

Final report – Erasmus++ Giacche Verdi Bronte

Anne Cramaro 01/10/2017 – 01/03/2018, Germany

As part of my study program "Landscape Ecology and Nature Conservation International", a 5-month internship abroad is planned. When I had long been planning not to attend the semester abroad, I read about a volunteer project of the Sicilian environmental organization "Giacche Verdi" (Green Jackets) and the German foundation Manfred-Hermsen-Stiftung. It was mainly about environmental education projects and practical nature conservation activities. Despite the lack of knowledge of Italian, I applied and was fortunately taken. In addition to the Mediterranean flora and fauna, I was particularly interested in the work of a Sicilian nature conservation association.

Also on the advice of the Manfred Hermsen Foundation, I planned my arrival by train. The route Greifswald - Taormina / Sicily led by night train via Munich to Rome. There I took a day to look at the eternal city. Another night train then transported me to Sicily to the beautiful hill town of Taormina, where I was picked up by Anna Spilateri, Stefanie Hermsen and Gino Montagno from Giacche Verdi. My destination and work-place, Bronte, was still an impressive drive around Etna away. There I not only saw Europe's highest active volcano and some lava fields for the first time, but also got a first look at the typical vegetation, e.g. the Etna broom (*Genista aetensis*).

I lived in a "typical" Brontese town house, pretty much in the heart of the 20,000-inhabitant city, with many balconies and old façade. Together with 7 other European volunteers I shared my stay. Another 7 volunteers lived above the city, directly above our office. The volunteers came from different countries: besides Germany and France also from Belgium, the Czech Republic, Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine and Russia. Not only by the living situation, but because we all got along very well, we spent a lot of time together. In the end, I spent more time with "our" people than with locals, which I do not regret at all. So I got to know not only the Italian, but also the Eastern European (and further east) culture. Living with so many people in a small room seems unusual, but in my opinion, it was quite pleasant. Not so pleasant was the cold in winter, since the houses have no heating and on Sicily not all year at 30 ° C the sun is shining...

Bronte is located at about 800 m altitude directly on the slope of Etna. About 1 km walk from our office began a beautiful, albeit lined with garbage, path to the volcano. Already during my first walks I was able to observe the hawk-eagle (*Aquila fasciata*). The view is breathtaking after only a few hundred meters, and the more impressive is the more than 3000 m high peak of Mount Etna, which towers over Bronte and is visible from many corners of the city. Northwest of the Etna are the Nebrodi Mountains. There I often observed whole hordes of griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*), which was resettled there after extinction in the 60s. On an ornithological excursion I was able to observe the snake eagle (*Circaetus gallicus*) for the first time in my life.

Together with the other volunteers, I went on hiking tours, for example in the Parco di Etna and in the Nebrodi Mountains, where you can easily sleep in shelters, so-called Rifugios, small houses that are usually equipped with a fireplace.

The work at Giacche Verdi was characterized by various projects. When I arrived, the current project was the environmental education program called "Boschi per la Biosfera" (trees for the biosphere). We worked together on a presentation for primary school children to teach them about the function of trees and forests. Later in the internship, we went to the elementary schools in the area, followed by field trips for which we also prepared stations and games. We were always accompanied by very knowledgeable members of Giacche Verdi. In addition, we also cleared an area to build an environmental education place. The project went on throughout my stay.

In one of the first weeks of my internship, a workshop lasting several days took place for "Boschi per la Biosfera". Participants were from Germany, Macedonia, Romania and Hungary, all from the fields of biology, ecology and / or environmental education. All the volunteers were involved in this workshop and it was a good first way to get to know the environment.

As part of this workshop, my next job crystallized out: Together with two other volunteers I should realize a nature trail dedicated to the toad (*Bufo bufo*). Above all, we took care of conception and planning, gathered information for panels and explored possible routes. Towards the end of my time, this project was not finished yet, but provided with logos, plans, and boards, and I was provided more software and design skills.

As part of the work, we were also encouraged to learn Italian by ourselves. In my opinion, that worked quite well with the months. At least I understood working instructions in the office and could explain to the children on the excursion in Italian bird species and birdhouses. In the end, although knowledge of Italian was not required in the beginning, in my opinion, it is helpful if you really want to support the association and would like to undertake interesting work.

In retrospect, I am very grateful for the tip from a communication workshop in the first days. We were advised: "Be flexible!". This was mainly related to fast and spontaneous changing plans and work assignments. Probably I would have failed the adjustment without this tip, but with the wisdom in mind, we could usually laugh about it.

I thank all the volunteers for the good time, Stefanie Hermsen and Gino Montagno for the opportunity to work together, Salvatore and Niccolò, because I learned a lot from them and Andrea, without whom the work would not have worked!

Arrividerci!