

## **22nd Annual Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism**

### BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN FIELDS

No one expected a biologist to be at last weekend's Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism, but my research and preliminary results on the resident perceptions of the whale watching industry in the Caribbean was a perfect fit. While most of the people at this particular gathering of researchers and young scholars were hospitality experts, sustainable tourism was one of the key topics for research and discussion. Many people were interested in learning more about my research, and throughout the weekend people seemed to easily recall me and my work on wild cetacean tourism in the Caribbean.

Whale watching seems to be a topic that enchants everyone, and a gathering of hospitality experts was no different. Even so, happiness about the subject was tinged by a common professional knowledge among the people gathered about the complexities of tourism. Much as I myself have learned, there are no simple answers when it comes to balancing rapidly growing industries like tourism (and whale watching), the needs of local people, and environmental concerns. Topics of research at the conference illustrated this complexity as other graduate students were looking at things like the influence of online information on patterns of travel, methods for reducing food waste, and barriers for American golf clubs to carry out sustainable practices, among others. My own qualitative social methodology, debated among my biologist and economist lab mates at home, was also well accepted among the professionals of the tourism field. This gave me a valuable opportunity to see how qualitative data could be operationalized and used in practical ways; not something that I had doubted, but something that I had found somewhat difficult to learn about in the realms of my own field.

Bridging the gap between biology and the tourism fields wasn't just one-way. In the research that Rufford has supported through me, conservation biology has deeply informed all parts of my investigation, whether a specific part is directly related to biodiversity or not. In the case of my social research, local perceptions of environmental practices and ideas about threats to whales and dolphins was key to understanding the role that whale watching can play in the community and as a form of ecotourism, which requires that environmental resources are protected. Whale watching cannot be sustainable in an economic or environmental sense if cetaceans are not protected, and they cannot be protected if the local people don't understand and support measures that are needed to do so. Biological expertise is so clearly important to my own research, and throughout the conference, its ability to enhance other hospitality research was clear.

In the end, a weekend of studying more about cutting edge tourism research and sharing my own work was successful. Not only did my project spark interest in other graduates as well as seasoned tourism researchers and professionals, but I was able to learn a variety of things that will enhance my ability to interpret and communicate my results once they have been further finalized. It was apparent from this conference that the work Rufford is supporting, and the work that I am doing is relevant from both the biology and tourism fields. Most importantly, the world of ecotourism research is ripe for partnerships between industry professionals/researchers and people like me, biologists seeking to see human and environmental goals align.

