

FINAL REPORT OF MY EVS IN SICILY

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After studying biology three years at University in Germany I decided that before continuing with a Master Study I wanted to make a different experience where I would get the chance to put in action what I had been learning about environmental issues in theory the last years and in this sense also share it with people. Another motivation was to get out of my comfort zone and dive into a new culture. This is how twelve months ago I arrived in Bronte (Sicily) to start my oneyear EVS experience with the environmental association Giacche Verdi Bronte (GVB).

When I arrived together with Susi (Germany, EVS) that would spend the first five months with me as a volunteer we were really warmly welcomed by the whole crew of volunteers. By showing us the office I directly got to meet the people that would accompany me all year long: Gino our boss and the president of GVB, Andrea our coordinator and contact person for all our concerns and problems and Lidia that manages everything concerning Erasmus (?). While Susi was going to live in the apartment over the office, I was supposed to live in a little house more in the centre of Bronte which became my home over the last twelve months. The starting phase of my EVS was rather calm as it was still holiday period and all the former volunteers were kind of busy each one in his or her own little projects so other than helping them wherever I could I took a lot of time studying Italian as for me language is the key of really being able to participate in all the work. Although between the international group of volunteers we spoke a lot of English I realized quickly that in a little town like Bronte it is unavoidable to speak the native language. I am happy that now I can assert to be fluently in this wonderful language.

In the following I will describe the projects I participated in and my general working experience in the association:

Frutti per la Biosfera:

The project I put most of my working effort in was *Frutti per la biosfera* (fruits for the biosphere). This project has been realized by the GVB with the outreach of the Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung and the support of the German federal ministry for the environment and nature conservation (BMU) and the European Climate Initiative (EUKI). The aim of this project was to educate school children about the connection between climate change and conventional food production as well as how to act against increasing CO₂ emissions by referring to their everyday life (shopping groceries, profiting from an own garden or the support of local farmers). As the first phase of the project were supposed to be lessons in school classes my first task together with the other volunteers was to create a PowerPoint Presentation that would explain in a children friendly way the connection between climate change and possible actions to reduce or avoid long-term CO₂ emissions related to sustainable agriculture and food. All together we did research, had brainstorming sessions and fortunately we had the possibility to attend several trainings with experts on different topics to get an even more detailed insight on this complex topic. The whole winter we spent giving the lessons in school. First, we volunteers would present us to the class including introducing them to a typical dish and the nature of our country of origin followed by one of the Italian co-operators of GVB presenting the actual PowerPoint Presentation. For me it was great to try out my Italian as the children would always try to interact with us by asking questions about our countries.



Figure 1: Me giving the presentation about the region I come from in the school of Randazzo.



Figure 2: A little Quiz at the beginning of the class together with Salvatore Vinciguerra (Adrano)

The second phase of the project was the practical one: The idea was to either create a school garden together with the children of the participating schools or to visit a local farm that would produce in a natural or biological way. Either of the activities would include an outdoor lesson.



Figure 3: At the biological farm of Giuseppe Rizzo we also did a little Quiz about seasonal and regional fruits and vegetables.

From this part I really enjoyed creating the school gardens with the children as I was taking care of teaching the children the importance of keeping a healthy soil in gardens and agricultures. It was great to see them digging and searching in the earth for worms, ants and other tiny animals. For this phase I also helped designing a little diary for the children in which they can monitor the progress of their gardens at home or in school.



Figure 4: During the creation of a schoolgarden in Linguaglossa: Explaining to the children why Earthworms are not strange but very usefull for a healthy soil!

At the last phase of the project we organized little farmers markets in the region to promote local agriculture and give different producers/farmers the chance to sell their products and get in touch with each other. I really enjoyed meeting different people from different work areas such as agriculture, handicraft or food.



Figure 6: Planting little seedlings at the market in Piedimonte



Figure 5: Regional fruits and vegetables with a lot of colorful bustle in the background.

