because they work all day long. In addition to activities some of the families would participate in to help with the ecotourism project, they had to do daily chores. For example, women would cook, clean, cut firewood, and do homework with children so they didn't have very much free time available to devote to learning English.



Personal Reflections

The project I was working on was a part of an ecotourism project in the hacienda of Sabacché which consisted of about 180 Maya people. I lived with a Maya family in Sabacché which was setup by the organization so that I would be exposed to Spanish on a constant basis since I had stated one of my goals for the internship was to become fluent in Spanish. My supervisor usually visited Sabacché once a week during the first month that I was there to ensure that I was transitioning smoothly to living in Sabacché, and also to ensure that I understood my role in the ecotourism project which had also enlisted volunteers from a university to help with the project. Even though I was separate from the students and I worked independently from them on my project, I would help them out if they needed it just so I would have a better understanding of what the total ecotourism project was trying to accomplish in Sabacché.

It was very difficult at first because my Spanish skills were severely limited to what I had learned from Rosetta Stone. While the computer language software did provide a good foundation, it is completely different understanding and trying to hold a conversation in Spanish. My supervisor only spoke Spanish and my Spanish capabilities were limited so that I had to rely on university students who were there to explain to me what my supervisor expected me to accomplish during my time there. While some of the students spoke English very well, I realized that many things were lost in translation and I later discovered that they had forgotten to mention specific information to me regarding my responsibilities for the project. Until I felt like I had achieved a better comprehension of the language, I felt lost and I didn't trust myself with the information that I "thought" or what I had "translated" others to be saying.

By about the fourth week after I had arrived to my project location, I felt comfortable enough with my Spanish speaking and comprehension skills that I felt like I could hold a conversation with someone. This helped me immensely to be able to perform the responsibilities I had been given. Up to that point in time, I relied heavily on others to explain to me what community members were saying. I even pushed myself by traveling alone to other areas where I was forced to rely on myself and not the other students to be able to get around.

I was able to hold a conversation in Spanish by the time I left, and I didn't doubt my abilities to translate what I was hearing someone say. The self-doubt had disappeared. If I didn't understand what someone was trying to tell me, they could explain it to me so that I would understand and vice versa. I could explain what I meant to say in a different way if what I was saying did not make any sense.

The experience was very informative for me especially since I am going into the field of international development. Things that I had been learning in class became very apparent to me once I was in the field. I think it is so critically important to establish relationships with those individuals in the project area who I am trying to help. By developing relationships with indigenous community members, I think it allowed me to have a better idea of what was needed in the community, and I think I was able to gain respect from most of the people.

Since the project was being implemented in a foreign country, I was curious to see how implementation of the project would be different compared to those in the United States. This allowed me to have a critical eye towards the project itself. I could see that what the project was trying to accomplish was important for drawing money into this very poor village, but at the same time many members of the community were left out. Also, in my studies the focus has shifted to more of a bottom-up approach to community development which suggests that it is important to have community members input from the very beginning of the project planning phase to its implementation. To my knowledge, the community participated in helping to fulfill specific objectives, but they were not asked for their input as to what they felt would be best for the ecotourism project and how to achieve those objectives. From what I saw when I was working in Sabacché, it appeared that the NGO that was implementing various programs for the development of the ecotourism project did not receive community input at all. The NGO had specific objectives in mind that it felt would help the community.

One objective the NGO initiated was picking up garbage both inside of the main project area and tourist facilities and outside of the main project area at specific community houses. Project volunteers would go to houses to explain the purpose of keeping their living space clean and to not throw garbage on their plot of land. The volunteers would then proceed to help the residents of the household pick-up the garbage. While the volunteers were educating participants as to the benefits of keeping their living space clean not only for health reasons but also to improve conditions for growing food on their plot of land, the problem that I saw with this is that they were not actually solving the root of the problem. Many of these households cannot afford to

have sanitation services pick up garbage. I know that the family I was living with would periodically rake the accumulated garbage together and then burn it which would save them the expense of sanitation services. So while some households were being educated about the importance of sanitation, if the service isn't available because of either financial or other constraining circumstances, then while individuals will understand the importance of not throwing garbage randomly, they weren't provided with a solution as to where this excess garbage should go.

This experience also helped me to grow on a personal level. I think I actually experienced more culture shock coming back into the United States versus what most people think of with culture shock which is going to a foreign country and the initial time it takes to adjust to a different culture. I had been aware of the amount of waste that the United States produces, but after having lived with a family in Sabacché where the people struggled from day to day just to have enough to eat, made me very critical of the culture in the United States. This new awareness has helped to open my eyes and to view things in the American culture in a whole new light. I think this new awareness of cultural differences gives me the ability to critically analyze concepts and ideas that I am being taught in my studies which I wouldn't have if I had not been exposed to the Maya culture and how different their society operates.



Words cannot express my heartfelt gratitude to Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation, Experiential Learning International, Cuerpos de Conservación for my experience in Sabacché, Yucatan this past summer. I plan to stay in contact with the people I met while I was there, and I hope to make another trip there in the near future to implement a project that I have designed for one of my classes.