

JAMES RENNIE BEQUEST

REPORT ON EXPEDITION/PROJECT/CONFERENCE

Expedition/Project/Conference Title: Safari Field Guide Course Training

Travel Dates: 3rd August to 17th September (Course dates – 4th August to 31st August)

Location: South Africa – Timbavati (near Hoedspruit) – Keer Keer Lodge

Group Member: Jonathan Harris

Aims: Learn more about ecology and how to apply it in the field

Introduction

The main purpose of the course was to learn how to be a field guide. The topics covered were relevant to my ecological science course and demonstrated their practical application. Topics specifically related to being a field guide encompassing survival in the wild will be of benefit to me on future field trips.

Days would consist of a walk between 7am and 10.30am, a lecture from 11am to 1pm and drive or a walk late afternoon from 4pm to 7pm. The lectures covered a wide range of topics and the walks were related to the theory discussed in lectures.

Topics covered

Over 40 different trees and 20 grasses were identified. This was important, as different plants could indicate certain characteristics of an area. For example 'Heron Bone grass' and 'silver cluster leaf' could both be related with the geology of an area, indicating a sudden change in soil characteristic, called a seepline. Various plants would indicate the type of plant succession found in the area, whether the vegetation found in a particular area was primary, secondary, pioneer, sub-climax or climax succession.

Different plant vegetation would also affect the animal diversity in the area, thus one learnt the different types of vegetation that one would expect to relate with particular types of animals.

Different animals are found in different areas, thus one was able to establish the different types of habitats and niches found in the local area, i.e. the components of the ecosystem in the area and their relationships with each other. For example if an elephant was to dig a hole to acquire the nutrients and water found in roots, the hole could provide the opportunity for other creatures to occupy the hole as a home, the soil would be aerated, seeds may be influenced to germinate and water may become entrapped in the future, providing an essential water hole for other animals.

The different types of relationships seen in the area, relating to mutualism, parasitism, neutralism and commensalisms were explored. For example one would expect the relationship between a lion and impala to only be parasitism, as the impala is being preyed upon. However the relationship could also be seen as mutualism, as the fitness of the impala as a species would be increased, due to natural

selection.

Mammals, arachnids, insects, reptiles, amphibians and birds were all discussed and observed in the field. This included the evolution, anatomy, life cycle, behavioural characteristics (ethology), adaptations, tracking recognition and the habitat of different animals. Different types of venom produced by different types of snakes and spiders, and how the venom would affect the human body, whether the venom were neurotoxic, haemotoxic, cytotoxic, cardiotoxic or a cocktail was looked at in detail.

Geology covered different types of rock formation and what their affects were to the local area. This was important, as different rocks would essentially influence the local ecosystem. For example a granite parent rock would produce a sandy, low nutrient, high drainage soil. This would have an influence on the vegetation, and other biotics, thus affected the ecology of the area.

The climate and weather of an area and its importance to understanding the geology, topography and ecology of the land was investigated. The relevance of a good knowledge of climate and weather with regard to habitat management was studied in depth.

Habitat management was very diversely covered on the course. The use of various types of fencing, alien control (particularly related to plants), erosion, water, stock control, maintenance of roads and fire (relating to the different burn-cycles) were some of the topics discussed. Stock control management was a particularly interesting subject. Calculations had to be made to ascertain the capacity of an area, and solutions had to be devised if the carrying capacity exceeded the recommended number.

Topics that were specifically related to a field guide were covered in the course. The maintenance and running of petrol and diesel engines was taught in depth, as one would be taking clients out in 4x4 vehicles. The handling of clients was discussed and practised, as having a good relationship with your clients is always very important in business. Rifle handling was covered in the course and its importance for the safety of a field guide, and his or her clients. The teaching of astronomy was another subject covered. This was to provide additional information that a field guide could deliver to his or her clients and also for navigational purposes.

Outcome

Over the four weeks, there were three written exams, two presentations, an assessed driving exam and an assessed walking exam. The three written exams examined the theory that was taught. It was necessary to know the theory, in order to be able to interpret the surrounding ecology. The two presentations were mainly designed to improve communication skills and presentation skills. The assessed driving exam and the assessed walking exam were examining whether the theory that had been learnt, could be put into practise.

I achieved success in passing these exams and was accredited as completing a course in Game Ranging.