



# Worlds of Experience

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### Green is the future: Volunteering for the Environment

Dear friends,

2020 has started with dramatic events of massive bushfires in Australia, huge losses of wildlife, plants and material damages. Although climate change is not alone to be blamed for the fires, experts point out that extreme weather conditions as the drought in Australia are linked to the current anthropogenic climate change. Yet little action is being taken to change the climate policy both at national and global levels. The recent failure of the climate summit in Madrid further shows the difficulties in reaching overall political agreements on how to solve the current climate crisis. At the same time, young people all over the world keep protesting every Friday through the global *Fridays for Future* movement, demanding that leaders show responsibility and take action. This movement points to the fact that changes may be reached from the bottom up and that youth activism, active engagement and volunteering can play a key role in the urgently needed transition.

***Green is the future: Volunteering for the Environment***, the 51<sup>st</sup> issue of the ICYE Federation Newsletter focuses on environmental sustainability and shows how young volunteers relate to the environment. In **Volunteers Voices**, we are pleased to present articles by seven volunteers who describe how the environment has played a key role in their voluntary service, illustrating that volunteering can bring about change, a change for individuals and for the nature. As the Polish volunteer in Ecuador states, "transformation is possible when we are all part of the equation". All of them feel a sense of obligation and make an urgent call to action for our future.

In this connection, the last ICYE General Assembly held in Vietnam in November 2019 adopted a motion to develop an ICYE Green policy and set up a Green Fund to offset CO2 emissions of all flights and travels before 2021.

**ICYE News** features a short article on the cooperation between the board of managers of ICYE Denmark and ICYE Finland, and the 31<sup>st</sup> ICYE General Assembly, which was held in Hoi An in Vietnam in November 2019 and culminated with the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration of the ICYE Federation.

Wishing you an interesting reading, we look forward to receiving articles and pictures for the next issue of "Words of Experience", dedicated to "Volunteering in a World of Diversity". Please send your contributions to [icye@icye.org](mailto:icye@icye.org), before 31 May 2020.

Warmest regards!

**ICYE International Office**

This and previous issues of "Worlds of Experience" can be viewed and downloaded from: [www.icye.org](http://www.icye.org).

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# Volunteers Voices

## About Shrinking and Growing

**Ayesha Lietzau and Lilian Joost (Germany)**  
Volunteers in India

When we came to India, we more or less expected the overflowing cities so crowded and squished that you expect the whole system to burst just any time. Smog hanging over houses like ghostly curtains, cars playing never ending noise concerts, countless mountains of garbage that make you sigh – all those things we had already heard so much about at home in Germany. The heap of environmental problems just seemed to be unmanageable.

But it did not even take a week at the “Chiguru Farm” for us to realise that our pre-shaped image of the hopeless situation urgently needed to be corrected. When we first welcomed visitors who searched for an escape from the hustle and bustle of the city on the organic farm, at the end of the day, we all had experienced the same release, euphoria and happiness immediately lighting up our faces when coming to this oasis of mother nature. Not through pessimistic news about passive politics, catastrophes and what goes wrong in the world, but through a beautiful, energizing and tangible example of what goes right, all of us in this project are being confronted with the questions around sustainability and environmental awareness humanity is facing right now. In this kind of positive atmosphere, the unmanageable heap suddenly starts to shrink a little bit...



Experiencing first-hand how humans, animals and plants can live in a healthy environment where everyone is allowed to be, but needs to respect the others, has been incredibly uplifting and inspiring for us. We realised, for developing a fundamental inner drive to take action, theoretical awareness is not enough. The key to finding our personal motivation revealed itself only through the very close up involvement in ecological doing that we have taken up voluntarily. Just through this we are able to see the great potential that is already existing: the extensive knowledge of naturopathy, the seasonal diet as matter of course, or the significance of nature in religious practise – naturalistic trades of the Indian heritage that are still very much present in many people's daily life. That is how voluntary work has deeply enriched our perspective in so many ways and given us wonderful examples that we can learn from and take into our culture. For sure, we would wish the people around our voluntary service to have an inspiring experience somehow as well, even though we are aware of the fact that we are the ones that probably profit the most from this. Nevertheless, we believe voluntary work provides a huge intercultural learning opportunity in very diverse facets.

If we keep up hope, focus on what it is worth fighting for and act with a positive mind-set, If we find our very inner motivation, step into a sensitive, connected exchange and immerse into the different cultures of our world, then together we can grow and face the sometimes overwhelming heap of environmental problems with combined efforts.

