Saving Endangered Sea Turtles

Juan Miguel Cruz is 19, a St. Croix native, a scholarship student at the University of the Virgin Islands, and an SCA intern. But to his friends, he is “Turtle Boy.” He laughs at the moniker. “It’s okay,” he says.

On any given night during nesting season, while they search for turtles, Juan and his NPS colleagues walk the beach, sit in the warm sand, watch shooting stars and discuss how philosophy, religion, and science come together in biology. “I’m working with so many great people, and have learned so many amazing things. This has shown me what’s in my environment, that it’s very important, and not to take it for granted.”

When female sea turtles are spotted coming ashore under cover of darkness, Juan and his team observe where each species lays its eggs in order to track seasonal reproduction success. They tag, measure and photograph the huge turtles. They also monitor the location to make sure the eggs are safe from tides, the public, even hurricanes. And, if not, they carefully move the eggs, in the dark, to a safer spot.

Juan is serving at the Christiansted National Historic Site, Buck Island Reef National Monument, and the Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve in St. Croix, completing a 9-month, 20-hour per week assignment in resource management. His NPS Buck Island Sea Turtle Research Team is assigned to monitor green, loggerhead, leatherback and especially hawksbill turtles—all endangered or threatened by water pollution, loss of habitat, waterfront light pollution, illegal harvesting and fishing nets.

The hawksbill (Eretmochelys imbricate), smallest of the species nesting in the US Virgin Islands, is the most highly endangered, having been harvested almost to extinction for its beautiful (continued on page 3)
Solitude is a Step Outside
by Leah Duran, SCA '09 - '10, Kenneth Dubuque Memorial State Forest

A wood stove exuding warmth. A lake with shimmering ripples. One bunkhouse. Sixteen people. No cell phone service. The setup sounds like Survivor, The Real World or even Walden, but in actuality, this place is our new home. Welcome to SCA Massachusetts. Our goals to live as a community, to learn from each other, to enrich ourselves and others, and to complete hands-on conservation projects, split into five months of environmental education service and five months of trail work.

Snapshot: “We are pro-love,” says our director Jonah Keane at our first community meeting. Life at Kenneth Dubuque Memorial State Forest demands intimacy with the land and each other. You could compare our first meeting to a blind date, except that you couldn’t just pay the restaurant bill and leave. Point blank: You will be with these people for the next 10 months.

Snapshot: “We’re here. We’re actually here,” says corps member Caleb Ruopp over cereal on a Sunday morning in early October. With unpredictable dynamics and little privacy, community life can be challenging, but we work through trials together. Almost everything, including how we delegate chores, is open for change through collective debate and consensus, a flexible system refreshingly different from the typical handed-down set of instructions for living our lives.

We started as strangers and, as we build connections, the relationship shifts to friends. Through the power of play, open communication and hard work, we engage in the continual process of creating a space that simultaneously fosters comfort and the stretching of personal boundaries. We can laugh when we make epic fails in front of each other while sliding on icy sidewalks. We can have impromptu dance parties in the kitchen.

The more comfortable we become with each other, the more we continue to surprise one another. We have seen each other struggle to chop wood, learn how to bandage a burn during Wilderness First Responder training, and teach a classroom of expectant kids. And if we ever tire of constant company, solitude is a step outside. We are learning how to better treat the earth and each other. We are SCA Massachusetts.

You can read more from Leah at thesca.org/hands-on

Did You Know: Surprising facts about America’s wild places

Biscayne National Park

Acadia National Park contains more than 120 miles of historic hiking trails, many established in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Biscayne National Park is home to hundreds of species of plants, including the semaphore prickly-pea cactus, one of the world’s rarest.

With over 367 miles of surveyed passages, Mammoth Cave is the world’s longest known cave system.

You can read more about Juan at thesca.org/hands-on

Saving Endangered Sea Turtles continued from page 1

“tortoise” shell. (On St. Croix, hawksbill turtles are nesting with some success at Buck Island Reef National Monument, a fully protected island.) Reaching maturity between 15 and 30 years, females will nest once every two to three years, returning to their natal beach. After 60 days incubation, when the hatchlings emerge to make their first trip down to the sea, Juan’s team will be there to protect and assist if need be. Only 1-2% will survive to adulthood and reproduction.

“We must take the initiative to show people what is going on and what needs to be done. We need to work together.”

Monitoring sea turtles is not all Juan does. He helps with the St. Croix ground lizard project and identifies, records data, and conducts control treatments on exotic plants to ensure the survival of native plants for future generations. Invasive lionfish are another most unwelcome newcomer and Juan has become a certified diver to help in the search and removal of these voracious predators.

“I’m working with so many great people, and have learned so many amazing things. This has shown me what’s in my environment, that it’s very important, and not to take it for granted.”

The biggest challenge Juan sees is educating the public.

