

# Williams joins expedition to Baja Peninsula

Wednesday, August 18, 2010

Local educator Bart Williams was recently included in an expedition to the Baja Peninsula allowing him to participate in activities that will no doubt make his intermediate school students green with jealousy.

While in Mexico as part of an Earth Expeditions program, Williams swam lazily next to a whale shark in the Sea of Cortez, hunted for scorpions in the desert night, slept under the stars, studied the ecology of inter-tidal communities, viewed ancient cave paintings and was serenaded with traditional Mexican ballads around an impromptu campfire.

As much as these experiences are sure to enhance his interaction with students at Dyersburg Intermediate School, Williams thinks the experience may be more beneficial in creating projects involving the Forked Deer River. Williams works on river projects with both the Boy Scouts and in his position as alderman for the city of Dyersburg.

Earth Expeditions is a cooperative effort between Williams' alma mater, Miami University of Oxford, Ohio, and the Cincinnati Zoo.

"The program places scientists, educators and others in exotic locales in Africa, Asia and the Americas to learn about biology, ecology and community-based conservation initiatives," said Williams. "I got to see fascinating animals from a fairly close perspective that I had, up to this point, only seen in a zoo, or seen pictures of in books. We spent some time doing actual bookwork, learning how to set up scientific studies and reinforcing concepts of statistics."

Williams' trip to the Baja Peninsula - the second expedition to the location in the summer of 2010 - was created as a foundation course for students who have been accepted in Earth Expedition's Global Field Program. The program offers a master's degree to participants who complete coursework in the field over three summers and online throughout the remainder of the year. Current sites for study include Borneo, Thailand, the Amazon, Namibia, Kenya, Trinidad, Belize, Costa Rica and Mongolia.

"My group, officially titled 'Baja II', met before 7 a.m., on a Sunday morning at a motel near the San Diego airport," said Williams.

The first day of the trip included a smooth entrance into Mexico, Williams' first glimpse of the Pacific Ocean, an opportunity for the group to explore the desert and dinner at Mama Espinoza's Restaurant, a noted stop on the famous Baja auto races.

The next morning the group had a picnic breakfast at the site of ancient cave paintings and experienced the trials of traveling an unkempt road through the Mexican desert.

"South of Rosario, the traffic on Highway I diminished considerably and the road wound through desolate country, dotted with towering cardon cactuses and cirrios - unique, almost branchless trees, also known as boojum trees," said Williams. "Stark-colored mountains of volcanic origin rose up

around us. In mid-afternoon we turned east, leaving the smooth road for a dusty cart path that would take us the last thirty miles or so to Rancho San Gregorio. It took more than two hours, jouncing across the rocks to complete this distance. On a couple of occasions, we had to climb out of the vans when we came to wallows of deep, coarse sand where a fully-loaded vehicle might bog down."

Williams said that before 1873 Highway I was not paved below Ensenada, and all travel further down the peninsula was as arduous as his group experienced that afternoon.

"Stories abound of shredded tires and mechanical failures that caused vehicles to simply be abandoned," said Williams. "In those days, the 900-mile trip from San Diego to the tip of the peninsula could rarely be accomplished in less than 10 days and the intrepid travelers who attempted it were wise to employ a rugged four-wheel-drive vehicle equipped with a winch and loaded with jerry cans of gasoline. Our group got a taste of that type of adventure when the right rear tire of our van kissed a protruding rock just two miles from the ranch."

During their three days at Rancho San Gregorio, students met for discussion groups, helped develop a trail for the ranch site and visited the original ranch buildings.

"Another building is under construction, which will serve as a dormitory," said Williams. "At present, there is no roof. So, at night we could lie on our cots and stare up at the dazzling desert sky. I had never seen stars so numerous or so brilliant. Many members of our group opted to take their cots out into the garden area so that their night view was unobstructed by even the open rafters."

Evenings under the stars also featured traditional Mexican ballads and folk songs performed around an impromptu campfire and a trip into the desert to hunt scorpions at night.

"One night, we went on a scorpion hunt after dark," said Williams. "Armed with special black light flashlights, we hiked up into the hills behind the ranch. Scorpions have a chemical in their bodies that cause them to give off a soft, fluorescent green glow when bathed in black light. We encountered many of the little arthropods. The largest was probably about three inches long."

After three nights, the group climbed aboard the vans and made the crawling 25-mile trip to Bahia De Los Angeles, or the Bay of the Angels, along the Sea of Cortez.