## From the seed to the tree: Environmental growth through volunteering

**Elisa Rodríguez González (Spain)**  
Volunteer in Finland

Green crop fields, forests and the Cantabrian seacoast. That was the last thing I saw through the plane window when I left home on my way to the land of the thousand lakes, Finland. Nature and landscape were the final view from my country and the first thing that draw my attention when I first put my feet on the new place I was about to discover, snow! How do they manage to live with such a hard climate? What do they do in wintertime? How can they enjoy nature with less than - 20 °C?!



This is just one example of all the questions that passed through my mind every day during my experience abroad. Answers didn't come up immediately, just with patience and observation I started to understand and adapt to the Finnish lifestyle. I would say that my volunteer experience was an eye opener regarding people-nature relationships. Natural conditions highly influence our lives and the adaptations to them are a key piece of the local culture. Finland is one of the European countries with a higher forest surface. Basically, no matter where you look, you'll see forests and lakes, which I found absolutely wonderful. I met many local people who appreciate and enjoy their nature. Hiking and skiing in the forest, berry picking, fishing... and the ultimate combination ever: sauna and lake. These simple things became my best memories from Finland and provided me with a different point of view that enriched my understanding of life. Contact with nature makes us appreciate it and therefore, want to conserve it. I realized that it's not only about the correct environmental policies but also about how people feel about their natural heritage and the social willing to protect it.

This is something that I have learnt through volunteering. It was not exclusively by being part of a specific project, it was by living in a certain place, integrating with local people, adopting their habits and being in contact with the environment. Once at home, the nature and landscape that I last saw before leaving, to which I was completely used to and where I had grown up, had changed. Something is different now, and it's nothing but the eyes that look. All the knowledge I have acquired from nature, directly or indirectly didn't stay in Finland, I brought it with me, and I will carry it everywhere I go from now on.

## Looking into the eyes of bears

**Laura Rosenhøj Wedersøe Gravgaard**  
(Denmark)

Volunteer in Croatia

Fog sways through the valley, magic of lilac red light floating behind high mountains, peaceful silence only interrupted by the howls of dogs and round voices playing the music of Croatian language. A bear appears. A bear majestically yet so harmonious appears searching for nuts amongst long branches. Looking sceptical but with respect to the shapes passing by.

This is Kuterevo, a little village in the Velebit Mountains in Croatia. Surrounded by forests with high pines on the ground of stiff cliffs, the so-called limestone, a population of 550 people lives. Owing to the people's passion for nature, a bear refuge now exists in the heart of Kuterevo. Hidden was this beautiful and unique village with its local people until Kuterevo suddenly became known in 1978 for receiving volunteers from all around the world.

In December 2019, I had the honour of starting and taking part in this movement. A young Danish girl who just finished high school and was standing on her own feet for the first time in life. Just like a vulnerable and newborn child. With this opportunity, I had the chance to expand my knowledge about nature, experience another culture and be more self-aware. The thrill of learning something new and creating a change overshadowed the fear of letting go and facing the unknown.



The spontaneous act turned out to be revelation. I have now been in Kuterevo for two enlightening and improving months and still have four months left. For six hours a day, I work together with four other volunteers contributing to nature conservation and sustainability. Work that requires passion and motivation. This includes taking care of and observing animals (bears, ponies, birds and dogs), physical work outside, guiding visitors, documenting the surroundings, and interacting with the local community.



# Volunteers Voices

By following the local people, I have learned how to live as sustainably as possible. An awareness gained by using compost toilets, fire stoves for heating and cooking, local and organic food, recycled materials and rainwater. This makes me realize how little you actually need and how simplicity leads to freedom and serenity. This makes me realize how humans can be tied to materialism and how humans keep striving for something newer, "better" only getting selfishness and concerns as reward. I believe that in acting for a better environment, we need to take a step backwards and start performing a more simple way of living.



The local people however are not the only ones who are subjects for impression. Every time a brown bear comes into sight, I get overwhelmed. Looking into the bear's eyes, I perceive how forsaken and misunderstood this beautiful creature is. The imagination that bears are a threat is far from reality where bears are actually naturally non-harming. This does not mean that we should not be aware of bears but that fear should not rule. They are neither killers nor teddy bears but indeed valuable! That knowledge is exactly the reason behind and the core of the bear refuge of Kuterevo. To educate visitors that pass by and to make them more conscious of the nature and its inhabitants. To make them see what is happening around them. Because if humans have the will to save the nature, then nature conservation can become a reality and not only a vision.

