RVN sisters on tour

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ABSTRACT: We have always enjoyed travelling and last year we decided to combine this passion with our love of veterinary nursing, taking our careers abroad. We spent a year saving and planning before jumping on a plane at Heathrow for the six-month long adventure of a life time! This article explores all the amazing charities we worked with across five different countries and we hope our words inspire those of you considering volunteering abroad to take the leap - there are so many wonderful opportunities out there - just book that plane ticket!

Keywords: volunteer; charity; travel; wildlife; conservation; rehabilitation

Gemma Crowley MSc (Wild Animal Biology), BSc (Hons), RVN

Gemma graduated from The Royal Veterinary College with a BSc (Hons) in Veterinary Nursing in July 2016. Throughout her degree, she developed a strong passion for wildlife and exotics nursing, which led to her undertaking a master's degree in Wild Animal Biology at The Royal Veterinary College in collaboration with The Zoological Society of London. During her masters she spent three months completing a veterinary wildlife internship in the Eastern Cape, South Africa working with wildlife such as rhinos, giraffe, lions, cheetah, buffalo, antelope, elephants and hippos. As well as her passion for exotics, Gemma has a strong interest in emergency critical care and has experience working in both out of hours services and a referral hospital intensive care unit. Now back in the UK Gemma is working at St David Veterinary Centre, a small animal first opinion practice in Cardiff, and hopes to complete her advanced programme in exotics nursing in the near future.

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Working as a veterinary nurse abroad

One of the most rewarding parts of volunteering abroad is offering your expertise to clinics and volunteer programmes that have little access to UK trained veterinary professionals. Many of the places that we volunteered at rely on nurses to teach their staff and help improve the standard of patient care. Working in exotic locations can be vastly different to working in clinics at home; many places have very limited veterinary equipment and often you must think on your feet, adapting to the conditions and using what little equipment you do have. This was one of the main attractions for us working aboard as it is one of the aspects of veterinary nursing that we both love. As with working in a new clinic at home, it is important to prepare yourself to adjust to different techniques and ways of approaching cases; often many of the exotic regions that you may work in aboard will have very strong religious and cultural beliefs that differ greatly from what we are used to at home, it is important to remain respectful to such beliefs regardless of how you feel.

Where did we go?

We were very lucky to visit six countries across South East Asia, Indonesia and Australasia. We started our journey in Vietnam, volunteering with Save Vietnam's Wildlife (@vietnamwildlife) working with injured, sick and trafficked pangolins (Figures 1-3). The charity is based in Cuc Phong National Park, in Northern Vietnam, which is also home to the endangered primate centre and turtle centre which you can visit during your time at the

Figure 1. One of the many rescued pangolins at Save Vietnam's Wildlife.

Figure 2. Monitoring GA on a pangolin at Save Vietnam's Wildlife, Vietnam.

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Lisa Crowley BSc (Hons), DipVN, RVN

After graduating with a degree in Equine Science from Aberystwyth University in 2013, Lisa began working in a first opinion small animal practice in South Wales and completed the VN diploma with Abbeydale College, graduating as an RVN in 2017.

Lisa spent the past 5 years in practice developing a passion for medical nursing and now back in the UK, Lisa is working at St David Veterinary Centre in Cardiff and hopes to complete the Medical Nursing certificate in the near future.

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Figure 3. Assisting the vet with critical care of a dehydrated pangolin.

Figure 4. Lisa preparing medication at Elephant Nature Park.

park. Whilst volunteering we were asked to assist with a rescue mission of 218 pangolins that had been seized being illegally trafficked across the border towards China. We travelled with the team to a police station to triage as many pangolins as possible, sadly many had already perished in the crates they were crushed into. We worked tirelessly around the clock for two weeks to try and save as many as we could, putting our emergency and critical care (ECC) skills to the test, but the majority suffered severe trauma and dehydration. In addition to pangolins the centre rehabilitates a range of other carnivores and omnivores, we were lucky enough to work with civets, binturongs and assisted in hand rearing an Asian short clawed otter pup rescued from the illegal pet trade.

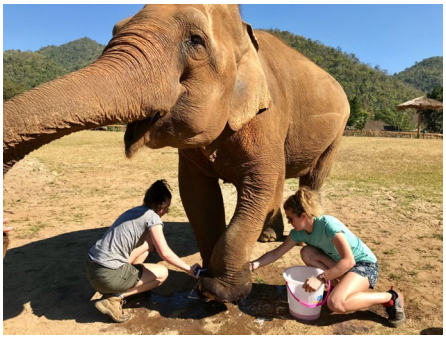

Figure 5. Cleaning Sri Pai's wounded foot at Elephant Nature Park.

We then travelled on to sunny Thailand where we had the opportunity to volunteer at the Elephant Nature Park (@elephantnaturepark), working with elephants rescued from the logging and tourism trades

Figure 6. Dressing Thai Koon's land mine injury.

(Figures 4-6). We worked alongside the team of vets to provide preventative health care to their herd of 80 elephants: administering medications, managing wounds and providing fluid therapy to newly rescued elephants. Whilst volunteering we were asked by Lek Chailert (ENP's founder) to travel to a remote village outside of Bangkok to aid with their wild elephant outreach programme by setting up a pop-up neuter and vaccine clinic. The programme aims to help mitigate human-wildlife conflict by offering free veterinary care to local farmer's cats and dogs, as an incentive for them to help protect local wild elephants.

