

IRIS report

Teresa POPP

The International Research and Training Grant for Incoming Graduate Students has allowed me to spend a year in Montpellier, France participating in an international collaborative scientific project. This project was funded by the prestigious “Make Our Planet Great Again” (MOPGA) initiative created by the French government to combat global climate change. I was able to represent the University of Wisconsin’s Department of Integrative Biology on an international platform, working alongside scientists in the Marine Biodiversity Exploitation and Conservation (MARBEC) laboratory at the University of Montpellier.

My project examines marine organisms’ response to climate change. Specifically, how the brackish water copepod, *Eurytemora affinis* species complex, adapts to salinity decline. This copepod species supports major fisheries in both the Baltic Sea as well as the Great Lakes and is therefore a crucial part of the food web. Understanding this copepod’s ability to adjust to a changing environment is essential in understanding species adaptation amid climate change.

The University of Montpellier hosts one of the best marine physiology labs in the world. Students in this lab have access to the latest technologies and can collaborate with top scientists in their field. I have spent this past year in France developing my research skills by learning the most advanced techniques in physiology, microscopy, and lab culturing which allowed me to apply these skills to dozens of experiments that I was able to direct. While attending the Université de Montpellier I presented this research at two conferences: I gave a poster presentation at the Society of Experimental Biology (SEB) online and an ‘in person’ oral presentation at the Colloque d’Ecophysiologie Animale (CEPA).

While working towards my PhD in France, I also became immersed in French lifestyle. I initially moved to Montpellier with my husband and one year old son. Since moving abroad, we welcomed another baby boy. We have learned the French language as a family and greatly enjoy traveling around France and conversing with native speakers. While this was challenging at first, we are now comfortable holding conversations with local shop workers, restaurant employees, as well as friends. My son, who is now almost three years old, progressed rapidly and spoke comfortably with the other children and workers in his French daycare, also known as crèche. Every morning, we would walk hand in hand to crèche while he would sing “Frère Jacques” or “Alouette, Gentille Alouette”. These seemingly ordinary moments are in fact, some of what I will remember most fondly.

Being able to spend time in France with my family was truly a once in a lifetime opportunity. Actually living and working in a foreign country imposes many challenges versus to spending vacation time there. We dealt with a lot of administrative paperwork to get residency permits, health insurance, bank accounts, and European phone numbers, but we were also able to participate in the most amazing childcare system I have ever seen. Also, as a scientist who studies marine organisms, living in the South of France on the Mediterranean Sea was incredibly fascinating! This entire experience has changed the way I view the world. I now approach every situation with more patience and empathy. This opportunity has been incredible for my professional development but also for my family, and I thank the IRIS for helping me achieve this.