For me nature conservation is an obligation. I have always had this great passion for nature and since childhood, I have been filled with admiration for its complexity and beauty, but knowing it was something I was going to do for the rest of my life was not a certainty. However, after two months of dedication to Kuterevo and its nature, I feel sure. This proves that volunteering can make a change. A change for individuals. A change for the nature.

## Not a cloud for rest

**Elin Disse (Germany)**

Volunteer in Ecuador

Waking up in the cloud forest of Mompiche, at the northern coast of Ecuador, feels like waking up to a dream. The morning air hangs heavy with fog waving over treetops, down the hill to the shore of the ocean. The call of the oropendola, like dripping water joins the chatter of the smaller birds. If you are lucky you might hear the howling monkeys somewhere in the distance. That or the chainsaws.

The large scale cutting down of the cloud forests in Ecuador started during the fifties in order to strengthen the country's agricultural sector. In just twenty years, many parts of the coast that had been primary rainforest with an Amazonian-ecosystem were transformed into pastures and plantations. The road leading to Mompiche now separates thousands of hectares of shallow pools, the breeding tanks of the shrimp farms, Palm oil plantations, Eucalyptus farms and corn fields from the last bit of coastal forest.

When I first visited Mompiche as a tourist in March, I met Stefano Bajak and Chrissy van der Linden by chance. The two have been raising awareness for these problems for years. Countrywide rainforests are being cut down so fast that Ecuador could be completely cleared in just thirty years. That's not just impacting climate globally, the wastewater produced by shrimp farming contains large amounts of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and antibiotics. The destruction of the environment is thereby directly stripping both local populations and animals off their basis of life.



What I learned in Mompiche impacted how I perceived Ecuador's nature, so I kept in contact with Stefano and Chrissy. In June, they founded the NGO "Save the Paradise" which manages a small natural reserve. The project raises money through a crowdfunding website to buy and protect more land. When I came back to Mompiche in December, the grounds already covered three and a half hectares and they had started reforestation with endemic trees. During my two weeks of volunteering for Save the Paradise, I helped by trying to raise more funds and taking care of the freshly planted trees.

I have found volunteer work rewarding in very different ways. What I learned and saw, the people I met and actually connected with has its own worth. But there is something else to Save the Paradise. Not all of the work was interesting by itself, like writing emails to different possible donors and influencers. Still, the feeling of urgency that I felt when I first saw the street, plantations to one side, forest to the other, never left me. This is why I wanted to help and continue to do so as best I can from afar. There are a million good reasons to protect this piece of land, the unique ecosystem, its importance to our world climate, the animals living there. Above everything, as Douglas Adams has said it "There is one last reason for caring and I believe that no other is necessary [...]. The world would be a poorer, darker, lonelier place without [it]."

## Helping the Amazon—Roboré

**Julia Rosenow (Germany)**

Volunteer in Bolivia

From the 27.11.19 to the 02.12. Marlene Schwender, Nicola Krämer, Katharina Alsmeier and I, Julia Rosenow, went to Roboré, a small city in the Amazonian region of Bolivia to distribute necessities we bought from money we collected through the internet and from friends and family.

Since August, there were huge wildfires in the forests of South America. We were mostly affected by the situation here in Bolivia and started by raising awareness and collecting funds to buy food, water and medicine which were collected by certain places, like hostels e.g. from which they were delivered to the affected regions. We started to collect money to give people the option to help directly and not feel helpless while watching the horrific pictures in the media. Because if you donate to organizations you often do not know where the money ends up.

When Marlene collected a large amount of money, the idea to travel personally to the affected places began to form, so that we could see the direct impact of the bought aliments and ensure the money fulfills its purpose. Our host mother then told us that in fact her sister; Betty, lives in Roboré a city in the middle of the burned Amazonas. She further told us we could visit her and she would be happy to help us with the distribution of the things we bought. So we all began to collect more money. We actually wanted to do it as soon as possible, in October, but Betty advised us it would be better to wait until there is less support because at this time there was still a lot of help as the fires were still very present in people's heads.



