

Leadership-in-Action Reflections

EPFL, Laidlaw Cohort 2024, 30.08.2025

Transformative Adventure in Costa Rica: From Wildlife Protection to Snake Bite

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1. OSA Conservation

Osa Conservation is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and restoring the biodiversity of Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula, a region containing 2.5% of Earth's biodiversity. For two decades, Osa Conservation has worked with local communities, governments, and global leaders to build a climate-adaptive biological corridor where nature and people can thrive. Their efforts span 1.3 million acres in southern Costa Rica, including 8,000 acres of private wildlife refuge.



The organization focuses on regrowing, reconnecting, and rewilding rainforests, restoring coastlines, protecting marine and terrestrial wildlife, and empowering future conservation leaders. They collaborate with farmers to implement sustainable agriculture and restore degraded farmland, creating productive and climate-resilient landscapes.

They also work with coastal communities across the region by enhancing economic opportunities to support coastal livelihoods, restoring marine ecosystems, monitoring marine habitats and providing training and knowledge to local populations.

In 2023, their work included planting 100,000 trees, patrolling 50,000 km, restoring 40 hectares of mangrove forest, tracking wildlife motions, and engaging 400 children in nature education. They hosted workshops for guides and local communities, removed trash from critical habitats, and introduced GPS monitoring for sea turtles. Through community engagement, scientific research, and innovative conservation strategies, Osa Conservation is creating a sustainable future for the Osa Peninsula and its communities.



2. Volunteering at OSA

Together with Belkis Ben Youssef, I volunteered at the OSA Campus for six weeks, from June 2nd to July 13th. As volunteers, we supported the camp's operations and scientific work by contributing to a variety of tasks.

Regenerative Farm: OSA maintains its own biological farm that supplies the camp with fresh vegetables, fruits, and eggs. Under the guidance of the farmers Chonga and Marcus, we assisted with harvesting, weeding, seeding, and collecting eggs. It was a real pleasure to exchange with them and learn from their experience under the burning sun of Costa Rica.



Sea Turtle Night Patrol: Every night, when the rain is not too heavy, part of the team goes on patrol along the beach in search of sea turtle nests. Raccoons are the main threat to these nests: they smell the eggs, dig them up, and eat them. To protect the species, it is therefore essential to save as many eggs as possible.

Sea turtles lay their eggs at night before returning to the ocean. By observing the tracks in the sand, we can identify the location of a nest. We then carefully dig up the eggs, relocate them to a safer place, and protect them with wire mesh and rocks to prevent raccoons from reaching them. Because turtles are very sensitive to light, we only use red light occasionally to check the tracks.

It's a tiring process to walk for more than 2 hours at night on the beach but also deeply relaxing, with the sound of the crashing waves and the moonlight as the only source of light.



Tree Nursery: One of the main missions of OSA Conservation is to connect the two large national parks Piedras Blancas and La Amistad through a biological corridor, enabling wildlife to move freely and thrive. A major challenge lies in reforesting vast areas while also working with local farmers who depend on agriculture and cattle ranching for their livelihood.

The Tree Nursery, where José and Titi work, serves as a place where a wide variety of trees are grown before being planted in specific areas of the corridor. Reforestation and regeneration are complex tasks, as we often must guess which species originally grew there before deforestation. Cooperation with local farmers is not always easy either, since farming and cattle ranching must be integrated into the corridor.

For me, planting trees and speaking with Titi about his life in Costa Rica has been one of my greatest memories at OSA. It was truly inspiring to hear his story, his passion for Costa Rica and its unique nature, and to learn how he and his colleagues support farmers in transitioning from cattle ranching and intensive agriculture to more natural and sustainable practices.



Camera Trap Check and Installation: One of the most effective ways to monitor wildlife movements is through camera traps placed at strategic locations. These devices record a few seconds of video whenever they detect movement. The system is inexpensive, autonomous, and highly scalable, making it possible to cover large areas and gather valuable data on species presence and behavior.



