

Undergraduate Placement Report

As part of the required placement criteria I carried out a placement with African Impact on a Big 5 Conservation Research Project in the Greater Kruger area in South Africa. I thoroughly enjoyed my time spent with the organisation and my knowledge has increased massively due to the informative and friendly guides.

African Impact is an organisation which carries out community, research and photography projects with the same end goal which is to provide hands-on help and skills to communities within Africa to increase well-being and knowledge of the continent. I chose this placement as I had previously been to South Africa the year before on my gap year and wanted to enhance my knowledge on the African species and experience more community work along with contributing to active conservation projects.

During my time with African Impact I took part in 14 research game drives collecting data and monitoring the Big 5 and other predator and bird sightings. Various data sheets were used to collect more detailed information of each species, sheets included:

- Predator sightings
- Elephant ID
- Reaction to Non-Wild Elements
- Self- Grooming
- Raptor Sightings

The raptor data is recordings of prey sightings with species, location data, sex breakdown, activity and the quantity of birds within the sighting. The data is then submitted to the African Raptor Database in hopes to ascertain the conservation status of raptors and their habitats across Africa to help build the local expertise needed to monitor these indicator species in the future and implement a sound strategy for their effective safeguarding.

Reaction to Non-Wild Elements data sheet ascertains the habituation of individual lions to different types of vehicles with varying distances. By observing the habituation process we can learn more about the process and the acceptable distances which vehicles are accepted. The

partner organisations which are the Lion Management forum of the African Lion and Environmental Research Trust can use this behaviour to compare reactions between different reserves or between semi wild and wild lions.

The elephant identification sheets are used to document the identifying features of the elephants seen. Using these features we are able to keep track of the individuals seen at each sightings to ID once we had returned to the lodge. All of these then go into ID kits for the individuals which can then be uploaded to Elephants Alive databases. This helps to understand how social behaviour drives movements, reproductive output, determines population dynamics and ensures long lasting social bonds.

Another example of how the data is used, is the predator sightings sheets on the reserves are used to monitor the movements of different large predator species. Using movements over time, territory boundaries and corridors for each species can be determined over a long time period.

After research game drives we would then conduct project work where we would submit data into excel documents to then make it easier to submit the various data to the external organisations they are submitted to. Within these sessions, identification kits for giraffes were also created for individuals which may have only had the left side photographed which we could add photographs which I had captured on my camera to enhance the identification kits for further use. After comparing the kits with the photographs I had taken, we were able to identify individuals we had seen on the drive to see if the same individuals were colonising with the same group when comparing to previous weeks data. This is used to help prove or reject the theory that giraffes have informal social structures.

Other activities which I also carried out on my placement included practical conservation skills using machetes and loppers to cut down vegetation on one of the reserves we studied. This made the tracks more accessible for the game viewer vehicles allowing a greater sized research area for us to gather data from. Another task included cutting down River Thorn which is a highly invasive species which can strangle trees within the environment. With its ability to grow quickly and efficiently it had taken over all the trees within the work area. Cutting down large pieces of the vegetation and managing to clear a whole tree of the plant species was highly rewarding but challenging. Within the small reserve in which I was based we also carried out bush clearance in order to make a fire break. All of these tasks assisted in challenging myself, increasing my team work and leadership skills and educated me into different methods of scrub clearance as I had never used a machete before.

Community work which is an integral part of a successful conservation project was part of my placement with African Impact. I conducted two grade 8 conservation education lessons to the local community school. The topic which the lesson was based upon was endangered species which educated the children with the different definitions from the IUCN and examples of species which fall in each category. Reasons for the decline of species were taught and the solutions to counteract those were also discussed. I also took part in reading club where the local children read books to you to help improve their english. At grade 4 within the school system they switch from speaking their local language to all of their classes being taught in English. Seeing their progress on their record sheet showed me how community projects are successful and are having a positive impact on the education of local people.

Looking back on my placement spent with African Impact shows me how much I have taken away from my time spent with the organisation. My knowledge on the African species has massively increased and the sightings I experienced on the research game drives made me see species I had never seen before. This includes Hyena cubs, Jackals and their cubs, Cape Vultures and Wild Dogs to name a few. Working within the community has helped me improve on my communication skills and public speaking when having to speak in front of 40 students on my own. My practical conservation skills have also improved by using a wider range of equipment to achieve different goals in each project. I thoroughly enjoyed my placement with African Impact and would recommend it to any other student within the university. It has ignited my passion for African wildlife and made me more driven to help conserve these threatened species. I felt as I made a real difference into helping a successful conservation project.