

Rebecca Blais

**Graduation Year:** Sophomore

**College:** Arts & Letters

**Major(s):** Political Science

**Minors(s):** Hesburgh Program in Public Service, Business Economics

**Scholar Group Membership:** No

**Did you received other funding for this project?:** CUSE, First Year of Studies

**Could you have completed this project without CUSE funding?** No

**More details on CUSE funding assistance?** Simply put, I would not have gone on this trip if it weren't for CUSE funding my research. I am immensely thankful that CUSE and the First Year of Studies funded my project.

**Project Title:** Elephant Conservation Project

**Project Location:** Sri Lanka

**ND Faculty Mentor:** Anre Venter

**Project Type:** Research, Service-Learning

**Why did you undertake this project/experience?** Deepen your knowledge of a topic or issue, Research/experience necessary for senior thesis or capstone project, Career discernment and/or preparation, Internationalize your Notre Dame experience

**Did your funded experience help you:**

**[Deepen your understanding of your coursework or field of study]:** Very Much

**[Discern your interests and post-bac goals]:** Very Much

**[Become confident in your ability to set and achieve your goals]:** Very Much

**[Gain a more nuanced view of local, national, or global communities]:** Very Much

**[Improve your written and verbal communications skills]:**Very Much

**Tell us about your experience.**

My goal was to learn about the human-elephant conflict, contribute to the ongoing data collection, and collect independent evidence through observation. The human-elephant conflict centers around the issue that the human population in Sri Lanka is steadily growing, which causes humans and wild elephants to come into contact more than ever before. Forests and fields are being converted from elephant territory into cropland, which means that the elephants are more likely to invade the rice paddy, fruit, and vegetable fields in search of food. This becomes a problem for the rural farmers because in a single night, a herd of elephants can destroy their entire crop yield and livelihood. The farmers are unable to keep the elephants out with electric fences, and as a result they have taken to shooting and dropping firecrackers on the elephants, often harming or injuring the elephants. This puts the people in an awkward position because 70% of Sri Lankans are Buddhist and another 13% are Hindu, and to both religions, the elephant is sacred and should not be harmed, and it clearly is bad for the elephants because they are walking away with scars, severed limbs, and sometimes a smaller herd than before.

The first stage of my research was to learn about Sri Lankan culture; this was achieved through research and reading prior to the trip and then visits to historical sites, Buddhist temples, and interactions with locals during my trip. Since my research did not allow for interviews, I mostly wrote about my interactions in my journal and used what they taught me about the language and culture to assimilate.

To collect data on the human-elephant conflict, I spent two weeks living in a field house next to the Wasgamuwa National Park, studying the conflict every day by completing a transect in the morning and making observations from a tree hut in the evening. The transects were trails that I would take with the local coordinators from the Sri Lankan Wildlife Conservation Society (SLWCS) that took us through heavily-trafficked elephant areas. We would survey the ground looking for elephant dung, and when we found it, we would measure and dissect it and look for evidence of what the elephants had eaten. Depending on what food remains we found, we could determine whether or not the elephants had gotten into the farmers' crops. Measuring the circumference of the dung is a technique which helped us determine the age and gender of the elephant. We spent two days working on the Beehive Fence Project, a prototype fence made out of bee hives which is being tested as a method of elephant deterrence, as well as Project Orange, a project helping farmers convert their crops to citrus plants that elephants do not eat.

The evening hours spent staked out in a tree hut consisted of watching the woods where the elephants commonly emerged as well as a busy pedestrian road. I recorded how many people I saw, their form of transportation, their direction and speed, and noise level, as well as the number of elephants I saw and their approximated age and gender. Fortunately, I never witnessed the humans and elephants coming into direct conflict. After each data collection, I turned in my work to the SLWCS. Working with the SLWCS was especially beneficial because they also focus on educating the people in proper treatment of elephants and the development of mutual respect for boundaries between elephants and humans.

One lesson that I expected and ultimately did take away from this experience is that there is no simple solution to a problem on this scale. The simple solution would have been to put up fences and fence the elephants in, but the broken fences and destroyed fields are enough evidence to prove that was not enough. We found it to be more effective to use the fences to fence the people in, thereby protecting their villages. The alternative solutions such as Project Orange and Project Bee Fence are proving to be helpful to the situation as well. The projects are not traditional methods of elephant deterrence, but they are working to keep both people and elephants safe.

