

## Conservation and the liberal arts

By Samuel Duling

**A** liberal arts education is characterized by the cultivation of one's love of learning. To accomplish this, exposure to a broad array of disciplines is necessary for undergraduate students. In that spirit, I participated in the Jesup Scott Honors College's first biology and conservation study tour of the Galapagos Islands with Dean Heidi Appel.

As a political science and economics student, I was the only non-STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) major in the class. The wide-ranging intellectual interests of the students in attendance made for academically stimulating conversation and myriad opportunities to challenge one's perspective. From my experience, I have learned yet another way to think critically about contemporary issues on both local and global scales.

After four flights, our class landed on San Cristobal, the easternmost island with a human population. We began our excursions

in short order by visiting the Charles Darwin Foundation's interpretation center, hiking along Frigatebird Hill and Española, and snorkeling around Kicker Rock. My first impression of the Galapagos was the apparent interspecies congeniality; even the species without symbiotic relationships did not seem to mind close proximity with one another. For example, a baby sea lion gnawed on a marine iguana's tail without any avarice, to our surprise. With regard to the human population, citizens were left without a choice but to get along with the other inhabitants of the island. This explains the staircases and park benches commandeered by sea lions.

On Isabela, we hiked up to the crater of an active volcano to observe the old lava flow site as well as the flora and fauna of the Galapagos highlands. It was quite a moving experience to witness the still-steaming seat of the power that continues to create the archipelago. Along this hike,

we observed countless guava trees that were introduced to the Galapagos by humankind and have since proven to be a formidable invasive species (the trees and humans, that is). Another example of irreversible ecological damage is the introduction of the blackberry: The plant responsible for the jam on our toast every morning was spread by birds that unwittingly scattered the harmful plant incessantly.

During the final days of our study tour, we snorkeled around the lava tunnels off of Santa Cruz and visited the giant tortoise incubation center. Decades-old tortoises lived in enclosures next to newly hatched babies, a promising vision of the future of the island's tortoise population. Tragically, when pirates governed the islands centuries ago, these creatures were slaughtered en masse and eaten. At one point, the roads were marked by their stolen shells. Today, the tortoises represent only one facet of the Charles Darwin Foundation's ambitious

efforts to preserve the population of species endemic to the Galapagos. Thanks to the foundation's programs, we saw innumerable species while swimming in the lava tunnels, including white tip reef sharks, giant Pacific green turtles and spotted eagle rays.

My time in the birthplace of modern conceptions of evolutionary theory has inspired further exploration of how scholars of the humanities, like myself, can contribute to the conservation of Earth. I am very grateful for this opportunity presented by Dean Appel, and hope that future UT honors students of all disciplines will try new ways to explore the liberal arts.

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Samuel Duling stood in front of Sierra Negra, a volcano crater on Isabela.



Samuel Duling took these photos of a giant tortoise; a lady bug, which was introduced to the Galapagos Islands to eliminate a harmful infestation of the cottony cushion scale; and a sea lion sleeping on a bench.

