

REPORT ON EXPEDITION/PROJECT/CONFERENCE

**Expedition/Project/
Conference Title:**

Operation Wallacea – South Africa 2012

Travel Dates:

7th June 2012 – 8th July 2012

Location:

South Africa

Group member(s):

Anna McLeod

Aims:

To research Elephant impact in the surrounding reserves.

OUTCOME (not less than 300 words):-

I would like to thank the James Rennie Bequest for the generous funding towards my expedition to South Africa. I travelled to South Africa on a biodiversity and ecology course with a charity called Operation Wallacea. I spent 4 weeks there working as a research assistant. It took me 2 flights and an 8 hour bus transfer to get to camp and the funding I received really was essential in making this trip possible.

Operation Wallacea runs many different research projects around the world and several of these are based in South Africa due to the diversity of species and the large number of endemic species, making it unlike anywhere else on earth. I was based in a camp called Banghoek Lodge just outside of Thanda Private game reserve. Thanda recently joined onto two other reserves called Intibane and the Kings property. We were monitoring the elephant damage in these reserves. Thanda has contained elephants for a long time, Intibane has contained elephants for a short while and Kings Property has only very recently had elephants as the fences had just been dropped. This laid out a perfect opportunity for our research meaning we could sample areas with different numbers of elephants and compare the damage.

Naturally Elephants migrate and they love to knock over trees, normally this doesn't cause too much harm as by the time the elephants migrate it gives all the trees time to grow back, before the elephants return. However these days most Elephants are in game reserves to prevent poaching for ivory, and although many of these reserves are massive, it still imposes a lot of restriction on Elephant movement. This means that when they knock down trees, by the time they return to the same spot as before, the tree will still only be very young and so the damage is much more dangerous as if all the trees are gone there will be no food left for

the Elephants, and many other species. Our research was helping to establish the extent of the damage and ways to help. Many national parks have used methods such as a cull or contraception (sterilisation of males or hormone injections for males) to help keep Elephant numbers at a level the park can manage. We had many lectures about this sensitive issue and I formed an opinion that contraception was a better option as Elephants are very family orientated and a cull can leave the surviving animals very distressed. The data we collected was then given back to Thanda reserve and they could use the data to determine the most suitable population management for them.

My first week was spent doing Bush Training. This mostly consisted of going on guided walks and drives and learning about our surroundings. I learnt so many amazing things during this week, about what all the different plants could be used for and lots about the wildlife helping to prepare me for the next 3 weeks.

Each day, for the rest of the expedition, we got up at 5am and got ready to leave for 6am. We would drive out on our jeep to different plots using our GPS system and maps. We did 4 bird counts every morning as birds are a great indicator of damage in the area. We can tell from certain birds what conditions in the area are like as different birds feed on different things. Then we would drive to other squares and do something called habitat assessments. We had been given a map with sample plots marked out and we would use this to find each plot and then map out the square with rope using a compass. Then we would measure all the things in the square such as grass biomass, types of trees and height of grass and woody touches. These measurements help monitor elephant movement and the extent of damage to the area. We also did lectures where we were taught about the different issues facing the reserves and learnt about many different ecology and conservation concerns.

I saw the most amazing things along the way and was lucky enough to see all of the "Big 5" (Elephant, Black Rhino, Leopard, Lion and Buffalo). My tour guide lives in the African Bush and hadn't seen a Black Rhino in 15 years so it was a really amazing sighting! We had a few close calls while on foot as well with lions and leopards (We could only hear the leopard in the trees but couldn't see it so was pretty scary!). I spent my birthday in Africa and I will definitely never forget it! Thank you again for the support.

I have attached a few pictures below of the work I helped carry out:



This is a picture of us with our compasses and rope at the ready! Busy marking out one of our sample plots.



This is a picture of a few members of my group in a lecture. Learnt a lot in these classes and we had lots of debates and discussions about controversial issues.



This is a picture from one of my guided walks during bush training week.