

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

REPORT ON EXPEDITION/PROJECT/CONFERENCE

Expedition/Project/

Conference Title: Game Reserve Conservation Volunteer

Travel Dates: 30th of June – 25th of July 2011

Location: Kwantu Game Reserve, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

Group member(s): Daniel Collette

Aims: To learn more about the applications of conservation in a working
game reserve and to experience a different culture.

OUTCOME (not less than 300 words):-

Thanks to the James Rennie Bequest and its generous award I was able to travel to South Africa during the summer of 2011. Whilst in South Africa, I volunteered for three weeks at Kwantu Game Reserve which is a relatively small Game Reserve and is based around the British Settlement village of Sidbury, which has now been converted into the volunteers and staff camp as well as a predator camp. This reserve is largely dependent on the volunteers that work there, even with the hard working permanent staff. Kwantu is a tourist orientated game reserve with the aim of teaching and increasing awareness of the important biodiversity of South Africa. With its rehabilitation centre, predator camp and game drives tourists are able to observe and even interact with the animals. Kwantu is also an important part of Bengal Tiger breeding programme, sadly boasting 0.001% of the worlds' population.

During my stay at Kwantu, I was involved in a variety of task from the general up-keep of the camp to more hands on tasks such as Game Captures. Our day was split up into three working times: 7:30am-9:30am; 10am-1pm and 2pm-5pm, during which I would carry out tasks as part of a group of other volunteers and a game ranger or two. The main tasks were the removal of alien vegetation and the plantation of native vegetation; fence patrols, making sure the electric fences were working correctly but also checking for snares; game counts; game drives; animal interaction, where we were allowed to interact with the tiger and lion cubs and observe the feeding of the big cats in the predator camp; wilderness walks; and game captures, with the aim of treating the animals with an anti-tick solution. Since Kwantu also owns and Elephant rehabilitation centre we spent a lot of time helping out there feeding the elephants and preparing their bedding for the night.

The predator camp situated within the main camp of Kwantu held a pride and a bachelor group of lions, a male and female white lion which were mating at the time of my visit, a cheetah and a family of Bengal tigers, with the adult female pregrant. Within the game reserve itself there was a great range of animals: a breeding herd of elephants, buffalo, 2 white rhinos, giraffes, zebra, ostrich, baboons, many species of antelope, jackels and a wide variety of smaller mammals and over 250 species of birds! Whilst volunteering at Kwantu I learnt a great deal about all of these animals as well as the vegetation around. The game rangers acted as our supervisors but also our tour guides whilst out on the reserve teaching us of the different edible berries, and the uses of some of the vegetation by tribes men. For example, lichens can be used as a natural dye for fabrics and some types were and still are used as wound dressings due to their absorption properties. It was very interesting learning about the way tribes people worked with nature, about the biodiversity of South Africa and the conservation measures which need to be employed.

Amongst the family of tigers were two cubs Bangles and Spice of around 7months old both were very playful and enjoyed playing with the volunteers. Sadly during my stay

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there Spice became ill and sadly died after contracting a tick-borne disease. This only highlights the significance of treating the animals in the reserve with anti-tick solution to reduce the chance of them catching such diseases. Bangles, on the other hand, is fitting fit and will soon be the older sibling to a new cub! During my final week at Kwantu one of the groups of volunteers found a Springbok caught in a snare which had died. Although this is sad there is a little satisfaction in knowing the poachers which planted that snare were not able to profit from it.

It was very interesting to be in the working environment and to be able to apply knowledge learnt in class to real life, and see it in action! I was able to understand the reasoning behind game counts to control numbers, in an attempt to maintain populations at their carrying capacity, which I studied in Population and Community Ecology 3. I could also apply Behavioural Ecology 3 criteria whilst out on game drives and observed Springbok stotting/pronking.

As one of many volunteers I was introduced to and befriended many people from different walks of life. This promoted a more open-minded approach to life. At the weekends we were allowed to go on excursions to Port Elizabeth and visit the city and learn more about the South African culture. We also visited Jeffrey's Bay for a day to watch the World Surfing Championships. During these weekend excursions we were able to take part in lots of different experiences: horse riding on the beach and do the worlds' highest bridge bungee jump of 216m. The bungee jump was definitely an experience to say the least and I don't regret it at all. I have a fear of heights and doing this, I feel, allowed me to at least ease the fear I experience.

I am glad I did this trip. I have come back with memories and friends which I will hopefully never forget. This trip has confirmed my passion for zoology and has lead me to think more carefully about my future career and possibly future post graduate career. As well as the personal life experience I gained, I gained what I hope to be valuable work experience, which may give me a competitive edge in years to come!

I would just like to thank the James Rennie Bequest committee again for considering and accepting me for this award! It has been an opportunity of a lifetime and something which I will treasure for a long time to come!