“We must take the initiative to show people what is going on and what needs to be done. We need to work together.”

Zandy Hills-Starr, NPS Chief of Resource Management and Juan’s supervisor said, “He’s very much a people person, committed to helping others and his community. He is an outstanding young man with great promise.”

You can read more about Juan at thesca.org/hands-on
Putting the Squeeze on Constrictors in the Keys

Officials at Crocodile Lake Fish and Wildlife Refuge routinely track endangered wood rats via radio telemetry. But sometimes their findings are anything but routine. “We recently tracked a wood rat directly to the inside of a python,” says wildlife biologist Ron Rozar.

Large, invasive constrictors, primarily Burmese pythons, are something of a plague in southern Florida. In Everglades National Park alone, authorities estimate the entrenched reproductive python population at 30,000. With the help of SCA intern Sarah Dewees, the Fish and Wildlife Service is making a stand in Key Largo.

Key Largo is home to several endangered rodents; further down the Keys are Key deer, marsh rabbits and other vulnerable native species, underscoring the urgency of Crocodile Lake’s python control project. Rozar, part of a U.S. Geological Survey team managing the effort for the FWS, says Sarah provided the refuge with critical expanded capacity. “Sarah was an integral part of the project,” he states.

“The amount of work to be done here is daunting, as our responsibility extends throughout the Florida Keys. Sarah’s done a lot of trapping, surveying. She’s a great kayaker, really adept on the water, and that enabled us to cover a lot of area, which was crucial. Sarah has allowed us to accomplish a lot of things we couldn’t otherwise do. She’s recovered a fair number of pythons during her surveys and allowed us to participate in larger regional studies. The information gleaned from these tests has been absolutely critical.”

Sarah’s captures, which were featured on ABC’s World News Tonight, were also providing important python education and outreach and promoting a “snake spotter” hotline in conjunction with The Nature Conservancy. Rozar credits Sarah with helping the FWS hold the line against exotic pythons.

“Once a species like this becomes established it’s an immense challenge to eradicate them,” he says. “It’s a lot easier to prevent a problem than to deal with one.”

No Time Off for These Teens

They signed up for an Alternative Spring Break. No one said anything about an “alternative spring.”

The nine teens—all students at Vermont Academy—traveled in March to Arizona’s Saguro National Park for a two-week SCA service project. During that time, they endured ping pong ball-sized hail, bone-chilling rain, and winds that literally ripped open their tents. They were turned into pin cushions by the park’s myriad cacti and also moved tons of rock and earth. The toughest part? “Not showering,” said Anna Brown.

The crew’s assignment was to reroute a badly worn stretch of Garwood Trail. Heavy equestrian use had created a narrow gully up to three feet deep in some places. Both horses and hikers were at risk, so the team constructed a bypass before refilling and revegging the old section.

Sixteen-year-old Mike Reilly admits he’s never worked so hard in his life. “Around the house, probably not. This is definitely one of the toughest things I’ve ever done,” Mike says. “But I’ve enjoyed it. There’s a difference between challenging yourself mentally and challenging yourself physically.”

“Like when we put in the switchback, it was hard to get the rocks to stay in the right position. But if I had been just walking by, I wouldn’t have given it a thought. I’m really going to appreciate nature and my surroundings more than I have in the past.”

Crew leader Jeff Glenn notes that the students were never daunted by the work or the weather—even when temps climbed to near 90 degrees under a blazing sun. “Every day, the hikers and riders thank them for the work they are doing to improve the trail,” Jeff says. “That provided even more incentive to get out there and finish the job.”

On their final day, the crew sweated with pride as rider after rider paraded by on the brand new spur of trail. “To be paid off by having other people say the trail looks great is really awesome,” says Samantha “Sami” Gillingham. “It makes it all worth it.”
“Our work with the SCA contributes to the transformation of Detroit and our surrounding cities, and creates a mindset for others to be inspired by our actions. It’s amazing how many people [in the community] take time to watch us work and thank us all one by one…I am proud to say that, through my efforts, the city of Detroit is now cleaner, greener and beautified.” — Lauren Sowell, Detroit Community Conservation Crew, ‘08 - '09

“My SCA experience opened my eyes to the environment, and I worry more and more about our earth. I would like to become a representative speaker for an eco-friendly company.” — Elena Marroquin, Houston Community Conservation Crew, ’08 - '09

Become an SCA Sponsor

and receive a letter from the field

“It was as if I had been hiking with you through those fields of wildflowers, exulting in the purity of alpine lakes.” — Anonymous SCA Donor

The SCA tradition of sponsorship connects you directly with an SCA member. When you give at least $250 annually, you will receive a biography and a personal letter describing the impact of the SCA experience and the tangible accomplishments achieved along the way.

