

European Voluntary Service at GOB Menorca: When traveling leads you to the right professional path

Giulia Massaro

Can you tell us about your background before joining the European Voluntary Service?

I'm from Italy, I grew up in the most rural province of Tuscany, Maremma, and I spent my 20's in Pisa, where I moved to attend the University of Pisa. Growing up in such a rural part of Italy at first didn't impress me so much; as the majority of young people, I saw this rurality as a simple lack of night-life and cosmopolitan events. Every concert or big event was organized at least 2 hours away from my home, and that was all that mattered to me. Later, seeing other types of territories, I learnt to appreciate where I am from and how important it was in order to preserve central Italy's biodiversity. I understood the importance of big open landscapes, wide horizons, the possibility of seeing every shade of green changing through the seasons, but most of all I understood the privilege of eating local products, buying them directly from the farmer.

Before joining the European Voluntary Service project, I studied Environmental Sciences: I studied the basics of Natural Sciences and then focused on multiple aspects concerning the impact of civilization on the environment. I did my final work collaborating with my professor of Environmental Microbiology research and the main topic was how to decontaminate tannery wastewaters using a micro fungus of the genus *Aspergillus*. I had the privilege to be able to deepen my knowledge in this field through a traineeship in the Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona.

What made you decide to switch your career up and join field work?

Although that type of study was very interesting to me, I had to admit to myself that the lab world was not an option as a future career. I suffered from being indoors and not doing social work. My work in the lab was a "health check" routine of the fungus colony: I was in charge of controlling some vital parameters and to make sure that the reactor was clean and functioning. Sometimes, ensuring that all the pipes were unobstructed could be a really grimy job

It was the first time I traveled for academic purposes; I had already lived abroad years before but it was for professional purposes with nothing to do with the scientific field.

How did you hear about GOB Menorca? How did you enjoy this Mediterranean island and its specificities?

During summer 2020 I was looking for a project that can let me explore and experience new aspects of environmental preservation. After some years of static academic studies followed by lockdown, I was looking for a new experience, a project where I could learn through doing. A friend told me about the GOB's Menorca project, so I decided to send the CV and try my luck.

GOB MENORCA: Protecting Menorca's environment and biodiversity

GOB (Balearic Group of Ornithology and Defense of Nature) is a non-profit association working in the Balearic Islands since 1973, with a working group in Menorca, Mallorca and Ibiza. The insular arm of Menorca has been running since 1977 and regroups more than 1,400 members.

GOB's principal objective is to reach a sustainable economy which implies transforming anthropic pressure into sustainable practices in different sectors. In regards to food systems, the Custòdia Agrària programme, Menorca's Agricultural Land Stewardship programme led by GOB uses the Land Stewardship approach to sign voluntary agreements, with no economic transaction, on sustainable agricultural practices between them and local farmers and landowners. In return, they help with product promotion, they organize volunteering days and help with training and fundraising actions.

Because sustainability is interconnected to a myriad of elements, GOB Menorca is confronting unsustainable practices in a holistic way via different projects: Es Viver de Plantes de Menorca (a gardening center and plant nursery of local plants), a Wildlife Recovery Center, Marine Environment work facilitating sustainable fishing with mediation and awareness, policy and advocacy work around renewable energies and land management, environmental education and summer camps...

The European Voluntary Service: when mobility allows personal growth

How did you learn about EVS and why did you choose to participate?

I learnt about the EVS project at university, as it is a perfect way to consolidate aspects of my studies, have new experiences or simply a

moment to press the pause button while doing something good for the planet and for others. Many of my friends attended this program or similar ones and they always had good feedback, so why not try?



Volunteers at the Centre for the Recovery of Wild Fauna - Photo Credits: GOB Menorca

EVS offers a variety of choices; before taking part in the EVS project with GOB Menorca I had found another 1-year-long volunteering project, sponsored by the Italian government. It seemed very interesting but was canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, it gave me the opportunity to get to know more about Peru, where I was supposed to go, monitored by Caritas. The project was supposed to be located in some villages around the Amazon Forest, in collaboration with local communities to introduce water management and nutritional health improvements, such as separating wastewater, greywater and freshwater, installing dry toilets and monitoring infant and child nutrition.

Were there any challenges: technical (internet...), access to information and/or help, opportunities, visa issues... What did you find the most difficult to handle while

registering for the program, during the program but also at the end?

I didn't handle too much bureaucracy as the sending and receiving associations do this for the volunteers: having to do the two weeks of training online instead of in person was the only real, but inevitable, challenge.

Are you monitored by a tutor or someone from the EVS program? How long did it take you from the moment you registered to the moment you finished your mission and went back home?

I was monitored by my supervisors, Adrià and Sara, the two Environmental Education managers at GOB Menorca. I registered in September and was given the green light to begin in November. I arrived in Menorca at the end of November 2020 and never left; I decided to remain here after finishing the EVS program. After this experience I decided to continue living in Menorca: at this moment I'm carrying out my own personal project running scientific laboratories for primary school kids in the city of Mahon and I'm so happy!

What kind of dynamic does the program offer? What would you change now that you know some of the weaknesses/strengths of the program? What kind of skills did you gain and did it have a positive impact on you?

The EVS program offers the opportunity to try, explore and discover a new place within a safe structure. As it can pan out in so many ways and so many different types of organizations are involved it's not easy to point out weaknesses and strengths, as it really depends on your receiving organization.