After a two week holiday in Bali we flew to Australia, travelling from Darwin down to South Australia and all the way up the east coast to Cairns. Here we volunteered with Cairns Turtle Rehabilitation Centre (@cairnsturtlerehab) helping care for rescued turtles suffering from Floater's Syndrome caused by plastic ingestion and turtles injured from

Figure 7. Gemma feeding Portia, one of the turtles with floaters syndrome at Cairns Turtle Rehabilitation Centre.

Figure 8. Michelangelo a rescued baby turtle.

fishing net entanglement, issues sadly solely caused by humans (Figures 7-9). The centre was founded by Jenny Gilbert (who you may have seen on BBC's Blue Planet Live) and is based on the beautiful Fitzroy Island. Not only did we have the incredible opportunity to work with such an iconic species, we made the most of the amazing snorkelling around the island where we encountered numerous turtles, reef sharks, rays, fish and corals.

Figure 9. Monitoring Leila in her new rehabilitation tank.

Next, we travelled to Fiji, where we worked with Animals Fiji (@animalsfiji) - a fantastic charity clinic and shelter in Nadi that treats the island's animals and find homes for abandoned and surrendered cats and dogs (Figures 10-12). The clinic relies solely on donations, both monetary and of veterinary equipment, receiving no government financial assistance. Whilst at the clinic we worked with the veterinary team and the shelter team, prepping animals for theatre and monitoring anaesthetics, nursing hospitalised patients, assisting the vets in consults and on quieter days helping look after the many animals in the shelter (including lots of adorable puppies and kittens!) The team are extremely passionate, dedicated and making a big difference to the local stray and owned animals.

Finally, we volunteered at Auckland Zoo (@aucklandzoo) shadowing their incredible veterinary department at the Centre for Wildlife Medicine and Conservation. We spent a week assisting with procedures, health checks, caring for hospitalised patients and helping the team with vital conversation of New Zealand's most endangered bird life, such as Kākāpō and Kiwis.

How did we find volunteering positions?

The first question that everyone has asked is: how did we find all these amazing opportunities? We discovered most of the charities through word of mouth from friends or colleagues that had already visited, or through searching online. There is a vast number of volunteer pages online, Facebook and Instagram also provided us with lots of ideas. Great places to start your search are on Veterinary Volunteers and Wildlife Workers Network on Facebook, and searching the hashtag #veterinaryvolunteer on Instagram. Planning the trip took us around nine months so be patient and take your time to ensure the projects you choose are right for you!

Seeing the sites whilst volunteering

Most veterinary and animal volunteering positions will allow you to have weekends off, this allows you to explore the region you are in and make the most of your time in exotic locations. We decided that we would give ourselves time to explore each place before moving on to the next location so

Figure 10. Team photo at Animal's Fiji.

Figure 11. Gemma having puppy cuddles during patient rounds at Animal's Fiji.

Figure 12. Lisa debriding wounds of a dog at Animals Fiji.

that we had a good balance of work and play! Most volunteer positions or clinics will have a great knowledge of the area so take advantage of this - use local knowledge to find hidden gems!

Experience required

Many of the volunteer programmes in remote areas may rely heavily on experienced veterinary nurses to help run their projects and it is important that you are competent and confident enough to work alone. As mentioned, most of the places we visited had very limited equipment, so you

need to be able to 'think outside the box' and adapt to the situation. Our advice is to contact the project you are interested in and tell them what experience you have before heading out, they can then tell you whether the project is suitable for you.

The cost

When people think of volunteering, they often forget that the majority of charity clinics and rehabilitation centres rely on funds from volunteer fees and donations, not just from your physical presence. When booking our trip, we spent a long time researching the charities we wanted to visit to ensure that our donation money would be used effectively, as well as ensuring the project would benefit from our nursing skills and knowledge. Some charities rely solely on donations from volunteers and will request a fee, therefore the cost can add up if you plan to volunteer with multiple projects as we did. Donations of veterinary equipment may also be accepted rather than monetary donations. Remember you also need funds for flights, travel insurance, vaccinations, visas and may need to find your own accommodation and food whilst you are there - it can become a very expensive adventure but one you will treasure forever!

To sum it up...

Working abroad has never been easier, with online contact and international flights so readily available there is no reason not to explore the veterinary world around you. We really hope this article will have inspired some of you to take your career overseas and have the adventure of a lifetime – it is an amazing way to reignite your passion for veterinary nursing and highlights how vital we as RVNs are in ensuring animal welfare across the world!

If you have any questions about our trip, volunteering abroad or would like contact details for the places that we volunteered please do not hesitate to contact either of us using the details in our bios or look back at our journey on Instagram.

Save Vietnam's Wildlife
https://www.svw.vn

Elephant Nature Park
https://www.elephantnaturepark.org

Cairns Turtle Rehabilitation Centre
http://www.cairnsturtlerehab.org.au

Animals Fiji
https://www.animalsfiji.org

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).