You can become a sponsor by making a sustaining monthly gift for as little as $21 through our Partners in Conservation giving program—use the included reply envelope, or visit thesca.org/donate

Beyond Park Boundaries
by Joshua Sweet, SCA ’09 – 10, Tonto National Monument

John Muir wrote that “in every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.” But what about those who reside in a classroom rather than in nature?

My internship with the SCA at Tonto National Monument in Arizona has given me many outstanding opportunities. The most noteworthy was providing outreach programs to three 4th grade classes at Dr. Charles A. Bejarano Elementary School in neighboring Miami, Arizona.

For six weeks, we discussed topics ranging from local geology and wildlife to ancient Native American culture and architecture. This outreach curriculum is in addition to the already vibrant programming provided by the staff at the monument which includes night hikes, photography tours, heritage days, and Junior Park Ranger activities.

During the first week, students learned about outdoor survival and the importance of being prepared. They participated in hands-on learning experiences during which they were able to use a compass, a signaling mirror, and a crank flashlight. They learned how to tell direction using only shadows on the ground. And they learned how to use a flint stick to ignite a fire.

For the remaining five weeks, we explored the archaeology of the park and learned about snakes of the desert. The U.S. Forest Service in Tonto Basin loaned us their resident king snake. We were able to see the snake up close and learn more about other desert reptiles, including the infamous Gila Monster.

Since joining the staff at Tonto National Monument, my experiences have been wonderfully rich and memorable. I have performed backcountry maintenance with law enforcement, led three-mile hikes to a prehistoric cave dwelling, and developed presentations for eager elementary students. These programs show how the National Park Service can expand educational experiences beyond park boundaries and, with SCA, build the next generation of conservation leaders.

Refocus, Reform & Recycle: Redefining the Three R’s

SCA intern Allyssa Gabriel was surprised by the amount of plastic bottles, cardboard and fast food wrappers she pulled from a single trash receptacle. Up to 90% of its contents, she estimated, were recyclable.

Yet Allyssa was even more surprised by the source of all the non-sorted recyclables: employees at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) hangar in Fairbanks, AK. Last summer, Allyssa served as Greening Coordinator for the Arctic, Kanuti and Yukon Flats refuges. Inventorying trash was one of her first actions after being charged with expanding recycling efforts at all three refuges, producing educational materials and working with the greater Fairbanks community to boost local recycling.

The task would not be easy. Past efforts had ended up somewhere between “failure” and “nice try” thanks to economic and logistical challenges posed by the region’s remoteness. The belief was “you can’t get there from here.” Allyssa, however, had a different view. With an insatiable passion for sustainability, the Kennecott (GA) State University graduate dove into her work. She tirelessly researched new recycling opportunities, placed space-appropriate collection bins in key locations, and delivered collected materials to recycling centers at the Fairbanks Rescue Mission, Walmart and the University of Alaska Fairbanks—all of which Allyssa enlisted as refuge recycling partners. But she didn’t stop there.

She also gathered and compiled data on sustainability practices, posted recycling posters, and designed a reusable canvas bag emblazoned with the slogan: “Arctic, Kanuti and Yukon Flats Refuges are working together toward a greener future.” Allyssa even volunteered to ride a bicycle to work, weather permitting, which inspired refuge managers to purchase a fleet of bicycles for staff and volunteers to use.

In the program’s first month, more than 1,100 pounds of materials were successfully recycled. “For quite some time, we’ve desired to improve ‘greening’ efforts in the Fairbanks-based refuge offices,” states Deputy Manager Joanna Fox, who spearheaded the effort. Adds Refuge Manager Mike Spindler, “it is only through efforts of people like Allyssa that we will be able to meet our goals for a more sustainable footprint well into the future.”

Allyssa (right) assesses recycling potential at a hangar in Fairbanks, AK with FWS’ Joanna Fox. At press time, FWS had just added Allyssa to its staff.
The American Institute of Philanthropy and Charity Navigator rank SCA among America’s top conservation charities for fundraising efficiency.

SCA is a nationwide conservation force of college and high school volunteers who protect and restore America’s parks, forests, and other public lands. SCA’s active, hands-on approach to conservation has helped to develop a new generation of conservation leaders, inspire lifelong stewardship, and save our planet.

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Show Us the Green Spaces You Love!

SCA’s Conservation Begins Here photo contest to launch in May! At SCA, we want to show the world that conservation matters everywhere, and that all places—from local green spaces to mountaintops—are connected, and need our care.

Your best photo could win you 4 round trip tickets to visit your favorite green place anywhere Southwest Airlines flies.

Enter at contest.thesca.org

Judged by renowned film director and producer Ken Burns

Save the Date!

Outdoor Nation Summit – June 19-20

Join SCA and Outdoor Nation for a two-day summit and festival in New York City’s Central Park. Youth from across the country will unite to reclaim, redefine and rediscover the great outdoors—and leave no child inside.

For more information, visit thesca.org/events