In GOB Menorca for example, I had the opportunity to test my ideas and my potential: the

association asked for my help with some concrete issues, and gave me carte blanche to solve them. This free space, seeing that the solutions I proposed worked and that my contribution impacted positively on the community empowered me a lot.

This project had a lot of positive impact. I learned about Menorca's ecosystem, history and tradition, a new language (es menorquí, a dialect of Catalan) and I gained a new network of wonderful people. I also had the opportunity to learn how to structure activities and how to deal with different groups of people. There's always something left to learn, but I definitely learnt a lot during these 12 months.

Agriculture and Food in Minorque:

Menorca is one of the four principal islands of the Balearic archipelago that belongs to the Spanish Autonomous Communities, it is subject to the Tramontana north wind especially in winter. This small island of 700 km² has been declared a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1993, in order to protect the endemic and diverse species and the cultural heritage it holds.

With its Mediterranean climate and history, agriculture is key in protecting and conserving the landscapes even if it concerns only 1,6% of the GDP and 2,6% of the population of the island. Dominated by an agroforestry mosaic, Menorca's rural side is composed of tancas¹ that protect from the winds and are used as stockyards. The island has a strong presence of dairy cattle breeding, especially for Mahon cheese, but also produces fruits, vegetables, cereals and small livestock. Now there is a resurgence of the autochthonous breed of cow used for milk and

¹ A network of dry walls originally built by the Arabs which protects from the strong winds

meat, “Vermella Menorquina” that is better adapted to the island’s climate and environment.

However, there are several challenges the island has to tackle: the lack of workforce in the agricultural sector, the lack of competitiveness of the products caused by the double insularity of Menorca, the lack of diversity of production, the lack of marketing organization, the lack of cooperatives...

Since 2017, Menorca has adhered to the Milan Pact making food an essential axis to promote the sustainability of territories. The island is betting on niche sectors such as luxury and sustainable agrotourism with the objective of developing territorial resilience; especially in a place where 88,4% of the island is either a forest or an agricultural area.

Building bridges between science and field work

Can you explain the type of activities you had to handle during your EVS at GOB Menorca? What did the field bring you as a scientist; did it change your opinion/perspective about some issues?

In GOB Menorca I used to collaborate with the person in charge of environmental education in order to elaborate new activities for children and adolescents. We prepared both summer camps and activities to be carried out in class. I was also in charge of the local volunteers' network; in charge of welcoming them into the association, taking care of them and accompanying them through some activities such as caring for wild animals in recovery.



Giulia and the kids at the farm near Mahon -
Photo Credits: GOB Menorca

One of the educational activities runs on a farm near Mahon. Here, the kids have the opportunity to see how cheese is produced in a sustainable way and know how it is possible to care for wildlife, animals and land while producing food... We try to let them understand how society’s fast pace has deviated from the environment’s natural rhythm and what possibilities we have to return to a sustainable path when it comes to producing food. Even though the kids are obviously not the person in charge of the family’s food consumption choices, it is very important to learn from an early age what is behind a piece of cheese or behind an egg and what differences there are in buying a chicken breast from the supermarket or from a local farmer.

During my year in GOB Menorca, I also took part in agricultural volunteering sessions as part of the Custòdia Agrària programme, where the GOB community helps some of the farms adhere to the land stewardship network with occasional extensive work in the field. I think this is a great way to raise the general public’s awareness on what a sustainable farm management model looks like and normally the more you know the more you can appreciate it.



GOB's Custodia Agraria field activities - Photo
Credits: GOB Menorca

What do you think is lacking between the research world and the field? What would you want to see happen in the near future between these sectors and how would it have a positive impact on tomorrow's challenges?

I think that most of the time within the research sector, maybe as a natural consequence of its complexity, is a quite hermetic world. The results and the achievements obtained inside the labs only reach the public if they are very BIG achievements, but most of the time the fascinating process of research goes unnoticed. Something similar happens with knowledge of flora and fauna : when people have a closer relationship to wildlife, it helps them understand its importance and uniqueness and the reasons why it's so important to protect the natural world and act responsibly. Volunteering with a local environmental association helps this process and that's one of the reasons why I liked my work with GOB Menorca so much.

I'm very grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in a project like this. Personally, I would suggest everyone should get involved in some volunteer project, it is something you can learn from at every age or stage of life and gain a lot of experience in the field you choose to volunteer in.

Giulia Massaro graduated in Environmental Science in Pisa. Although the focus of her career has been environmental biotechnology, she is now more interested in environmental education and community outreach. Through volunteering she has been able to accumulate experiences in various fields and live many adventures; among them, the most relevant for her took place last year as a European Volunteer with GOB Menorca, in the framework of the European Solidarity Corps programme.

GOB (Grup Balear d'Ornitologia i Defensa de la Naturalesa) is a not-for-profit environmental association, which has been working in the Balearic Islands since 1973. The branch working on the island of Menorca was created in 1977 and now has more than 1,200 members. Its primary objective is to contribute to the achievement of a sustainable economy by making human activities compatible with environmental values. There are many areas of work including marine environment protection, a plant nursery and sustainable gardening service, a wildlife recovery centre, land policy influence, environmental education, and the established agricultural land stewardship programme Custòdia Agrària, which has been running for over 15 years and currently supports 36 farms. GOB opens CES positions every year for various roles. If you are interested in donating, please click [here](#).

