Learning Spanish and interviewing in the fishing community of San José, Peru, funded by the Santander Travel Fund.

The £500 that was I was awarded through the Santander Travel Fund allowed me to undertake a language course to improve my comprehension of Spanish, which I used in interviews at my study site, the fishing village of San José in Peru. Having a basic understanding of Spanish allowed me to better integrate with the fishermen and their wider community, offering me the ability to more easily convey my thoughts to understand respondents during interviews. Late last year I was also able to make an initial visit to my field site to begin building relations with my target population. Finally, on the way to my field site I was able to present some of my DPhil research at the 28th International Congress for Conservation Biology in Cartagena, Columbia.

My DPhil research is focused on investigating novel ways to reduce the unintended catch (bycatch) of species which are not targeted in fisheries, based on strategies widely used for engaging with resource users in terrestrial conservation. As part of my work, I am exploring the effectiveness of different methods of changing fisher behavior in addressing bycatch, with a focus on reducing the number of turtles captured in both the Peru and US Californian surface driftnet fisheries.

My case study site in Peru is the fishing port of San José in the northern Lambayeque region. Here I am working with a local NGO, ProDelphinus. In 2015, ProDelphinus began a trial for a scheme to reduce bycatch with five San Jose gillnet skippers and their crew. Skippers and crew agree to use acoustic alarms on their nets to reduce the likelihood of capturing dolphins and whales, lights to reduce the likelihood of capturing turtles, and take onboard a small-scale electronic monitoring device to improve data on the number of non-target species captured. In exchange for taking on this bycatch reduction “toolbox” they are buying into a conservation initiative that will afford them a higher price for their catch through local market distributors and restaurants in future. How to expand the bycatch reduction initiative to ensure long-term uptake and success within the wider San José fishing community was a question I was interested in answering.

In order to investigate how best to expand strategies to minimise the capture of turtles in the San José gillnet fishery, I undertook a Social Network Analysis. Social networks are patterns of relationships between individuals and can facilitate the flow of information and improve cooperation within communities that hold varying stakeholder perspectives. Social Network
Analyses often require a census of the target population, in this case, I targeted the skippers (also known as captains) of the gillnet fishing boats that launched and landed from San José.

Attempting to interview all the gillnet skippers in San José was no easy task. What little data was available on the number of active skippers was over ten years old and led me to believe there would be around 50-70 active skippers operating from the port during the winter months I was surveying. Once I arrived and the interviews were underway I quickly realised this was an underestimate, with the final number of interviewed gillnet skippers being 170.

Throughout all these interviews I was thankful to have improved my understanding of Spanish and to have made an initial visit to my study site. These experiences would not have been possible without the Santander Travel Grant. Thanks to the award I was able to fulfil my aim of understanding how information about the uptake of new fishing technologies and behavioural change flows within the San José gillnet fishing community. Having a better understanding of the native tongue allowed me to converse more easily with respondents, offering me the ability to build up a rapport, gain trust and pass on information that I hope will lead to more sustainable fishing practices within the community in future. I am extremely grateful to have received support from the Santander Travel Award, without its generous contribution I would not have had such a rich and meaningful experience during my 2017 field season.
San José gillnet fishermen organise their nets in the early morning.

The first information meeting held with the San José gillnet skippers.
Interviewing a gillnet skipper in his home.
Traditional Peruvian Totora reed fishing boats used for line fishing. These boats are present along the Peruvian coastline.