

Final Report: Research Stay at the University of British Columbia

Ina Tessnow- von Wysocki

Freie Universität Berlin

Humboldt Universität zu Berlin

Universität Potsdam

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A huge amount of waste accumulates in the oceans and negative effects can be seen and felt across the world. I am passionate about protecting the environment and I wanted to do more than simply switching from plastic bottles and take-away cups to re-usable alternatives – I wanted to conduct research to make a difference and provide solutions to the global problem of marine plastic pollution. To find solutions to global problems, it is necessary to look at them from various points of view and to compare best practice examples from different parts of the world. But, most importantly, to solve global problems there need to be interdisciplinary and international communication. The University Alliance for Sustainability is reflecting exactly that: Exchange of ideas and practices, collaboration and understanding across continents.

As a master student in international relations, I focused on environmental protection throughout my studies and chose the topic of marine plastic pollution for my master thesis. I had four months to complete the thesis and I spent around half of the time at the partner university. My research focused on international regimes for the protection of global public goods and potential treaty elements for a successful global legally binding mechanism to adequately address the issue. The research design of my thesis included interviews with experts in the field of marine plastic pollution, international law and global governance.

My motivation to conduct research at UBC came in part from the active leadership of the Canadian Government to push for solutions regarding the problem of marine plastic pollution under their G7 presidency, as well as the fact that much is happening in Vancouver on this topic because the city connects to the ocean and its coastline and surrounding islands are affected by the problem. The possibility to study near the ocean additionally contributed to my choice of UBC as walks along the water immensely motivate my work and strengthen the connection to the environment that I am seeking to protect with my thesis. The city where Greenpeace was created is also a hub for stakeholders from NGOs and academia who work on plastic pollution prevention. Regular events, such as beach clean ups and discussions around protecting the oceans, reminded me on a regular basis of the urgency of the problem and provided the space to meet many wonderful people who work on similar issues that I would like to call lifelong friends. The research stay at the University of British Columbia offered a great benefit for my thesis because I got in contact with NGOs and local actors in the region, corporations, as well as representatives of academia who are contributing to solutions on preventing marine plastic litter and could support my research.

The University Alliance for Sustainability enabled me to conduct research for my master thesis under the supervision of a UBC professor. I received guidance for the research project from Prof. Dr. Kurt Hübner before, during and after my stay in Canada and was included in the circle of affiliates of the Institute of European Studies at UBC. Regular events and lunch discussions at the institute enabled PhD and post doctoral students to share their research and receive feedback, which was a refreshing excursion out of my “plastic ocean” and offered valuable insights and inspiration for further studies. While I was affiliated with the Political Science Department and the Institute of European Studies, the University of British Columbia also offered contact to students and professors working on the issue of plastic pollution in different departments. In this way, I learned about the science behind the chemical components of plastics, their durability in marine environments, as well as their impact on the ecosystem. An interdisciplinary approach to this issue is crucial and without the input from different departments my analysis would not have been as extensive as it is now.

Events and conferences, such as the panel discussion “A National Plastics Pollution Strategy for Canada” at UBC, offered additional contact to stakeholders in the field and gave students the chance to engage with the topic. Regular events in the city, such as movie screenings, awareness-raising campaigns or workshops, organised and sponsored by for-profit and non-profit organisations, such as Vancity, the Plastic Oceans Foundation, Surfrider and Sea Smart, offered the opportunity to receive further information, as well as to meet like-minded people and valuable interview partners. From the beginning I felt included as part of the circle of people working on this issue in Vancouver and

was invited to further events. Some organisations introduced me to other members of the team, based inside and outside of Canada, and further meetings after completion of my master thesis are planned. I am incredibly thankful to have gotten the chance to meet these people, learn about their work and appreciate the contribution of each and every one of them which is crucial for the success of achieving the overall goal.

Even though the research stay comes to an end, the connection to UBC, their professors and the friendships to students remain. Further projects evolve, as I am currently working on a publication with a professor from the partner university, based on my findings from the master thesis. Also the contact to the representatives of for-profit and non-profit organisations who are working on solutions regarding marine plastic pollution is still vivid. I would like to thank the organisations and their representatives once again for their time and insights, their inspirational talks beyond the interview, and their incredible support for me as a young researcher. I am grateful to have gotten the opportunity to work with professors from the partner university and contribute to the intercultural knowledge exchange and global solutions.