On the 26.11 we set off to Santa Cruz where we invested all of the money in plenty of rice, sugar, maize, salt, oil, noodles, notebooks and pens, and from Sucre (our hometown) we brought clothes. With three minibuses, we went from Santa Cruz to Roboré, which took about 6 hours. The same night we started packing the packets for each family of each community we were going to visit. The whole night we worked and only got about 2 hours of sleep. Early in the morning, we started packing again and managed to visit three communities on this first day. The night we spent in Aguas Calientes where Betty has a house. The next morning, we went back and started to pack all of the rest. At midday, we went to the last community. In the communities, we always talked to the people and distributed the packets. Afterwards we would sometimes eat with the people. In the evening, we returned to Santa Cruz by train.

All in all, it was a valuable experience. The people weren't as directly affected by the fires as we thought, meaning their houses weren't burned down but still there were more indirect, long-term effects, such as their crops not growing because of the dryness or them not having electricity.

# Volunteers Voices

## The grass will be greener

**Fryderyka Falandysz (Poland)**

Volunteer in Ecuador

There is no doubt that the 21st century is the period for environmental reforms throughout the world. The condition of the environment is a result of usage of natural resources and land. Latin America is the second, after the Middle East, reserve of oil deposit and the Amazon the largest forested area of any continent. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness about how to maintain such resources, and at the same time to minimize the negative impact on the environment. Fundación VASE offers projects focusing on the value of natural resources and environmental diversity available only in Latin America.



*Photo of Belen Calderon and Laetita Pourchet*

One part of the plan that involves Latin America within the scope of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN (hereinafter: **SDG**) is the Latin American Green Awards in the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador. The event organized with the cooperation of the United Nations, is awarding 500 top social and environmental projects within the continent. The projects that are being honored are initiatives in ten categories that are aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN. The focus is on developing awareness of policies, use of resources, clean technology, waste management and recycling among the public and private sectors. Therefore, the main goal for Latin America is to use environmental diversity while improving life by decreasing poverty and social inequality. The environmental projects involve appreciation for biodiversity of the region, but the great majority of the projects involve social work.

For volunteers from Europe, when working in projects addressing social inequalities, it is easily noticeable that the level of pro environmental awareness is more developed in their home countries compared to Latin America. With the results that many of the volunteers are likely to introduce the new lifestyle into their host families and beneficiaries of the project. The most representative example is that radical aversion towards daily products packed with plastic. It is common in Europe to reduce usage of plastic in every possible aspects of life due the policies implemented within the European Union, thus there is not a single volunteer without their own reusable bottles, and feeling very guilty when buying plastic bottled water. The promotion of the new patterns of daily usage and consumption can be highly successful when presented directly.

One of Fundación VASE's principles is to apply sustainable lifestyle to its team as well as its volunteers. Fundación VASE is based in Quito, the capital of Ecuador, and as the most populated city in the country, it has its problems regarding pollution. The younger generations are greatly willing to change the city into a more eco-friendly environment. A team member, Belén, who implements eco lifestyle in her private life, rides a bike whenever she can for the purposes of decreasing the level of pollution. Yet, one of the problems she struggles with when coming to work is no parking for bikes. Nevertheless, she decided that she would bring her bike to the office directly, and go against the rules of the office building administration. The constant dispute regarding the lack of possibilities to park the bike in the adequate infrastructure led to building managers to provide a bike stand with nine bike racks. Nowadays, the bike stand is constantly full. Thanks to Belén's stubbornness and holding strongly to her principles, she has accomplished a change and shown that transformation is possible when we are all the part the equation.

## Acting by doing

**Simon Le Cléach (France)**

Volunteer in Finland

2020, here we are, already another decade passed and as we see, as science says, our wonderful planet is sick. The earth is sick because of human activity, because of the way we consume, the way we live.

Since a long time already, we always want more, buy things that we don't actually need, and always cheaper, just to satisfy our personal desire because we think it could make us happy. The system has understood that perfectly. It always offers us more and more to make always more and more money. It has created massive consumerism at the cost of our resources, our wildlife.



The disaster that happened in Australia proves that climate catastrophes are real and they will continue if we don't do anything. As we saw, most of the governments in the world are ready to let our planet burn just to maintain the economy and satisfy their own interest.

Yes, I criticize this system because we all know that it cannot continue like this without collapsing at some point, our planet cannot follow it – and we need this planet to live. However, I try to stay open-minded about the topic. It is important to discuss it peacefully and not to be too radical. Discussion and awareness are the key.



