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June 15, 2016
Mazama, Methow Valley, WA.

My PBI Experience

It was May 22 when I first arrived in Wenatchee and I was excited for the Conservation Science and Leadership Course to start. Sarah picked seven of us up from the airport and we were heading to the North Cascades Basecamp in the small town of Mazama, which was going to be our new home and classroom for the next month. This was the first multidisciplinary Conservation Course that Pacific Biodiversity Institute (PBI) had done with 13 students from all around America and the world and it was going to be an amazing experience. Mazama received us with a beautiful spring afternoon. Looking outside the window of the bus, the landscape was amazing: the Methow River meandering through the valley and cutting through the land like a snake. The Methow Valley was carved by glaciers millions of years ago and now consists of a wide sheet of green and brown patches of fertile soil, surrounded by the vast immensity of the snowy peaks of the North Cascades mountains.

Upon our arrival to camp we met Kim, Steve, their kids Emmet, Amelia and the giant black ball of fluff, Mica- the biggest dog I've ever seen. They live next to the Base Camp and own the beautiful lodge and property. At this point neither Kim nor Steve imagined that they would end up with 13 more adoptive kids by the end of the course. Not to mention the team of PBI interns Kristina, Daniel and Carl, who came with us to many trips and shared hike stories, experiences and anecdotes. We got to know the Base Camp and the varied forest habitats surrounding it: from the cottonwood to the dry mixed forest, the cedar and the birch (where we would be setting up small mammal traps and birding at 6 am on following mornings). By the time I arrived I already knew we would be living in paradise for the next month. But what makes this place so special? Is it the Methow River and its fresh, icy glacial melt waters that are within minutes of the lodge? Or the fresh clean air that we could breathe from the house porch in the mornings? Perhaps it was the stunning views of the North Cascades and their snowy peaks. We would wake up to the sound of birds every morning, such that by the end of the month I can proudly say I can identify an acceptable number of them and have already classified the mountain chickadee, the yellow warbler and the pileated woodpecker as my favorites. Not to forget the times in which we would sing along with Steve "Chicago, Chicago" mimicking the California quail or "Cheese, cheese, burger" mimicking the mountain chickadee.

The first week started with Kristina's lessons on small mammal invasive and non-invasive trapping methods. Using actual scientific equipment provided by PBI, like the Tomahawk and Sherman live traps, we caught mammals in order to study and measure them. We collected hair samples using hair tubes and distinguished the species in the classroom, and set camera sensors in trees to study their distribution across the property. We were fortunate enough to meet Scott Fitkin who introduced us to the North Cascades Wolverine project and showed us wolverine and lynx live trapping techniques. I will always remember the Austrian kid climbing Rusty's shoulders to reach a wolverine camera on a tree 10 meters above the ground. How could I forget that one day we went bee hunting in the meadow with Dr. Don Rolfs, who told me how amazing and curious the world of this tiny creature is.

There are so many lessons and memories I had during this past month that I could never fit them in this one page. I just want to say that this course left me eager, eager to dive into the world, to fight for conserving nature on the planet, to better the environment. The Methow is a perfect bubble, a place where everything is possible, where conservation is tangible. I've learnt that passion and dedication for what you love is key in making things happen, but it also is community cohesion, engagement in local affairs, participation and taking care of each other as a community. This is when I realized that if it's possible in the Methow, it's possible in my home town and in every corner of the world. I'm grateful for this incredible opportunity to rediscover myself, to get out there, meet amazing people, get to know amazing projects and make connections with peers that will last for the rest of my life and career in conservation.

I finally want to thank Kim, Steve, Peter, Sarah and all the PBI staff for this opportunity.

Gracias!

Valentina