"A highlight en route to this destination was a stop at the Mission San Borja, an ancient mission established by Jesuit priests from Spain more than 400 years ago," said Williams. "The imposing block structure there is 350 years old, but the ruins of an earlier church lie at the corner of the site."

Williams said Bahia de Los Angeles is a small fishing village populated by approximately 700 people, most living within two blocks of the shore.

"Although it is remote, the paving of a highway off of Highway I has made it more accessible and it is a destination for sport fishermen," said Williams. "We arrived at Vermilion Sea Field Station around noon and wasted little time in changing into swimwear for a dip in the Sea of Cortez. Vermilion Sea describes the incredible colors of the water and surrounding islands at sunrise and sunset. For the next three days, we rose early each morning and sailed out into the sea aboard small fishing boats. At Bahia de Los Angeles, the sea is dotted with midriff islands of greatly varying sizes. They range from

Tiburon, an uninhabited island of volcanic origin 35 miles in length to features that are little more than boulders jutting up out of the water."

During the group's boat excursions, students witnessed finback whales, a school of over 100 dolphins, and a small island inhabited by dozens of sea lions, pelicans, osprey, cormorants and sea gulls.

"It was quite a sight to see a pelican lunge into a power dive when it spotted a desirable fish in the water," said Williams. "And it was equally fascinating to watch those prehistoric forms smoothly gliding just a foot or so above the surface. On a couple of occasions, a curious manta ray could be seen swimming alongside our boat at a leisurely pace."

Williams' group had numerous opportunities to snorkel at the Vermilion Sea Field Station and in protected coves along some of the smaller midriff islands.

"On our third day, we donned wetsuits and packed our snorkel gear as we headed out to look for whale sharks," said Williams. "In a short time, Lisa, in my boat, spotted the telltale dorsal fin. Our driver eased into the area and encouraged us to get over the side quickly in hopes that we could swim next to the creature. The whale shark, though a massive member of the shark family, has a long, narrow mouth adapted to feeding on plankton and small fish. Fortunately, they do not prey on humans, or I would have stayed in the boat. I was sure that 20 people splashing around in bright-blue wetsuits would scare the behemoth back to the depths. But just when I had given up hope of a close encounter, the main part of our group some 40 feet away inadvertently turned the shark back toward me. I spent the next few minutes swimming side by side with the great beast, although it was a much more graceful swimmer than I. I worked hard to stay ahead of its tail, as I did not want to get slapped. The whale shark was so long that it was hard to gauge its size from my up-close perspective. Our boat driver, who had a good aerial view, reported that it was about 20 feet long."

As a part of the program, each student is required to complete a paper on one aspect of the visit to the region. Williams chose the ecology of inter-tidal communities, detailing the creatures that make their home in the area between the high and low tides.

"These zones present some of the most adaptable organisms on earth," said Williams. "Many live part of each day submerged in saltwater and thrashed by the surf, and another part of each day exposed to open air and the drying effects of the sun and wind. At the field station, low tide came early in the morning and a stroll along the rocky shoreline, which had been covered with water the afternoon before revealed a multitude of small creatures. Every rock had something living on it or underneath it."

Williams studied sea roaches, crabs, starfish, mollusks, barnacles and various snails during his visit to the sea station. Following the advice of retired San Diego College biology professor Dr. Lane McDonald, who escorted the group to the Vermilion Sea Field Station, Williams also kept an eye out for another predator.

"Small stingrays, about a foot in diameter, lurked on the sandy bottom just off shore," said Williams. "Dr. McDonald warned us to shuffle our feet as we waded in and out of the water, thereby alerting the rays so they could retreat rather than strike."

Williams' expedition moved quickly through the region. The students spent their time wisely, gaining as much knowledge and life experiences as possible in the few short days they visited the peninsula.

"Since my return from Baja, I have had several conversations with other participants - both from our section and from other groups - about what we gained from the trip," said Williams. "There is universal agreement that the experiences with dolphins, sea lions and whale sharks were pretty fantastic. Most students have mentioned the 'other-worldly' quality of the desert, as well. The desert certainly brought home to me what a precious resource fresh water is, and at the same time gave me pause to think about how little water we could live on for our bathing and hygiene practices. Even at the Sea of Cortez, the desert essentially meets the ocean. And though saltwater abounds, fresh water is a scarce and valuable commodity."

Above all, Williams enjoyed exploring with kindred spirits.

"One of the most gratifying aspects of the trip was the opportunity to work with other passionate and committed educators outside of a normal school setting," continued Williams. "I appreciated hearing about their various educational assignments and the approaches they used to reach out to students and motivate them."

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Story URL: <http://www.stategazette.com/story/1657498.html>