Another very special part of the project for me personally was that I spent a lot of time helping out at Giacche Verdi Mascali in Piedimonte Etneo as they carried out the project together with GVB with the schools in this region. So, in March when we already started the second phase in Bronte I spent most of the weeks in Piedimonte in one house with at least one or two other volunteers continuing with the PowerPoint Presentations in the classes but also preparing the gardens at the different

schools. I really enjoyed this cooperation between the two GV groups as I had the opportunity to meet so many students and also get to know many other villages around the Etna. One of my best experiences here was working with the students of the school of Fiumefreddo in the Bioparco Bluegarden in Mascali which is a park where with these children in the second phase of the project realized a garden and then kept meeting with them over some weeks. I really had the chance to get a connection to these children and kind of felt like by seeing them more often and teaching them about gardening and environment I also learned a lot from them by seeing the world from there point of view. And at this point I would say I really felt like I improved my Italian to a level that I had no problems communicating with teachers, children and of course any person in general. Also the market in Piedimonte was one of my favourite events because from the beginning of its organization I helped by creating the advertisement or planning the activities for the children. Because all the schools of Piedimonte and around were invited I was really happy to see so many of the children again that some weeks before I saw either in class or during the gardening.



Figure 7: Proud children - in the Bioparco we met several times before the summer holidays, monitoring the progress of our garden every time.



Figure 9: Also volunteers need some fresh biological fruits to stay happy!



Figure 8: During the final fest in the Bioparco - planting aromatic herbs with the pre-school children.



Figure 11: Another evidence that oranges (of course biological) became our favourite snack during our outdoor lessons!



Figure 10: Greeting the sun to get warmed up before our outdoor class.

As further additional activities included in the Frutti Project I was also involved for example, in giving a workshop to students of Maletto that formed a “Baby-Parliament” in their town and wanted to participate in our project as well. So, we taught them how to teach their co-students how to create a garden and take care of it – maybe here I can add that this project really got me into gardening (see Free Time!).

All parts of this project always included writing reports about every activity which helped improving writing skills and always process the work that we are doing. Plus, in the end of the project we also designed different educational posters. I really appreciate how in one project I got to improve so many skills like language or creativity and also learned new ones such as using for example Publisher to create posters. Because the gardening part was one of my favourites and we did one of them in a school very near to my house, one of the first things I showed new volunteers when we went for a walk was the garden of this school because I was so proud of it and also of the students as they took so good care of it that in summer there was a massive amount of vegetables and herbs growing there.

As the Frutti project was the biggest part of my EVS it gave me a chance to show a lot of initiative but also to learn with and from the people that participated.

Bosco Brignolo:

One of my first “real” working experience I made with the GVB was at Bosco Brignolo. The Bosco Brignolo Project is an ongoing one and kind of the child of our Boss Gino. It is being realized by the GVB and the Italian Alpin Club Bronte with the support of the Manfred-Hermesen-Stiftung. It is an old landfill that is supposed to become a Forest but also a meeting Point for children, teenagers and families with opportunities for education or different outdoor activities. The first steps have been done in 2011 and ever since generations of volunteers with the help of different supporters are bringing forward this project. Me and the other volunteers have been planting quite a lot of trees, mowed the high grass in order to preventing fires and one of our favourite tasks: cutting giant fennel *Ferla* that over the last years has been spreading in this region and although traditionally the high growing plant is used to build seats it becomes a danger for grazing animals especially horses because of toxic substances. Fortunately, afterwards it is great to cover the naked earth in the garden or use it as organic fertilizer – or to fan each other air. In the last few weeks before the summer holidays the GVB started a cooperation with the middle school next to the office: Together with a group of ten students from the school we spent one morning per week together in the Bosco Brignolo doing the same activities or collect trash that unwanted visitors might have left. But because the school has a focus on agriculture the students would also teach us a lot about possibilities of planting on different terrains including special ones such as at Bosco Brignolo. As this project is permanently ongoing and is taking place directly in Bronte I enjoyed a lot spending time there also, because it was a change from working in the office. So, during the time also in my free time I liked to go all the way up to one of the hills there and watch the spectacular Panorama with the little railway and the Etna. I hope that one day the often-said sentence of Gino may become reality and former volunteers will visit with their children and can say that they took part in creating this forest.



