

Learning & Leading Gap Year Scholars

● Stuart Fielding

Dates	September 2010 to May 2011
Locations	Australia
Activities	Working, conservation volunteer and independent travel



Why did you want to do a gap experience?

I wanted to go on a gap year to become more independent and learn new life skills; organising my finances, accommodation and travel, with no one to turn to was all a part of this process. Being able to combine my passion for geography with a gap year was a great opportunity and one I knew would benefit me greatly when I went to university. The gap year was also a chance to experience something different, I wanted to get out and see what the world had to offer. Now I feel ready for university, I've taken a step back and thought about what I want to do with my life.

What did you do on your gap experience?

I went to Australia for 8 months. I spent the first 3 months travelling the east coast and working. For the next 4 months I alternated every two weeks between conservation placements and independent travel.



I did 4 Conservation placements. At the start of each new placement we met our team leader and the other volunteers. This was an anxious time as I never knew how many other volunteers there would be and whether or not they'd speak English. A highlight of my trip was meeting people from different countries and learning about their cultures.

Altogether during the placements I worked on 9 projects, ranging from surveying a rainforest at Mount Tambourine to a fire reduction project in Tidbinbilla. It was working on these projects that really impacted on my geographical knowledge.



What were the highlights of your gap experience?

The highlight of my gap year was the time I spent traveling independently. In terms of geography there's no place like Australia, its home to almost every environment. During these trips I set sail across the Whitsunday islands, watched the sunset over Uluru and saw the wild dingo's on Fraser Island.

What did you find easy and more challenging?

Most of the time I travelled on my own and met people at each new location. I had thought this would be one of the more challenging aspects of the trip, but as it turned out it was one of the easiest. Everyone was in the same position of not knowing



anyone else and so made more of an effort. In order to fund my independent travel I found paid work on a sheep and cattle station in Narrangulen. For 7 weeks I lived and often worked on my own as a farm hand. I had to do such jobs as; lamb and calf marking, fencing, spraying and yard work. Some of the jobs required not just a lot of hard work but also a strong stomach! For the majority of the time I lived on my own which was mentally and emotionally tough. I learnt a lot about myself and grew up very quickly.

What impact has your gap experience had on you?

It put me in situations that I'd never been in before and through the experience I've learned to be more independent and a more confident person. A major life lesson was the value of good company. Having spent so much time working and living on my own I now highly value having someone around to share decision making and pass the time with.

What is your advice for anyone thinking of taking a gap experience?

Don't over pack! Make sure you only take what you need and not stuff you might need because odds are you won't! You can never be too prepared or organised. Plan ahead and make sure you know exactly where you're going and how you're getting there - you don't want to take any chances especially with your transport and accommodation!

Make an effort! It's so easy to just stay in your hostel. Put yourself out there and meet new people, go to new places and try new things! You only get one gap year so why not? You might not get another chance!

A gap year should be all about experiences. If something bad happens then you shouldn't look at it as something negative, but as an experience that you can learn from.



How do you think this experience will help you?

This experience will help me in a lot of ways. The geographical and geological knowledge will directly help me with the course I have chosen at university. I also believe it will help me in life with people and the social skills I developed, such as patience, organisation and independence.



What do you plan to do next?

My next step is to become a mentor to help future scholars. I am also planning to work with my old secondary school by talking to students about my experience and geography. I am going to Hull University to study Physical Geography. After university I would like to work within the geology field that allows me to travel.