

Lufkin Middle School teacher spends summers learning about science in exotic locales

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By NICK WADE/The Lufkin News

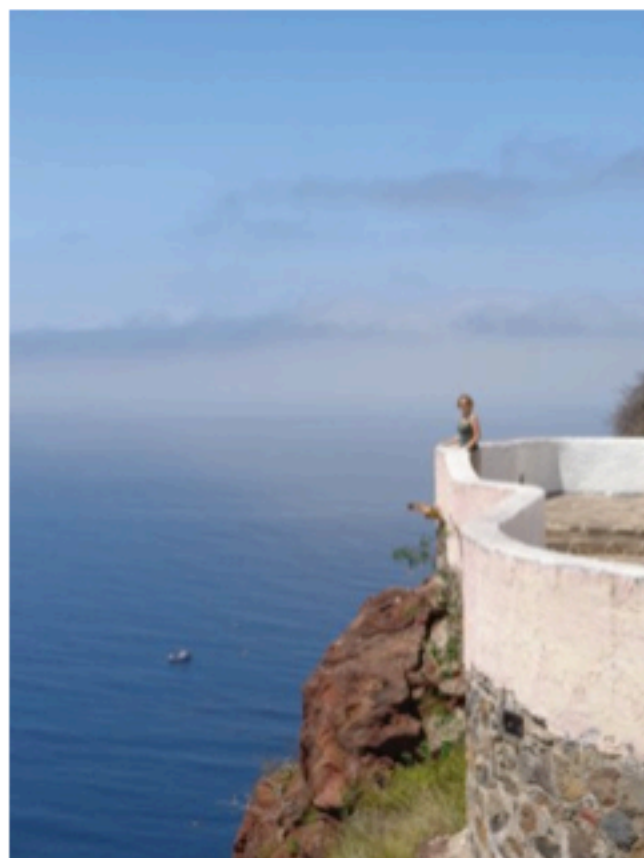
Lufkin Middle School teacher Jennifer Stover is working on her master's degree. During the fall and spring semesters, she takes online classes after spending her days teaching sixth-grade science. But during the summer, Stover spends time in a different type of classroom.

Through the Global Field Program, a collaboration of Earth Expeditions, the Natural Science Foundation, the Cincinnati Zoo and Miami University of Ohio, Stover will spend three summers in exotic locations and conservation hot spots around the globe, gaining first-hand knowledge and experience of inquiry-driven education, environmental stewardship and global understanding.

This summer, her first in the program, Stover traveled to Baja, Mexico, where she and her classmates joined a growing network of leaders who work together to bring about change in local and global contexts.

"This program really seemed like the perfect fit for me," said Stover, whose parents, Gordon and Charlotte Henley, operate Ellen Trout Zoo in Lufkin. "With me being a teacher and my parents being zoologists, this kind of experience was definitely something I was looking for."

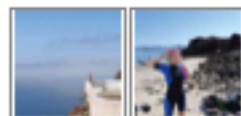
The experience was unlike any classroom setting Stover had been a part of, beginning with a 10-hour bus ride from San Diego, Calif., to Baja.



Contributed photo

Baja, Mexico

Lufkin Middle School teacher Jennifer Stover poses for a picture in Baja, Mexico, where she took part in the Global Field Program, where she is working on her master's degree. Experts from various scientific fields were on hand to talk to Stover and her fellow students and teach them about science through first-hand experiences.



"This is a graduate program, so our instructors expected us to be engaged from the start," she said. "During the bus ride, we had discussion topics that we had to go through to begin the process. We went right into the center of Baja and spent the first five days in the desert."

While in the desert, Stover was involved in group discussions, presented papers she had written, and listened to "lectures" from experts in various fields of science.

"It wasn't anything like your typical lecture," she said. "We didn't just sit and listen to someone talk, we were constantly walking through the desert and looking at different aspects of biology. We had an expert in botany who walked around and pointed out the different plants that were around us. We had a lady who literally wrote the book on fish biology in the Sea of Cortez, so when we left the desert and went to the sea, she was there with us, snorkeling and pointing things out."

Stover and her classmates did not spend a single night indoors, sleeping under the stars on cots each night. Class activities included scorpion surveys, which consisted of students walking through the desert at night with black lights.

"Scorpions actually glow under a black light," Stover said. "I mean, they glow so bright that it looks radioactive. Then, you take the black light away, shine a regular flashlight at the same spot and you can barely see them."

Stover listened to her instructors, took notes, swam with sea lions and battled full moon nights that she called "too bright to sleep." But the most memorable event of her trip — the one that literally took her breath away — was coming face to face with 30-foot whale sharks.

"Our instructors said we needed to be on the beach at 7 a.m., so we were there throwing our gear into the boats, laughing, some of us falling in the water. It was no big deal," Stover said. "But then they told us that we were going to be looking for whale sharks. Now, the water temperature was still very cool, and mostly whale sharks come in to give birth and then go back out to the Pacific, so we were excited, but we didn't really have high hopes."

Ten minutes into their outing, Stover and her classmates spotted enormous tails coming out of the water.

"Someone yelled, and then all the boats were speeding towards these tails," she said. "As we got closer, they killed the engines and coasted up. I leaned over the edge and saw this 30-foot whale shark swimming right below the surface. I'm going crazy and my instructor is yelling at me to put on my wetsuit. So a minute later I'm swimming with this huge thing and I'm honestly crying inside my snorkel mask. I was so excited I couldn't breathe. It was the coolest thing ever."

Since she grew up with zoologists for parents, the Global Field Program feels like home to Stover, who said she's more than comfortable being surrounded by the combination of teachers and zoologists on the trip who loved nature.

"Being able to do what we did, interacting with nature that way, that's what it's all about," she said. "It's incredible, it's unreal and helps to light a fire under us so that we can bring this stuff back to our own homes and begin to grow community-based initiatives that focus on the three pillars of the program — community-based conservation, environmental stewardship and global understanding."

Stover is already planning to start a science club at LMS and begin working on community projects. She said she hopes, in the future, to take groups of students to exotic places to study science.

"I want to show the students how exciting nature can be," she said. "I want them to actually experience it, not just see it in a book. I want them to discover things. This program will help with all of that through the networking, the contacts and the tools that it provides."



Stover has two more summers in which she will be globe-trotting for science, and working on a Capstone project for her final assignment. When she completes the program she will have a master's in teaching biological sciences, and she will continue to "set the fire" under her students and her community about the importance of nature.

"It's like an acknowledgement of all of these beautiful things that are around you," Stover said. "They are worth knowing about, and worth saving. Conservation is important, and we can't forget that."

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