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**I understand you are under an internship programmed working with Dr. Ram Bhujel?
When did you first arrive in Bangkok?**

Two weeks ago, on the 23rd of September

How much longer do you have planned here at AIT?

I have a 3-month study visa. Then I would like to stay for probably another month afterwards either at AIT or around Thailand.

Are you privately funded?

Yes, I'm paying for everything myself

Okay! An adventure I trust. Are you here with any institutions or are you here on your own accord?

No, this is on my own accord

Now you are from S. Africa? Whereabouts?

Durban, on the east coast.

So quite a big marine presence there, from what I know.

Yeah! I studied marine biology...

..so your educational background is...

I did an undergraduate degree in general biology and then I continued with my Honours years, which is similar to masters with course work and a dissertation in the final year and this on coral aquaculture.

What was the name of your university?

The University of KwaZulu-Natal

So your educational interest is chiefly marine science?

Yeah, marine biology and conservation.

...any other academic interest?

No no no, that's one of the main reasons why I came to AIT. I'm trying to get more into conservation with aquaculture and although a lot of it is obviously fresh-water base but I feel this is a good foundation to learn as it has a knock on effect. If you can learn how to help develop sustainable fisheries practices to not over exploit wild stock this contributes largely to marine conservation. This is one of the main reasons why I'm here, to learn these techniques.

Any previous relevant work experiences that you would like to share?

Well I've worked with the University of KwaZulu-Natal for much of my early career, which involved teaching practical's to 1st and 2nd year students and working as a research intern with my department during my honours year. I was also employed by Eskom, which is the main

energy supplier in S. Africa, and they are involved in several research projects where one of the projects involved investigating coral aquaculture...

A very relevant field to Asia, but, S. Africa offers several marine research opportunities so why did you choose to AIT?

The employment opportunities in Durban are not very extensive whatsoever. There are a few main marine research organizations in S. Africa but to get into them you need work experience. I was scouring the Internet for internship opportunities everywhere so that I can get some experience in aquaculture and one of the places I just happen to stumbled across was AIT. I sent an e-mail, one of the many I've sent over the weeks, and got such a positive and prompt response from Dr. Ram Bhujel stating he would like me come and help with a project and two weeks later I ended up in Thailand!

So things just happened very suddenly?

Yeah exactly

What were your first impression of the AIT website?

First of all I was really excited to find a site with all these internship opportunities, because it's not just the one in AIT, but the other facilities in Vietnam and Nepal and it was so good to see that there an institute that was providing these unique opportunities for students and realizing that we need practical experience. There are a lot of institutions that's all course work and not necessarily appropriate and not practical.

I was quite impressed after finding AIT and getting a good response from Dr. Bhujel convinced me to look into AIT further and seeing that it was this international post grad campus made it easier for me to make that leap and to actually come here because you know you'll be in the same boat as other people. I also like to travel and seeing new places and the sharing intelligent and stimulation exchanges made me quite happy to make this decision.

So you were quite happy when you first saw this opportunity but surely you must had some doubts?

I don't really think like that! No, obviously funding this opportunity, I think that's my primary concern. Coming from S. Africa where living costs are very high and our currency is not very competitive. Knowing that I had to come here and pay for everything myself, living out of home for the first time and having an extended stay in a foreign country, adapting to Asian culture with such a different language; these points were probably some of the apprehensions I had. Am I able to come here and survive for 3 to 4 months? But I think I'm doing fine...

So very little difficulty in making that choice then?

Yeah it wasn't too much. It was a case of: "okay, can I afford it? - I need to do this for my career - I need the practical experience, time to go!

So what was the final persuasive point that made you decide 100% that you were going to come here?

I don't even know! It all happened so fast! I got the email, went to the travel agent, saw how much it was going to cost, applied for the Thai visa, got the visa, then left three days later. You know, I think having such a positive confirmation from what I was going to get out of this and the fact that there was farm facility on site providing practical activities and being able to participate in some of the course work and engage with the people that are working is really perfect.

Just to round up that section, how did you feel about choosing coming to Asia and AIT, did you have that sense of adventure that you were going into a new culture?

Yeah, I had no problems especially knowing that it was this international campus with like-minded people who are in the same boat. You cant feel like you're the only one making this

decision, everyone's made that same leap to get here so your going to be able to relate every one. To me that's important, having that to relate to and AIT has all those fundamentals.

Such as Rahul [Brazilian Intern], he's had to make the same decision as you. So lets move on to your time here at AIT. What was your first impression of the actual institute?