Figure 13: Hoping to return to a fully grown forest one day after planting so many trees.



Figure 12: Working in front of the most beautiful Etna-Panorama

Piccole Guide:

Another educational project I took part in was working with the group *Piccole Guide* (Little rangers) in the village Santa Domenica Vittoria. They are a group of children that meet in the seat of the Nebrodi

National Parc to learn more about the local flora and fauna right in front of their house. Together with GV co-operator Fabio Bonaccorso who is a former geologist and know tourist guide I had several meetings with them learning with them about winter animals or birds for example. But the main aim of this group isto promote the first educational path in this area about the common toad and its natural habitat. At the beginning of my EVS I met them with Fabio and the other volunteers to walk the path and the children practiced how to present the information on the different info-panels along the path. Nearly at the end of my EVS the path was opened and it was great to see how these children developed during this journey and were able to share their knowledge about this interesting animal and similar topics to their same aged friends and grown ups.



Figure 15: Most of the time we worked very seriously, really!



Figure 14: Before starting the path it was always necessary to stop for some raspberries.

Fiumi Puliti:

During my time in Piedimonte I also took part in the project Fiumi Puliti which is an annual project by the Giacche Verdi with the support of the Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung. In winter the children already listened a Presentation about the River Alcantàra and the importance of not polluting the aquatic ecosystems. I participated in the outdoor classes at the estuary of the river Fiumefreddo where we did different stations on the Flora, Fauna and characteristics of water.

Since I am very interested in everything that has to do with aquatic environments, I was very lucky I got the possibility to participate and educate the children about the importance of taking care of the rivers, lakes and oceans on our planet. With my background in marine biology I had a lot of fun measuring the pH, calculating the flow velocity and talking about the special characteristics of water in general. Another great advantage for us volunteers that participated was that already in the first

sunny days of march after the lesson we took our first swim of the year in the ocean where the estuary flows into.

Office:

Learning from and with each other: During the major projects there were always some less busy periods which we volunteers used to realize our own little projects or got some tasks from Andrea in order to work on something for the Giacche Verdi or Terre della Biosfera websites. In the winter season we started to watch different documentaries on environmental issues. Because I really love watching documentaries, I was asked to make a list of my favourites so that every week we could pick one of them. After watching them we always started to discuss the topics and shared what for example what we already knew before or what we learned new. We had very interesting conversations since in that time we all came from different backgrounds (some of us just finished school or studied something completely different from science or environment).



Figure 16: When it was too cold to work outside - discussing round on plastic in the ocean!

In spring when nearly the whole group of volunteers has changed Andrea asked us to start a project on publishing one weekly advice for an environment supporting lifestyle on the Terre della biosfera website. At this time the atmosphere of the group was already very active and motivated when it came to discover or share ideas to make our lifestyle more environmentally friendly (see free time). So, with this task we were very happy to share all our ideas even more. Together with Natalie (Germany, Erasmus Internship) we already tried a lot *do-it-yourself* projects in our house such as making detergent or toothpaste in order to not produce waste and avoid harmful constituents. So, I wrote one advice on how to make organic detergent for cleaning pavements from apple vinegar and

orange skins that got published on the website. The project was really nice and really strengthened our group-feeling even more as we did not just only write the step-by-step advices but also tried them out in our homes and helped each other. In the end Fabiane (Brazil, Erasmus Internship) made so much dishwashing detergent that both the apartment and the house could easily wash their dishes with it over weeks without buying plastic packaged alternatives.

