**Alina, Interreg volunteer from Zaragoza: “Cooperation opens many ways of seeing the world”**

Alina Vera Paz, 22 years old, from Zaragoza, decided to become an Interreg volunteer to get a glimpse of what a career in conservation could look like. After having found a project which aligned with what she was studying as part of her master’s degree in Ecological Transitions at the Institute of Political Studies of Grenoble, in France, she volunteered for the Mediterranean Biodiversity Protection Community (MBPC) project at the European Topic Centre of the University of Malaga (ETC-UMA) last year.

The MBPC project aims at protecting and promoting Mediterranean natural and cultural resources via the collaboration of many actors across the Mediterranean. “Cooperation is crucial to safeguard the world’s biodiversity and ecosystems. It is the only way forward.” explains now Alina. “Nature knows no political boundaries and therefore its conservation is the collective responsibility of all. Let’s take the example of marine pollution, which was the focus of my work at ETC-UMA. Although there is great potential on local and individual actions, we cannot meet the Paris Agreement goals nor the European Green Deal targets without enhanced collaboration across all sectors and at all scales” she adds. Alina also claims that it isn’t fair either to place the burden on the shoulders of a few.

Through her experience, Alina learnt how to work as part of a large community of international stakeholders to reach together a bigger goal. She tells “I found it interesting to liaise with partners from other European regions, such as France, Italy, and Spain, exchanging and sharing key information on marine litter. This is very important to tackle environmental problems – like maritime pollution”.

Alina volunteered with Interreg Volunteer Youth, an initiative funded by the European Commission and managed by the Association of European Border Regions (AEBR) to promote cooperation among regions by involving young people in collaborative projects. The programme celebrates now its fifth anniversary, and the over 780 young people who, like Alina, volunteered through it in the last five years. Many volunteers were deployed in Aragon, for example at the Interreg Programme POCTEFA. Jean Louis Valls, director of the Working Community of the Pyrenees, the Managing Authority of POCTEFA tells us about their experience hosting volunteers with IVY: “We have been welcoming volunteers from all over Europe to our offices for 4 years. They learn how a European INTERREG programme works from the inside and have the opportunity to live in a city new to them (Jaca) with a great variety of sports and nature activities. For us it is a support in the dissemination of the programme and its projects. It is a win-win situation.”

POCTEFA is the Programme that distributes funding for cooperation projects in the north of Aragon, to foster collaboration with the neighbours in some French territories and Andorra.

For Alina, involving young people has clear benefits, because young people are enthusiastic and can bring a fresh vision to the work that is being carried out. “I contributed to the project through my knowledge on climate change and biodiversity, the mastery of three languages and creative ideas to raise awareness of biodiversity loss and marine pollution in the Mediterranean and to reach a broader audience”, she adds.

2022 being the European Year of Youth, it opens many new opportunities for young people to engage in activities all over Europe – including Aragon. Projects of cooperation and young people can fully embrace the motto of this European Year: shining a light on the importance of European youth to build a better future – greener, more inclusive and digital. Looking at POCTEFA’s experience, Jean Louis Valls adds: “Young people are undoubtedly more committed to Green Europe and certainly have more digital skills than people from previous generations. Thanks to initiatives like IVY we can learn from them in these areas every day”.

Alina devoted her time and skills to promoting a dialogue between different regions in Europe and beyond. This volunteering experience has been the opportunity to have a closer look at how regions work together for better conservation of the natural world. With her experience, she has seen how regions can learn from each other to work better and faster. She is very grateful for this opportunity and recommends it to anyone interested in collaborating with other like-minded people with different cultural backgrounds, or in international and multilingual environments.