

DAVIS EXPEDITION FUND

REPORT ON EXPEDITION/PROJECT

Expedition/Project Title: Tropical Biology Association course in Tropical Biology and Conservation

Travel Dates: 22nd June 2002 – 21st July 2002

Location: Kibale Forest and Queen Elizabeth National Parks, Uganda

Group Members: Vicki Fishlock, University of Edinburgh undergraduate, plus 23 other biology students from European and African universities.

Aims: To further tropical fieldwork experience of advanced undergraduates and recent graduates via a series of field exercises, lectures and seminars, culminating in an independent research project in collaboration with a student from another country.

OUTCOME (not less than 300 words):-

The principle aim of TBA is to establish a framework of communicating conservationists and tropical biologists, and the course provides an opportunity to work independently in the field. Although there is a formally taught element to the course and the exercises are initiated by teaching staff, students are then left to complete work independently in the field and then analyse it. The main role of the teaching staff is to provide guidance when necessary, but students are also encouraged to help one another. The course ends with a research project, where students identify a question, based on the experience gained during the first part of the course. Students are free to work in any area they choose, providing it is feasible in the given time frame.

My project was on the interaction networks of butterfly species found in Kibale Forest, working with a Ghanaian student, Frank Owusu Mensah. We were interested in comparing the butterfly diversity in the forest between disturbed and undisturbed (logged) sites, as well as the networks that connected the species. Butterflies are considered important bioindicators, and as such their diversity and population is of interest to biologists. Butterflies are incredibly abundant in Kibale, for reasons that remain unclear. We found that the species in the forest interacted very closely, and we discovered implications that the system is very resilient to random species deletions, but highly vulnerable to the deletion of the most generalised species. The removal of these species would in all likelihood cause the system to collapse, with effects on other flora and fauna. We also investigated the importance of butterflies as pollinators, which has been called into question recently. Whilst the results were inconclusive, we did uncover some evidence to suggest that their pollination role may indeed have been overestimated. Our results were published in a report, and also presented orally to the group.

The project gave me my first chance to perform independent fieldwork and research, and I am certain the experience I gained will prove invaluable to me in my final year. In particular, I am in the process of researching the possibility of proposing an Honours project working with interaction networks and their application in my chosen field of animal behaviour. I learnt a great deal, which has complemented and supplemented my university work, and I have received advice and ideas about pursuing my biological career as a postgraduate. For me, the TBA has achieved its objective; the students on my course remain in contact, and I look forward to working with them again in the future. The diversity of cultures, skills and interests makes for a stimulating environment, and I thank the Davis Fund for the support I received