



ECOLOGY PROJECT
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The Current

CONSERVATION FOR THE NEXT GENERATION • SPRING 2016



LOCAL EPI GALAPAGUENO STUDENTS VISIT GIANT TORTOISE NESTING AREAS TO HELP PARK RANGERS CHECK THE CONDITIONS OF EACH NEST, COLLECT DATA, AND RELEASE HATCHLINGS. PHOTO BY: FRANCISCO LASO

EPI STUDENTS INVESTIGATE NEW TORTOISE SPECIES

By Ana Maria Loose, Galapagos Program Manager

Exciting news from Galapagos! Researchers identified a **new giant tortoise species** on Santa Cruz Island last fall, and EPI students will be some of the very first people to help research the new species this season.

The *Chelonoidis donfaustoi*, named in honor of Galapagos National Park ranger Fausto Llerena Sánchez who spent 43 years caring for endangered tortoises, look similar to the *Chelonoidis porteri* but are a bit smaller and have a slightly different shell shape. The two species live just 12 miles apart on the same island. Thanks to genetic testing though, we now know without a doubt that they represent two distinct species. Researchers estimate there are only about 250 individuals of this newly identified species, as compared to around 2,000 members of *Chelonoidis porteri*. Identifying and understanding more about this new species is critical to conservation efforts, as it may mean increased habitat protection.

And guess what!? EPI students have the great fortune of participating in several projects focused on conserving both of these iconic species. This is an incredible opportunity for both our students and the Galapagos community.

During our 2016 season, students will contribute to Galapagos National Park research to determine current tortoise population numbers on Santa Cruz. With park rangers, EPI students will look for these unique creatures in the wild, then record biometric data and implant a microchip when new tortoises are identified.

EPI students will also participate in the park's nest protection program to identify tortoise nests, collect data, and help release hatchlings into the wild. Nests are often threatened by natural predators like feral pigs, cats, and fire ants.

Finally, students will work with world-renowned scientist Dr. Stephen Blake of the **Galapagos Tortoise Movement Ecology Program** on a baby tortoise tracking project. Researchers don't have much information about the early life of tortoises, so this project will help create a more complete picture of threats to their population.

Throughout this project, EPI will engage youth from **all nine high schools** on three different islands in the Galapagos archipelago, as well as engage visiting students from the U.S., in this exciting research, empowering the next generation to take an active role in conservation of giant tortoises and the intricate biodiversity of our entire planet.

Learn more about our Eco-Tours, partnerships, & conservation impacts & help spearhead conservation of the newest giant tortoise species by making a gift on our new & improved website: www.ecologyproject.org



For Our Future

With each EPI course, our planet gains new allies. By the end of 2016, an impressive **30,000** youth will have graduated from EPI courses, each student empowered to take an active role in conservation. Connecting youth with scientists in the field creates a synergy that results in durable conservation outcomes and builds momentum towards a healthier planet. This momentum propels not only our alumni but their friends, families, and communities into action. In EPI's 16 years of conservation education, I've witnessed firsthand the transformative effects of student-scientist collaboration at each of our program sites – effects that have inspired kids to become science teachers, marine biologists, environmental lawyers, green architects, and more. I am excited to share with you some of our incredible 2016 field season partnerships, whose alliances create amazing opportunities for our alumni and for our collective future.

~ Scott Pankratz, Executive Director



GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

Charles Darwin Research Station

The Galapagos Islands are known for the iconic giant tortoises, but how about sea turtles! **Macarena Parra**, a scientist at **Charles Darwin Research Station (CDRS)** supervises marine turtle nest monitoring, a project that EPI alumni and members of the Mola Mola eco-club are conducting at Tortuga Bay. EPI alumni partner with CDRS to learn more about the ecology and biology of green sea turtles and threats to their conservation. Students also help sea turtles by collecting data and marking nests to protect them from damage caused by visitors to this popular Santa Cruz Island beach.

YELLOWSTONE

Yellowstone National Park Bison Team

Did you know? The only remaining continuously wild herd of bison in the U.S. is found in Yellowstone National Park! Last year the National Park Service, along with Native American tribes and other agencies, agreed to revise the management plan for this species. To inform this discussion, the **Yellowstone National Park Bison Team** is conducting research about bison grazing habits. EPI students collect data alongside park biologists to ensure bison management promotes the long-term health of this iconic species.