Although I talk negatively about the system, I am entirely in it! And that's why I can't express radical arguments, that's why I cannot be completely credible because I use my car every day going to the supermarket. I have a smartphone, I eat meat, I use plastic, and the list could take many other lines. The point is that we are in 2020 and we have grown with this system without knowing whether it was going to be devastating or, I would say, without having good information. Nonetheless, there are many solutions to fight against it. I have chosen volunteering for many reasons, and especially to travel. Travelling was for me a dream, since I was young. However, I had some doubts, I was afraid to go abroad alone, to leave my comfort zone and more to find a sense behind it. Why travelling, is it just for me, is it to discover new cities, new sceneries, to party, spend the money I earned, be a "normal" tourist?

Then, some travel experiences taught me that I wanted to travel in a different way, I wanted to give it a sense, I wanted to discover by helping, to spend time with people and understand their problems or their culture. Destiny brought me for six months to Madagascar where I worked as a volunteer for an eco-touristic center, making a botanic garden and rehabilitating a museum. This experience was possible thanks to the French civil service

organized by the departmental council. Then I realized that there were many possibilities to go abroad without spending all your money and, instead, have something to do, a concrete purpose, that's what volunteering is all about.

This first experience gave me almost everything, I discovered myself and my values, I got to know a new culture by working with the locals, I did something which had sense concerning the environment and the culture, a real school.

Another experience brought me to Finland to a national park to volunteer again. There I was amazed by the wonderful nature, the purity of the place and how the locals maintain the environment. I was happy to be part of it and to realize that there are many people who still care about it because this is our future.

I am certain that the only way to preserve the nature is to work together, to be united, to share ideas and talk. Volunteering offers you this amazing opportunity to act for the environment, it brings you knowledge and open-mindedness thanks to the people you meet, real friends and something priceless, the occasion to plant trees, to preserve life. Of course, volunteering abroad has its faults because you have to move, often far away, so you may need to take a plane and, as we know, planes are not a good thing for the atmosphere, which means your act can lose value. If some people are disturbed by it, they can still act for the environment locally by joining local associations nearby them, either in cities or in the countryside. Volunteering for the environment is an efficient solution among thousands of others; we can all act for the future. Do it, the time is limited!

## Cooperation between the board of managers of ICYE Denmark and Finland

On the weekend of 4<sup>th</sup> - 6th October 2019, the board of managers of ICYE Denmark and ICYE Finland met up in Aarhus, Denmark to kick off a new cooperation between the two boards. The idea emerged in spring last year when a few board members from each organisation shared experiences and ideas on cooperation benefitting both organisations.

The starting point was that both ICYE Denmark and ICYE Finland have active national members with different tasks relating to incoming and outgoing volunteers. These active members play an important role, among others, in the planning and facilitation of the camps held for volunteers during the year. Both boards wished to exchange ideas on how to motivate members and attract new active members to carry out important tasks. One of the points that arose was the importance of building a good and strong team spirit within the national boards in order to create a sense of belonging and ownership serving the development the organisations.

Over the weekend, Mia Elina Aintila and Anna Mäkinen participated from the board of ICYE Finland, and Ditte Barnhøj Pedersen, Emma Valsson, Tine Mosegaard Jensen and Christina Nielsen participated from the board of ICYE Denmark. They started out getting to know each organisation's structure, which provided input on how tasks are structured, enabling in-depth learning about their own organisations. As Mia-Elina commented the end of the weekend, "Having to present our organisational structure and culture to ICYE Denmark's board members

have given us the chance to take a proper, perhaps more holistic, look at how our organisation works throughout the field." The next step is to share the ideas and experiences with the other members of the two boards and coordinate the next meeting in Helsinki in February or March 2020 where the focus will be volunteer camps.





### 31st ICYE General Assembly in Hoi An, Vietnam



The 31<sup>st</sup> ICYE Federation General Assembly took place in Hoi An, Vietnam from 18th to 23rd November 2019. Attended by around 60 participants from 35 countries around the world, the week was full of inspiring talks and discussions, not least ICYE's 70th anniversary celebrations!

The programme comprised enriching discussions on the growth and development of the Federation, it adopted a code of ethical practice, policies on child protection and sexual harassment, a market place for negotiations, and a sightseeing trip in old Hoi An! In addition, the General Assembly accepted Volunteers for Peace Vietnam as full member of the Federation. Many thanks to all participants for all the memorable week and to Volunteers for Peace Vietnam for their hospitality.