After trying out a lot of these practical ideas we continued by writing short articles on how to travel eco-friendly or on green energy. Although just one of us would write the article before that we would brainstorm all our thoughts and overall questions to this topic. We really profited from each other's questions and knowledge as for example I had some ideas what for example green energy means for me but Fabiane studied environmental engineering so she could explain a lot to us. I really liked how everyone contributed in these discussions even if it was just sharing an interesting video on the latest topic.

The garden: As I already mentioned in the part about the school gardens during this year kind of discovered my interest in gardening especially growing vegetables. As in the backyard of our office there is a really nice garden it is not an obligatory task but still kind of the responsibility of the volunteers to care about it. After one of the trainings during the preparation for the school gardens with GV-co-operator Eva Polare I felt very motivated to put into practice what she taught us about gardening. As Natalie already had some more knowledge and practice, I also learned a lot from her and know before leaving we could even motivate the newer volunteers to continue working in this beautiful green place. One of the nicest situations was picking a whole box of our self-grown tomatoes and eat them in the office all together.



Figure 18: Behind the scenes of my step-by-step for making organic plastic-free detergent.



Figure 17: Organically grown tomatoes in our garden. We also constructed the flower-bed.

Parliamo italiano! (Let's speak Italian!): As we all arrived in different periods it was quite difficult to just speak Italian in the office – of course while working in the schools it was necessarily required. For example, the first months I tried to take every chance to study Italian but still for feast communications between the volunteers English was (most of the time) the easiest way. I think through this barrier of always having to switch between the different languages I was really able to improve my communications skills in Italian, English and even in my mother language! For me it was great experiencing how at first I would need a lot of help from the volunteers that already spoke advanced or fluent Italian and now in the end being the one able to help the others getting used to the language or help them studying.

Cooperation with ProLoco: The GVB cooperate with the Association ProLoco in Bronte which focuses mainly on tourism and events in the town. In the beginning of the year me and my co-volunteer Pheline (Germany, EVS) gave English lessons for the young people that are doing their civil service at ProLoco. It was an awesome and also a little bit challenging experience to teach a foreign language in another foreign language but working together and having a lot of fun with them as students I really enjoyed teaching. Also at this point I need to say how much I appreciated this cooperation with them as they would always invite us volunteers to their events or even giving us tours through Bronte and teaching us about its history.

Biosphere Reserve: Because the GVB and the Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung are part of the promotor group of the “Terre della Biosfera” – a future biosphere reserve in between the two river valleys of river Simeto and river Alcantara – I as a volunteer of the associations helped during the research for the dossier of candidature and later also helped to translate the Italian version into English.

Giacche Verdi:

Giacche Verdi is a national working association which beside supporting nature and environmental protection also acts in civil protection through horse riding. So, one weekend we had the chance to support the Giacche Verdi at the Mediterranean Horse fair in Ambelia. We helped by giving out information and brochures. It was a amusing change from our “normal” work as we got the chance to visit some horse riding shows or visit the other stands.

But one of the greatest activities I participated in during the end of my EVS after the Frutti project was the “Traversata della dorsale dei Nebrodi a Cavallo” (Crossing of the Nebrodi mountains on horses). This event is annually taking place and was this year organized by the GVB. Near to the city Randazzo we spent five days at the campsite Trearie in the wonderful Nebrodi mountains. Our tasks were basically helping the cook by preparing the meals for the participants of the horse riding or accompany the horse riders with the Jeep and Staff Members of the Nebrodi National Park so that during their trips they could have lunch in the forest or another campsite. It was again great to meet so many new people from all over Sicily and the nature we were surrounded by was indescribably beautiful! For me this was an experience that every EVS-Volunteer should make during his stay.

Furthermore, together with different associations such as ProLoco or the Italian Alpine club we participated in some cleaning activities around Bronte. This mainly included together with a lot of people picking up trash in certain areas with the aim not only to clean them but also to raise awareness about the pollution through waste and overall plastic trash of this area.



