

Internship in Italy Region Abruzzo – Volunteer for Salviamo ‘L Orso



Figure 1 Pettorano Sul Gizio, Region Abruzzo, Italien

Introduction -The idea

I started my master studies in Biology in the summer semester 2019 on the Ruhr-University of Bochum. The study course of in total 4 semesters gives students the opportunity to organize their study program following their own interests. In the so called “Optionalbereich” it is possible to get the 10 needed credit points with all kind of courses from different

areas, traineeships as well as internships. I always wanted to make some practical experiences in the field as an ecologist in a different country to get to know different ecosystems and to learn more about relations within. After I finished my first module in bioinformatics, I decided it would be the right time to get away from the computer. I started to search for opportunities for Biologists in European countries to join practical work in the field. It was important for me to take part in an environmental conservation non-governmental project to get an insight as a possible future working place.

Preparation – the project

I started with a general research on the internet for biological field stations around Europe. Most of them were unfortunately too small to host foreign students. Just by chance I send my application including my CV for an Internship to the official mailing list of Rewilding Europe where it got spread to all their connected institutions.

Rewilding Europe is a non-profit oriented organization that restores the environment with focus of rewilding areas all over Europe. They created a wide connected network of different environmental saving organisations and operates as money founders, with volunteers in the field and as organisers to develop new projects.

The first respond I got was from XXX, the manager and co-founder of Salviamo L’ Orso in the Abruzzo Region in the heart of Italy. He told me about the work they do to support the population of the marsician brown bear in the Abruzzo region. My

attention was caught from the very first beginning because I had no idea that there are brown bears living in Italy. We stayed in touch via mail and had a skype call and he explained me all the details for my internship. I started to organize the internship and to collect all needed documents for the Erasmus-scholarship. The preparation for my stay in Italy was really simple because Salviamo 'L orso provides accommodation for their volunteers in their own guest houses to share with other volunteers. XXX also gave me a list with all the stuff I had to bring, like also warm clothing and hiking shoes for the work outside. When this personal project called Internship in Italy started to get serious, I was excited and kind of nervous all the time until the moment I arrived right at the front of the guest house. This was my first time travelling completely on my own and my bad habit to overthink things until I have a list of everything that could go horrible wrong stressed me a little bit. I just told myself all the time that everything will be fine. And everything was fine.

Volunteering for Salviamo L' Orso

The background

Salviamo 'L Orso is a small non-profit environmental saving organisation located in Pettorano Sul Gizio, where I was placed in one of the guest houses, Anversa and Casalid' Aschi, a small village near to Goia d' Marsi. It was founded in 2012 to support the population of the marsician brown bear all around the region of Abruzzo. The population was strongly reduced since the 17th century caused by upcoming settlement of the whole area, hunting and agricultural use of habitats.

Salviamo 'L orso is in strong contact with the different national parks of the region, especially Majella national park and Abruzzo national park and because of its placement in Pettorano Sul Gizio, the riserva monte genzana alto gizio. Most parts of the mountains and the forests belongs to the area of a national park and are protected areas.

The work

At the beginning, XXX told me about all the possible activities I could join if I like to. I never felt forced to do something which creates a very cosy working atmosphere between us. SLO operates as a team of volunteering members who are all so passionate and motivated about the work they do. It just inspired me every day to work with them to reach the same kind of goal: saving the brown bear and the

environment. On every Sunday, they had a team meeting to organize the tasks for the upcoming week, mostly building electric fences for the citizen to protect their property from the bear, looking for food. The most important purpose about this was firstly to show the people in the region that it is easy to life along with the bear as kind of a neighbour when you follow some rules. Secondly, SLO wanted to appear as a friend for residents to gain their trust, not as rulers. Carrying out the role as a bear ambassador was one of the most challenging and interesting tasks of my internship in Italy. People were usually happy to see young people putting effort in environmental protection and restoration. Young foreigner students caught nearly everywhere the attention of the people and brought us easily into a dialogue.



