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New Lexington woman takes love of conservation one step further

BY LEEANN MOORE
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NEW LEXINGTON --A lot can be learned in 10 days on the shores of the Sea of Cortez.

During her recent trip, New Lexington resident Joanne McGonagle saw whales, dolphins and gardens and fruit trees that grew in the desert. She also met a holistic healer.

It was McGonagle's first trip in the quest to earn her master's degree in zoology from Miami University. McGonagle was accepted into Miami's global master's program, which began with a trip to study the desert and marine ecosystems on the Baja peninsula.

"You're learning and seeing things and when you get the chance to experience something like that you may never get to again you really need to take it all in and appreciate it, who knows if I'll pass back that way again," McGonagle said. "It was an amazing experience."

McGonagle studied at Bahia de los Angeles on the Sea of Cortez, where she and more than 20 other educators explored several conservation sites through Miami's global field program, a part of Project Dragonfly. Project Dragonfly offers three master's degree programs, and the global field program is one of them.

McGonagle, who isn't an educator, but is interested in wildlife, specifically big cats, and conservation, came across Project Dragonfly after reading about it on the Cincinnati Zoo's Facebook page.

Her first stop on the trip was to a ranch in the high desert, where she saw gardens and fruit trees growing.

"It was a self-sustaining ranch in the middle of the desert," McGonagle said.

At the Sea of Cortez, she studied the marine life and biodiversity in the water.

"It has just an incredible amount of marine life in a small area, so we were fortunate to see whale shark, sea lions and dolphins, and fortunate to get to see bryde's whales," McGonagle said. "That was awesome. It was our last day out and we got to sleep under the stars on these cots, so we were all kind of joking around and meditating and calling the whales. The next day we were in smaller boats and shut the motors off, and there they were. My favorite part was listening. We could hear them breach and breathe."

She went snorkeling, hiking and a night hike with black lights to see scorpions.

"To the naked eye, you don't see them, then you have the blacklight and you see lots of scorpions. It was so interesting," McGonagle said.

She graduated from New Lexington High School and Ohio University. She has studied in Norway and traveled to Asia, Japan, Korea and Hong Kong. She also spent two weeks as part of Director Emeritus of the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium Jack Hanna's film crew in Australia.

She'll continue to take courses through Miami University and will travel again next summer, to complete her master's.

Inspired by her cat Gracey, she also wrote a book called "The Tiniest Tiger" and is working on a second.

"I always really liked animals," she said. "I thought, if I'm going to do something, I should start now."

She'd like to work with a conservation group after graduation, and continue to write and spread awareness about endangered species.

"Through knowledge and education, I'd sort of like to open up and expose people who don't think about conservation to it," she said.

Additional Facts

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To find out more about Project Dragonfly through Miami University, go to www.projectdragonfly.org.