Schedule of our first week at OSA:

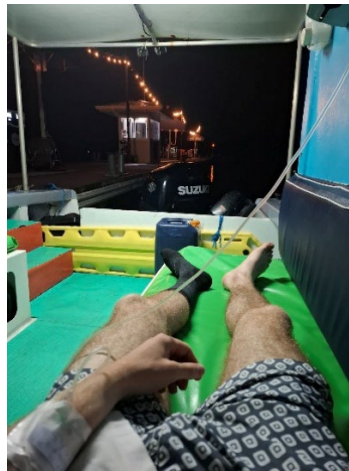
	MON 2	TUE 3	WED 4	THU 5	FRI 6	SAT 7	SUN 8
Isabella Kinuthia	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	DAY OFF
Cyrl Barthelet	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	DAY OFF
Beikis Ben	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	Activity: Point Person: Meeting Point: Time:	DAY OFF
Breakfast @ 7am							
Isabella Kinuthia	Activity: Media and Communications Point Person: Ian Meeting Point: Lab Time: 8am - 12pm	Activity: Working on the Regenerative Farm Point Person: Chonga Meeting Point: Farm Time: 8am - 12pm	Free time	Activity: Tree Nursery Point Person: Jose-Till Meeting Point: Tree nursery Time: 8am - 12pm	Activity: Working on the Regenerative Farm Point Person: Chonga Meeting Point: Farm Time: 8am - 12pm	FREE/ REST	DAY OFF
Cyrl Barthelet	ARRIVAL & Onboarding - Fabiola	Activity: Working on the Regenerative Farm Point Person: Chonga Meeting Point: Farm Time: 8am - 12pm	Activity: iNaturalist Point Person: Kameath Barboza Meeting Point: Lab Time: 8am - 12pm	Activity: Tree Nursery Point Person: Jose-Till Meeting Point: Tree nursery Time: 8am - 12pm	Activity: Working on the Regenerative Farm Point Person: Chonga Meeting Point: Farm Time: 8am - 12pm	FREE/ REST	DAY OFF
Beikis Ben	ARRIVAL & Onboarding - Fabiola	Activity: Working on the Regenerative Farm Point Person: Chonga Meeting Point: Farm Time: 8am - 12pm	Activity: iNaturalist Point Person: Kameath Barboza Meeting Point: Lab Time: 8am - 12pm	Activity: Tree Nursery Point Person: Jose-Till Meeting Point: Tree nursery Time: 8am - 12pm	Activity: Working on the Regenerative Farm Point Person: Chonga Meeting Point: Farm Time: 8am - 12pm	FREE/ REST	DAY OFF
Lunch @ 12 pm							
Isabella Kinuthia	Activity: Beach Clean (Sea Turtle Program) Point Person: Daniel Meeting Point: Pavillion Time: 2-5 pm	Activity: Asselt camera trap check on module Point Person: Hugo Meeting Point: Lab Time: 1:00am-4:00pm	Activity: Entrance Sign Creation Point Person: Eleanor Meeting Point: Pavillion Time: 1-4pm	Activity: Entrance Sign Creation Point Person: Eleanor Meeting Point: Pavillion Time: 1-4pm	Activity: Entrance Sign Creation Point Person: Eleanor Meeting Point: Pavillion Time: 1-4pm	Activity: Media and Communications Point Person: Ian Meeting Point: Lab Time: 1pm-4 pm	Activity: Asselt camera trap check on module Point Person: Hugo Meeting Point: Lab Time: 1:00pm-4:00 pm
Cyrl Barthelet	Activity: Beach Clean (Sea Turtle Program) Point Person: Daniel Meeting Point: Pavillion Time: 2-5 pm	Activity: Asselt camera trap check on module Point Person: Hugo Meeting Point: Lab Time: 1:00am-4:00pm	Activity: Explore Trails & Observe with iNaturalist Point Person: Indepant Meeting Point: Lab Time: 1-4 pm	Activity: Media and Communications Point Person: Ian Meeting Point: Lab Time: 1pm-4 pm	Free Time	Activity: Media and Communications Point Person: Ian Meeting Point: Lab Time: 1am - 4 pm	DAY OFF
Beikis Ben	Activity: Beach Clean (Sea Turtle Program) Point Person: Daniel Meeting Point: Pavillion Time: 2-5 pm	Activity: Asselt camera trap check on module Point Person: Hugo Meeting Point: Lab Time: 1:00am-4:00pm	Activity: Explore Trails with iNaturalist Point Person: Indepant Meeting Point: Lab Time: 1-4 pm	Activity: Media and Communications Point Person: Ian Meeting Point: Lab Time: 1pm-4 pm	Free time	Activity: Media and Communications Point Person: Ian Meeting Point: Lab Time: 1am - 4 pm	DAY OFF
Dinner @ 6pm							
Isabella Kinuthia	Activity: After Dinner Clean Up Point Person: Cook Team Meeting Point: Kitchan Time: 6:30 pm to 7:30 pm	Activity: After Dinner Clean Up Point Person: Cook Team Meeting Point: Kitchan Time: 6:30 pm to 7:30 pm	Activity: Sea Turtle Night patrol Point Person: Daniel Meeting Point: Pavillion Time: 7:30pm	7 pm: Documentary Night: Coexistence by Osa Conservation	Activity: Sea Turtle Night patrol Point Person: Daniel Meeting Point: Pavillion Time: 7:30pm	Activity: After Dinner Clean Up Point Person: Cook Team Meeting Point: Kitchan Time: 6:30 pm to 7:30 pm	DAY OFF
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3. Snake Bite and End of Mission