I got here in the evening, it was a little bit daunting, I arrived at about 8 PM. I went and sat in my dorm, which was empty except for my Just my luggage. Then I thought, "okay, I cannot just here", so I unpacked my bag and went for a walk around campus. Luckily I stumbled across the student union, which provided maps. Great! So I took the map and did some more wandering and saw some people playing badminton and I thought "this is great!" because I play badminton back at home and at least there is one thing I can relate to!

It was a novel experience. In S. Africa campuses, there is still a little bit of racial prejudices and to come here and see an international environment in the dorms, café and everybody involved all the time is something completely new for me so it was very interesting to come, and luckily I have a great room mate and who was very friendly on the first night so that made everything a lot smoother.

So even though you arrived late there was still a friendly reception?

Yeah

Now lets move on to the work you are doing here, what exactly do you do here in AARM?

Basically I am here as an intern to get practical experience on the tilapia hatchery. I have not dealt with freshwater systems very much and although I understand much of the theory behind it and getting this hands on experience; from every stage of the tilapia culture process, collecting the eggs, to sale and harvest is very helpful.

I'm trying to learn everything from this and my main responsibility is to contribute to AIT and AARM by writing and promoting the research that is happening here and how it can relate back to Africa and at the same time understand the technologies and adapt it to an African setting and promoting AIT at the same time. For now that's basically what I'm doing here. I'm not too certain of what will happen in the future...

Has it been a difficult process so far? Have you encountered any major difficulties?

No not at all. I came for the first week and my supervisor was away in Phuket [Conference] but everyone else in the department has been very accommodating. I went straight to the hatchery with Mrs. Lucia, and she showed me around and then from the next day we observed at the eggs, pretty much everyday and note the different activities occurring at the hatchery and ponds. I try to be there and get involved as much as I can.

When Dr. Ram Bhujel came back from Phuket, he continued work on a manual he was editing for publication, I have good English editorial skills, and so I was able to assist him in editing that. At the same time, reading a manual on aquaculture is a pretty good start!

Now this week I've started writing articles on potential replacement for fishmeal with plant protein meals. For me this is important, that you have these sustainable aquaculture units, but your feeding them with fishmeal and to me that is a complete oxymoron and I have a bit of a problem with that. I'm trying to promote complete sustainability. This the kind of work I am trying to do...

It seems you like you have a lot of work. Are you enjoying it so far?

Yes! You know I'm paying to be here and I have to get the most out of it. It would be an injustice to myself if I don't and I'm enjoying it. I've had a gap year after University where I helped out in my campus and but was not actually engaged fully in research and it's refreshing to get back into it now.

So “getting your hands dirty” so to speak. What is the best aspect so far? Is it being able to get first hand experiences or is it the interaction with the staff, students, and professors at AIT?

I think it's an overall successful experience with AIT so far. What I've gotten out of it; learning the hatchery processes and learning from my peers and supervisors is completely satisfying. There is nothing lacking for me here.

Ah okay, so you say that the input from Dr. Bhujel, Mrs. Lucia, and other AIT members have been helpful so far?

Yes, very much so

Any comments on the facilities, have they been satisfactory?

Yeah, I haven't had any problems. Obviously it's very different, but I've got no specific comparisons and I don't have any particular facility standards in mind. So everything has been lovely. And the fact that I have my own office is good as well; I was very excited about that!

Have you been involved in any field trips out side AIT?

Not research based, but I have been travelling around personally ...

...So you've been around to fish farms?

No no no, that's what I'm saying..

Ah! Just as important I would say! What do you want to achieve from your time here?

Basically, I need a better understating of freshwater aquaculture practices and I would like to, as a contribution due to my work here, understand how to relate it back to Africa and promote sustainable ecosystems with the help of aquaculture and better fisheries practices learned here in AIT.

This is the direction I want to go, whether it is marine or inland aquaculture. Previously, I've had little freshwater or marine aquaculture influences and for me to come here and have everything available has just been great.

So your finding you time to be satisfying at AIT?

Wonderful! Yes completely satisfying.

On that note, would you recommend AIT to your peers back in S. Africa?

Of course, I would actually speak to my supervisor to even possibly start a proper exchange programmes with AIT, it's worth it.

That's certainly exciting news. We'll get to the last section of this interview. What are you future plans? How do you plan to apply your experiences acquired here?

Basically now that I will have some more experience dealing with aquaculture systems I think it'll be easier to facilitate job acquisition. It's really tough, you apply everywhere with little success but now I have more experience and I'll see where I go from here. I have a potential internship / job offer next year and I think this is a positive addition to my CV to facilitate getting that next year.

Is this job offer in S. Africa or around Asia?

It's in the Maldives...

Ah okay, even better! Okay so to end. Would you ever come back to AIT?

Yes def. it's amazing, Thailand is an amazing country.

Nichola Van Os, thanks for your time and we wish you the best for you time here at AIT

Interviewed by:

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