Through this trip, I was able to fulfill my research goals and learn more about Sri Lanka than I ever could have hoped. I came to admire it for its beautiful landscape, wildlife, and people. I gained a deeper understanding of the human-elephant conflict and what can be done to help, eco-tourism, and general traveling. There are countless takeaways from this trip I could share through stories and photos, but one that I would like to highlight is this: traveling on my own to Sri Lanka has built my confidence as a traveler, scholar, and individual, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

**Describe the impact this project had, both on you as a student-scholar and on the people you worked with.**

It would be impossible to fully detail what I took away from my experience in Sri Lanka, but I can say that I walked away with a new perspective on who I am and what I want in the future. Not only did my experience alter my long-term goals, but it has directly affected my day-to-day persona, a result I have seen evidenced in the time following my trip. My conversations with fellow travelers from around the globe, my interactions with Sri Lankan locals and their way of life, and the vast amount of time I spent in silence taught me to be introspective and mindful of my actions and words.

I learned about myself from approaching the human-elephant conflict on a personal level. For example, I became acquainted with a family that had had their entire life disrupted from an elephant breaking into their home and stealing their bagged rice harvest. We brought the family orange trees as a way of rebuilding their livelihood, and they were eternally grateful. On the other end of the argument, I spent hours one evening observing a small group of elephant broken off from their larger herd. The matriarch was fierce and protecting of the smaller female and two young elephants. The longer I watched the elephants, the easier it became to see they had personalities and societal structures of their own. I had never realized that I could become so involved with and care

This project is having an immense, direct, and long-term impact on the lives of hundreds of Sri Lankan people. My own contribution was small, but in the grand scheme, the research I contributed to is changing lives. Families are sleeping soundly knowing their crops are protected by the bee fence and they are earning more from the orange crops than they were with the rice yields.

**Describe how this experience is connected to your plans as a student or future professional.**

I approached this project intending to relate the research to my original major in psychology and my minor in sustainability, and while I am still considering both, I found that this project related best to my studies in political science. Through my conversations with the coordinators from SLWCS, I was able to learn about the politics behind the human-elephant conflict. For example, members of the Sri Lankan government has been intentionally pulling funds from the SLWCS so that they can return them later during campaign season, thereby helping their image. Also, from simply traveling with people from countries all over the world (England, Scotland, Austria, Germany, Holland, Australia to name a few), I learned about other countries' education systems, socioeconomic situations, and politics as well as their views on the United States. Some of the most treasured conversations I had during my trip took place around the dinner table, when we as travelers from diverse countries dined with locals and talked about politics. This experience as a whole affirmed my desire to remain in the political science major, but it shifted my intended focus from domestic to international politics. I have decided that it is imperative that I find a career that involves international traveling and I am considering studying environmental and third-world issues. I realize this may sound vague, but my trip to Sri Lanka completely changed my idea of what I want my career to be, so I'm still figuring it out and I'm excited about the prospects. This experience, I believe, is best helping me discern my future career, but it also is aiding me in developing a thesis in my undergraduate studies and choosing a focus for a Master's degree, something I had not considered before my trip.

**What advice would you give other students who are planning to pursue similar projects?**

This is an interesting question because I haven't been home for two months and three Notre Dame students have already contacted me with questions about my project and requests for advice on their own project. The advice I gave mostly fell into these categories: choosing, planning, proposing, and enjoying. First, students who want to have an international experience should choose a project that will be fulfilling, meaningful, applicable, and beneficial. It is important to choose a project not just on the merits of the work, but also on what you can contribute to it. Second, planning is arguably the most important logistical part of the project because it comes in two phases, before and after the grant is proposed. Before, you need to plan out what you want to do, why you want to do it, where you'll go and stay, money you will need, vaccinations, transportation, and so much more. There are many hidden costs in an international trip, so it is important to consider it from every angle. Also, it is vital that you do all of the research necessary on the area you are hoping to visit. Once your research proposal has been granted, you need to fulfill the pre-trip promises you made in your proposal, make the bookings, get the vaccinations, pack your bag, and continue to research important information relative to your trip. I recommend following a news outlet from your intended destination so you have an idea of what is going on in that country on a day-to-day basis. When it comes to proposing your actual project, you need to ensure you're submitting your work to the correct institution and that your project is presented in a well-researched, clear, and concise format. You need to convey through your grant proposal that you are prepared to make your journey and that the research or work you want to do is worthwhile. Finally, enjoy your project. Whether you are following elephants in Sri Lanka or retracing the Odyssey in the Aegean, make sure you are enjoying the trip for which you have worked so hard. A smile can go a long way when you are traveling abroad and it might just turn out to enrich your experience in a way you could have never imagined.