BELIZE

University of Belize – Calabash Caye Marine Field Station

Lionfish are taking over the Mesoamerican Reef! Non-native lionfish represent a major threat to biological diversity throughout the Caribbean. They eat native reef fish and have no known natural predators in the ecosystem. EPI students are working with the **University of Belize's Environmental Research Institute** on Calabash Caye to collect lionfish, help analyze their stomach contents, and take genetic samples to better understand lionfish feeding habits and population diversity, which will inform lionfish management efforts and ultimately help improve the reef ecosystem.



MEXICO

Whale Shark Mexico

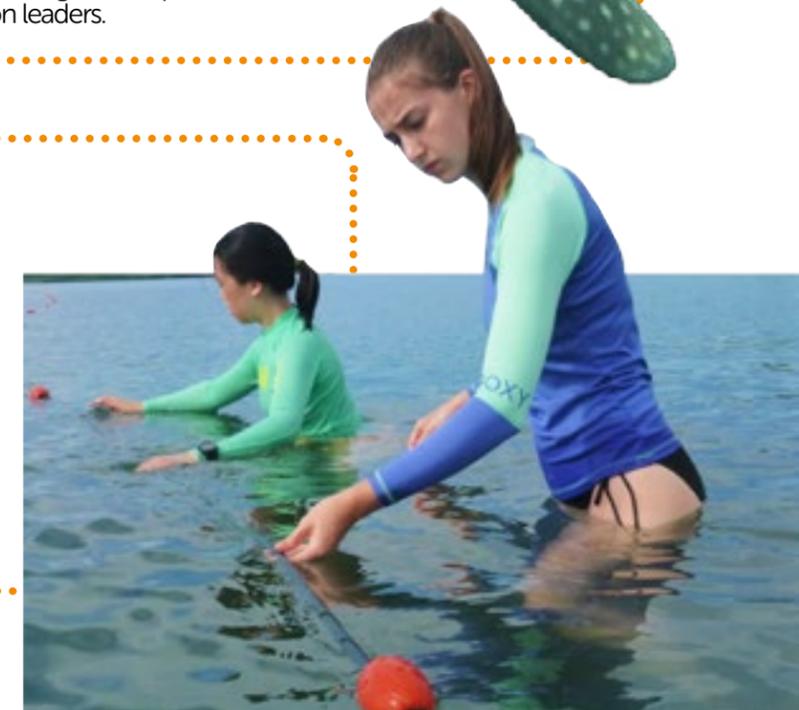
Whale sharks - these gentle giants are actually the largest fish on the planet! **Dr. Deni Ramirez** and **Whale Shark Mexico** are conducting research in the coastal waters just outside of La Paz. EPI students learn about the ecological, economic, and socio-cultural importance of this docile species and assist in data collection. They then share their knowledge and experience with new EPI participants and continue to inspire their peers as conservation leaders.



COSTA RICA

Latin American Sea Turtles

EPI's sea turtle program has expanded to the Pacific coast! On the Osa Peninsula, **Latin American Sea Turtles (LAST)** with **Director Didiher Chacón**, are working to protect endangered hawksbill and green sea turtle populations by conducting in-water studies to determine the threats sea turtles face. EPI students work with LAST researchers to monitor sea turtle feeding habitat and help collect data about their population structure and health. This new project allows local and visiting youth to contribute to critical research and support the survival of endangered sea turtles.



Learn more about all of our incredible 2016 partners:

www.ecologyproject.org/partners



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Ecology Project International improves and inspires science education and conservation efforts worldwide through field-based student-scientist partnerships.



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FILL YOUR BUCKET LIST!

No longer a student? Adventure Life, a leader in worldwide adventure travel, is now helping bring the EPI experience to adults and families! Visit ecologyproject.org/ecotour to plan your next adventure.



A ONCE IN A LIFETIME EXPERIENCE!

Win an incredible 8-day cruise in the Galapagos Islands, a stay at Pacuare Reserve in Costa Rica, or other eco-travel packages! Tickets are **\$25** for prizes valued at up to **\$8,600**. Call today to purchase raffle tickets: 406.721.8784.

Winners will be announced on June 6, 2016.
Details at: ecologyproject.org/raffle.



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