Figure 2 Barbed wire from the mountains of Cocullo

SLO also takes part in an environmental restoration programs in the mountains of Cocullo, an area that doesn't really belong anywhere and has been left with barbed wire fence about 50 years ago in an old reforestation program. We used to collect all the barbed wire and brought it from the mountain to the street for being picked up. I really enjoyed this kind of work because at the end of the day, you could see your efforts laying in the ground in front of you. You can watch the environment recovering step by step and this is something that just gives you a great feeling. The rest of

the work depended on the needs of the reserve and national parks. Besides the routine work every week, I also got the chance to join different kind of scientific studies. SLO volunteers took part in the yearly females with cubs count in the region of Abruzzo where all areas were covered with observers to find out about reproductive female brown bears in the population. We took our first position in the Abruzzan national park in Villavallelonga at sunrise around 6:00 am until 8:30 am and at sunset from 6:00 pm until 8:30 pm. We observed a huge area with binoculars

over and over again to be able to notice every movement on the mountains. Our group was very lucky because we saw some bears on nearly every observation. It was the best moment in my life when I spotted my first brown bear by myself. The bear was walking around and had a snack from the berries of the bushes in the mountains. It was so stunning to see a real brown bear just some hundreds of meters apart from me. We took notes on in advance prepared field sheets about the time, the date, the location and the activities of the bear. If it was possible to identify the gender or to see some individual characteristics that would make it possible to recognize the bear later. We also saw a female bear with 2 to 3 cubs. The young ones were playing around and exploring the environment. It was just a view you would expect from an animal documentary.

I also worked on a field study about micro mammals and their distribution of different species in the region of monte Genzana. XXX, a young Italian girl who studied wildlife and animal behaviour in the UK, came back to her homeland to work for the national park as a researcher. She shared all her knowledge with me about trapping mice, handling living animals and identifying them correctly. We placed different kind of live traps in an area, 4 each place each 15 meters apart from the last 4. She used



Figure 3 Hair collection from a pine tree stem for the wildcat project

different kind of bait placement per trap to attract different kind of species. Within the 15 meters between the traps, she also placed 2 so called "Hair tubes" each 5 meters apart from each other to collect micro mammal hair additionally. Two times of all the trapping events we stayed overnight at a refugio in the mountains; a small cottage with a chimney and simple made beds. We are still in touch to talk about the outcome of her study. I also took part in a big project from another Biologist about the wildcat population in the Region Abruzzan, using camera traps and hair traps to investigate the spread and size of the population of

wildcats. The Researcher who organized this project used some poo from vaccinated house cats to attract the wildcats and bring them to the camera traps. The hair was collected by the help of a stem of a pine tree where the wildcats are supposed to rub against. We visited the placed traps and changed batteries if needed, the SD-cards with photos and videos and took hair samples. It was great to sight all the videos from the camera traps. I realized how much wilderness is going on in all these forests.

Free time

Beside the female with cubs observation, nearly every weekend was off from work and we were free to spend our time as we like. Pettorano Sul Gizio is a very small village with only about 1000 citizen and is located direct in the mountains of the reserve from monte genzana. I spend all the good weather days outside. We were lucky to live in the guest house near an old mill with a river and a garden. Some guy from the reserve borrowed us his slackline, so I started to learn to keep the balance on the line. XXX, one of the members of SLO, works beside his duties also as a professional mountain guide in the region Abruzzo and invited us quite often to great hikes. He showed us unbelievable breath-taking places and with him, I made it to the top of Gran Sasso, one of the highest mountains in the Apennines. I really enjoyed spending all the time outside because it just got never boring. No matter how often we went in the same mountains, we never experienced the same.

Best and worst experience

My very best experience was when I spotted my first marsician brown bear in the Abruzzo national park. Before this, I couldn't believe that there are real bears out in the mountains. They live there, they eat there and they sleep there. From my point of view bears have been something really wild, something a normal person can never see out in the wild by themselves. I thought they are dangerous, wild creatures belonging to the far away wilderness in America, somewhere out of reach. But now I know better. They are so shy, so majestic and are so precious animals that need to be saved.

The worst experience while I worked for SLO were the ignorance of the people and the carelessness for animals in general. Even when the Abruzzo region has such a great wilderness, wide forests and pure nature, a lot of people seem to care so less.

On all our hikes for signs of presence or just for fun, there were no place where we didn't find any trash. Sometimes people seemed to visit far, quite places in the forest only to get rid of their waste. It also broke my heart to try to get into a dialogue with the people who hate the bear and only saw the problems he might bring. It is hard to change their mind when they are very biased against natural conservation. On the other hand, it showed me how much work there is to do to change anything for better.

Summary – all in all

After all, I can say this is the very best thing in my studies I ever did. I learned so much about nature, working in the field and natural conservation business. I improved my practical skills as a biologist in real field studies and how to organize them. I met so many interesting people who shared their stories and impressions with me. I didn't only learned a lot about my research field, also about myself and to guess better about my own skills. I have grown there personally and became more confident. I am really happy I took this opportunity and visited the great landscape of Italy and had the chance to work with the people of Salviama L' Orso to save the marsician brown bear. It encouraged me to go for a career as a biologist in the environmental saving area.

