

Project Report

Hello, I'm Alex, I am from Alba Iula, Romania. And this is a story about my experience as a Giacche Verdi volunteer in "Boschi per la Biosfera" project. It all started when I applied for this project in August 2017, after I found out about it from one of my University professors. After they, Giacche Verdi and M-S-H association, sent me the acceptance letter I was really excited to spend my next 6 months in Bronte, Sicily. I had a good feeling about it, which came true.

On arrival the staff were very friendly & welcoming. After a quick tour of the house in which I spent this 5 months in, I was shown the office in which we worked and met the other 15 volunteers from 10 different countries. All the coordinators are knowledgeable, approachable and passionate which is very inspiring. We had our "ups and downs", but mostly ups. I find myself extremely lucky that I took part in this particular group of staff and volunteers. We made a great team, we supported each other, we were understanding in times of stress and worked with commitment. We became a family.

Boschi per la Biosfera project

During this project I discovered different approaches to the nature conservation and environmental education in a foreign country.

The main activity of the project was the schools lessons. We went to schools in the communities all around Etna, we reached to around 2200 children and we had 2 classroom lessons and 1 excursion with every class. This involved presentations about forests, climate change, biological products and many more topics related to the nature surrounding us. This was a great way to teach children through non-formal education and to raise awareness about the environment, starting with the younger generations.



Me explaining the insects for children

We also participated or helped to organize workshops and had trainings with local experts or from all over the Europe.



Workshop with the European experts

One of the projects that I was involved in “Il percorso di *Bufo bufo*”, help me understand a lot about applying what I learned in university about nature conservation. The aim of the project is the protection and conservation of the common toad (*Bufo bufo*) and the implementation of a tourist attraction in the area of Santa Domenica Vittoria. For this reason it is necessary to transform the toad's habitat into a protected area. This work will allow to have information about the protected area to find the toad, thus allowing the protection of the surrounding environment. This will help transform the area into an area of permanent protection and tourist attraction. I am very happy to had take part of this project.

An important aspect of this activities that I appreciate is that we were included from the very beginning in everything. For example we helped with the organization of the workshops, but we also participated, we went to meetings with the officials of the involved communities but we also had the opportunity to express our opinion - we learned from the both worlds.

I explored how to develop sustainable choices for future lives by focusing on my personal journey, but also bring my learning of my own work to the children we worked with. This motivated me to stimulate the creativity, confidence and resilience of the people I am trying to reach to and last but not least to raise awareness of our identity and develop a beneficial mindset, through reflecting on our challenges and also, passions.

Life in Bronte

I live in the apartment right above the office, and this is a great perk, Considering the fact that I arrive in the office under 1 minute. I used to share this apartment with 6 other volunteers, divided in 2 rooms (3 and 4 per room), but after some of them moving to another city (Mascali) or back to their home countries, or just to the other house, the last 2 months I shared it with just 4 of them. The apartment was quite nice, traditional and old, I may say, with high walls and cold stone floors. This was a bit challenging given the fact that we spent the winter period here, and the gas heaters were a must! The space was sufficient, but every now and then, the house played some pranks on us. Luckily, the Giacche Verdi staff always came in our help, or called professionals to solve the problems.

A big improvement for myself was the waste recycling. We had in our houses recycling boxes for each type of waste, with a friendly reminder of which day we have to take out one type of waste. This motivated me to go further with the recycling awareness when I go back home. Unfortunately, the cleanliness in Bronte, but mostly around, in the Parco del'Etna area or next to the main roads was not very present. This is definitely another good reason to go further with this kind of projects in this region.

Living in Bronte was a great experience for me, though. I always said that I am very happy that we live in a small town, close to the nature, and not in a big town as Catania, for example. The people here are really nice and warm, as expected from an Italian community. Not to mention the delicious food that I cannot get enough of! The cornetos, the pizza, the Panini, the bar Tartufo across the street with their tavola calda, the vegetarian food from the Macelleria (I know it sounds crazy) - incredible. The coffee and the pistachio products (Bronte is known as the city of pistachio) were perfect. I will miss all of this.

Conclusion

This project was a rewarding experience, I had the opportunity to develop my skills, be more open minded, patient and active at local, and European level. I improved my Italian and increased my confidence in practicing environmental education.

I explored alternative ways of living, the intercultural aspect of the project allowed me to be even more aware of the diversity of Europe, and to deal better with the differences between people's ways of thinking on a everyday life and a professional point of view.

It allowed me to discover a new NGO, meet experts in my field, build a network of connections with people with same interests in nature conservation and last but not least, enjoy the beautiful and unique nature of Sicily. Not the forget about the breath-taking view of Etna, which I've seen almost everyday! I also understood better and learned about the Italian culture and traditions, which was one of my main goals. In one word: STUPENDO!

Therefore, Grazie Giacche Verdi, M-S-H and all the volunteers! See you soon! (Stefanie (and Paco), Gino, Andrea, Lidia, Tobia, Julia and Julia, Anne, Marie, Viktor, Kiril, Ksenjia, Jakob, Ana, Petra, Adele, Roman, Kate and Helene.)

Yours respectfully,

Alexandra Negrut

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