

## **Sophia Winkler-Schor**

International Research and Training Grant for Income Graduate Students (2019)  
Institute for Regional and International Studies, UW-Madison

With the support of the IRIS International Research and Training Grant for Incoming Graduate Students I travelled to the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico during Summer 2021 for six weeks to participate in a four-week Maya language immersion program and conduct preliminary fieldwork for my PhD dissertation. My PhD investigates people's motivation for participating in conservation programs to identify what psychological drivers contribute to long-term participation in conservation behaviors. In tandem with my language program, I conducted interviews and participated in the program activities to collect observational data.

Since there are very few programs that teach advanced Maya, I was able to organize a private program for myself and a colleague that allowed us to travel to Mexico this summer while still taking many safety precautions to be in compliance with COVID requirements. I was fortunate to learn Maya from two accomplished teachers one in Merida (where I had to quarantine for a week) and another in the village of Sisbichén, where I spent three weeks living with a host family, taking two hours of language class a day, participating in workshops to learn culturally relevant activities (i.e., cooking, basket weaving, farming) and researching the federal program "Sembrando Vida" [sowing life] that provides resources, funding, training and support to farmers for participating in sustainable agriculture and conservation.

Living with a family in a rural community in Mexico was invaluable for the development of my language skills. While I am not conducting my research in Maya, being able to converse with people in Maya demonstrates to people my commitment and interest in their lives, culture and experiences. Through living in this community, I made a lot of contacts and friends who will be helpful throughout my PhD research.

In addition to my Maya classes, I was participating in the Sembrando Vida workshops, attending the weekly community work parties at the nursery, visiting participants fields and conducting interviews with participants. I collected extensive observational data that helped me understand the program itself and learned about how participants are engaging in it. I also conducted 12 interviews and have two dozen hours of audio which serves as the foundation for doctoral research.

The goals of field seasons were: 1) to improve my Maya conversational skills and 2) learn more about Sembrando Vida and develop connections for future research. These goals were more than accomplished and I am eager to delve into the data I collected this summer and begin analyzing the data I collected.