On the Sunday of the first week, as I was walking from our cabins to the pavilion for dinner, I was bitten on my right foot by a venomous snake. I was with a scientist from Argentina, and the incident happened so quickly and quietly that we didn't even see the snake. At first, the team debated whether it was truly a snake bite or something less serious, but I ultimately decided to go to the nearest hospital in Puerto Jiménez, about an hour's drive away at the edge of the forest. There, I was administered antivenom before being transferred by speedboat across the gulf to a larger hospital in Golfito for monitoring.

After four days, with no severe reactions and the swelling gradually decreasing, I was discharged and stayed in the organization's office near the Puerto Jiménez hospital to recover. Unfortunately, I then experienced an allergic reaction, which required another night in the hospital. Following this, I flew to the capital, San José, for better treatment.

My insurance company gave me two options: remain in Costa Rica but risk secondary effects not covered by insurance, or wait until my condition stabilized and then return to Europe. As a result, I had to shorten my stay. I spent one more week in a hospital in San José before flying back home. In the end, it turned out that my reaction had not been caused by the antivenom, but by the antibiotics I had been prescribed, to which I was allergic.



4. Take Away and Conclusion

These three weeks in Costa Rica taught me immensely, not only about insurance and medical care, but also about life in general. Even though my time on the OSA campus was cut short, it gave me a glimpse into a truly meaningful project with a strong purpose. From the people and the natural environment to the projects and their goals, I was deeply inspired and discovered concrete actions for wildlife protection and reforestation. I also had the chance to exchange extensively with people from many different cultures and fields, which was a unique and enriching experience.

The setback and adventure with the snake bite, though difficult, greatly strengthened my autonomy and perseverance. Dealing with doctors in Spanish, coordinating with my insurance, and navigating logistics together with the locals and the OSA Conservation team made it one of the most intense yet enriching weeks of my life. This experience also reminded me of who is truly there for me and whom I can rely on. Above all, it was the unconditional support and love of my family and friends, present every step of the way, without which my time in Costa Rica would have been far more difficult. I also realized how important it is to be able to take care of yourself, and how in some moments, life can come down to very small details that make the difference between safety and danger.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Laidlaw Foundation for providing such transformative opportunities. I am deeply aware of how fortunate we are to benefit from them. A special thank you also to Dan-Thi and the Laidlaw team at EPFL for their exceptional organization and support. I felt well prepared and received all the assistance I needed throughout my stay.