



Greenforce Expedition, Uganda

Greenforce is a registered non-profit making environmental organisation and a member of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations. Their aim is to organise long-term environmental conservation expeditions overseas.

The Greenforce expedition to Uganda was a joint venture between Greenforce, the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA), Makerere University and the American Peace Corps. The aim of the project was to make a comprehensive assessment of the health and welfare of the flora and fauna of Murchison Falls Wildlife Reserve. Reports would also be made on evidence of any poaching and encroachment in to the Reserve. The Uganda Wildlife Authority had overall control of the project. They were the ones who saw work that needed to be done and requested our help to do it. It is they who got the full report at the end of the day.

The Expedition

On the 20th of July 1998, I along with 7 others made our way to Kampala to begin our Greenforce expedition. We were met in Kampala by the Greenforce co-ordinator for Uganda and spent the first few days being introduced to our new country. As well as seeing some of the sights, we also attended a series of lectures at Makerere University. The lecturers there were very enthusiastic about the project and instructed us on the methods and techniques that we would be using in the field and why things were done this way. It was a good introduction to Uganda and very interesting to meet the students and staff.

Having spent almost a week in Kampala it was time to go to base camp in Nyamahasa. Nyamahasa is located half way up the Eastern boarder of the Reserve. The camp had been set up almost 2 years previously when the project in Murchison first started. This meant that luckily for us the toilet pit had already been dug, a kitchen area assembled and best of all they had made a table and benches only half eaten by termites! We constructed 1 hammock, 1 "love seat" and numerous washing lines, which doubled as volleyball nets. However, gorgeous as base camp was, we were only ever there for 2 or 3 days at a time. The rest of our time was spent away on satellite camps.

Satellite camps were where the real work was done. Having gotten provisions together from Bugolobi, the local trading centre, we would drive off to the next designated area of research. The area would be decided by Andrew, Kibbuka, and the UWA. Andrew was a Peace Corps volunteer and Kibbuka was a student of Makerere University working on his Masters degree and it was these two who were in charge of the research done in the field.

As soon as we arrived at our new area of study, 2 would stay to set up camp and collect firewood, and the rest would head off to make the transect. The transect was the line we had to follow to make our survey. Using machetes we had to hack a trail 2.25km long on a given bearing. Global positioning satellite co-ordinates were taken at the beginning, middle and end of the line so that the information gathered could be labelled precisely on a map. I was amazed at just how much the landscape varied over a mere 2km! We would spend hours trying to cut our way through 500m of dense woodland and then suddenly walk out into a patch of grassland we could walk through in a matter of minutes!

Once the transect had been cut we could lay our traps. We used three different

kinds of traps, all humane so that we could release the animals afterwards. The main traps were Sherman traps designed to catch small mammals. These were placed over the first 50m. and last 50m. of the transect at 5m. intervals. We also designated a random area just off the transect to lay pitfall traps also for small mammals, which were mainly shrews. There were 8 of these at 1m. intervals. The last set of traps were mist nets designed for catching birds. All the traps were checked twice a day and any animals caught were identified, weighed and measured.

A more thorough bird survey was carried out in the manner of a timed species count occurring twice a day. It was very satisfying realising that as time went on one could identify more and more species just by sound rather than having to ask Andrew or Kibbuka.

Whilst it is the animals that people tend to remember most we also carried out vegetation surveys. I had never done a thorough vegetation plot before and, as ever, became more interested the more plants I was able to identify. Makerere University was a great help in this as anything we were unable to identify we could take a sample of and send to their botany department for identification.

Satellite camps were 10 days of physically hard work. Luckily everyone got on extremely well so there was a lot of laughter even when walking down the same piece of transect for the 10th time! But then again, if you all have to sleep together under the same tarpaulin every night, having eaten beans for every meal since you arrived and smelling as one would after 10 days hard graft, you'd be hard pushed not to develop a sense of humour! By the end of a satellite camp all I could really think about was me (and hopefully everyone else!) having a bath!

During the middle of our expedition we had one week's "break". A few others and I were given the time to explore some of Uganda and so we headed off to Mount Elgon near Mbale. The others in the group were the actual reason that we got our break. 3 of our group had decided to use this trip to Uganda as an opportunity to get research for their various dissertations. One went around different schools interviewing children about the National Parks, one questioned the local people about development around the Reserve and their views, and one concentrated on more bird investigations in other areas. As far as I have heard the results they gained have been very successful.

I have come back with many highlights from my trip. One of my most enjoyable moments was watching the local school play which was put on as a response to some previous talks Greenforce volunteers had made on the benefits of conservation. The children dressed up and told the moralistic story of some poachers being caught out in the reserve.

Overall I learnt a lot from my trip. I gained a lot of experience of science in the field, which is the kind of job I would like to do in the future. I also discovered more about the country than I perhaps thought I would. One could still see the damage Idi Amin had inflicted on the country by talking to people and seeing the ruined houses and empty tanks along the road. I also realised that although everyone agrees on the necessity of National Parks and Wildlife Reserves, there is also another side to it one does not often hear about. The Park rangers were struggling hard to keep poachers out of the reserve, but at the same time they were recognising that people relied on the woodland, that they needed things from the reserve. For example, we saw them set up a more effective gathering program where people were allowed into the Reserve on certain days to collect dead wood for their fires, and reeds for their homes. This is not a problem highlighted in Europe but one which must be addressed out there. I made a good many friends, both Ugandan and British who I still keep in

touch with now. But above all I learnt the patience eat beans twice a day, everyday!

I also believe that the work we carried out was valuable. The devastation to the wildlife caused by Idi Amin's troops and rebels is not repaired overnight. The report we made indicated areas which were improving and highlighted areas which were not. Giraffes, lions and elephants all had to be reintroduced to the park and have settled in well.

The Future

At the end of three months of surveying the reserve we wrote up our report, copies of which can be obtained from Greenforce and UWA. The next group of volunteers arrived shortly after we had left and headed for a new area of the reserve called Bugungu. Unfortunately, a few weeks into the expedition the group had to pull out due to rebel violence in the area connected with Uganda's intervention into the Democratic Republic of Congo's civil war. This intrusion is a disappointing setback and has put the project indefinitely on hold.

For Greenforce, however, the future looks promising. Other expeditions are being set up in such places as India, Indonesia and Vietnam all along the same theme of conservation through exploration. Overall I got a lot out of my summer and believe the work we did to be valuable. I would definitely recommend Greenforce again!