Figure 20: Even during not so sicilian weather conditions we tried to free certain places from trash-polution.



Figure 19: Just one part of the "family" - happy with their new fleece-jackets.

Free time and living in Bronte (experiencing Sicily):

Like I said in the beginning, at my arrival I got heart-warmingly welcomed by the volunteers and office members of Giacche Verdi. But at this point I should say that from the moment I arrived at the little railway station in Borgo (Catania) to take the little train Ferrovia-Circum-Etna to arrive in Bronte I felt welcome as I was asking with my little Italian when the next train would come and ended up drinking my first sicilian *caffè* with the head of the railway station and his colleagues.

Fortunately, also in Bronte everyone I met was nice and welcoming, of course most of them already knew the volunteers of Giacche Verdi and could guess. At the beginning there were still a few things that I had to get used to for example, nearly everyone driving a car even for short distances or a public transport that kind of exists, but trains don't go on Sundays or holidays. Also, the working times were something I needed to get habituated in – for example the coffee bars are open all day long but if I wanted to buy groceries I had to wait until the evening since during *pranzo* lunchbreak all the shops closed and wouldn't open until the afternoon (which after spending the summer here makes absolute sense for me as the temperatures make it impossible to work during midday). Then, for cooking we used gas as well as for heating in the winter which was first very new to me but the more often, I changed a gas bottle the more it became normal.

And I guess everything else that I needed to get used to became part of my everyday life somehow. And this process got faster and faster as I learned and improved my Italian. Of course that needs some time, but I was very lucky to have my house mates Julia (Germany, EVS) and Pheline that already spoke so fluently that they kind of pushed me into it – also sometimes it was easier to let someone who speaks fluently speak for you I always tried to get as much from conversations as I could no matter if I was involved or just heard people talking in a bar. And then, of course working with children was an immense help to get into talking as they would just not stop asking you



questions or explaining you something until you would answer and understand. Language was my key to really become a part and not just a visitor.

When I met people that where not from Bronte everything they would refer to when hearing the name was "Oh the city of pistachio!". And I do not know if I changed their minds but for me very quick Bronte became more than just the place with the best *Cornetto al Pistacchio* (typical sweet for breakfast) I ever had, but my home. Walking through the streets it was nearly impossible not to meet somebody to have a short talk with. And if not at last when I arrived at home there was at least one neighbour outside, and they were the first persons we saw in the morning when we greet them, and they wished us a nice day from one balcony to the other. Or walking to our house in the evening passing our favourite pizzeria everyday and the guys working there greeting us as well.



But living in Bronte did not just mean to live with the *Brontese* but also to work and live together with the other volunteers. Of course, when you see each other everyday and you never met these persons before in your life not everyday comes with a sunny atmosphere. But I must say that this experience really taught me how to stay open and mentally flexible even if there were differences – in age, in opinions or in culture. And particularly in the second half of my EVS we really became a big family and spent a lot of

time together for example, visiting Taormina and had several cooking or movie nights together. And as I mentioned in the part about our *do-it-yourself* Projects before we were a very active group always talking and discussing and trying out. I learned to cook not only a lot of Italian but also Turkish, Brazilian or completely international dishes we invented all together. I really had a great time full of adventures with these persons. I could add so many pictures, but I think for every potential volunteer this experience will be particularly special so in this report one gets just a little view into the moments of this incredible experience.



In the end I would just like to say that for me this year has been an extraordinary experience. The EVS gave me the chance to really adapt (not fully but a lot) and feel home in Sicily and over all meet great people that I really want to stay in contact with and for sure see again. The work with the Giacche Verdi gave me the chance to realize how much I enjoy working with children and how important it is to educate the smallest. I would

highly recommend doing an EVS to everyone that is searching for an experience to work with great people, work for important issues and learn a lot about him or herself.

GRAZIE and THANK YOU to everyone I met during this experience and that lived part of this journey with me!