

“I Honestly Can’t Believe I’m Here” An Ecological Outsider’s Experience in the Makuleke Concession

By Trey Medbery: *Wildlife Management Research in South Africa*

Four days before I landed in Johannesburg, I was cleaning out and packing up my primary school classroom in Mississippi, USA. For the past two years, my time and energy has been devoted to teaching reading and language arts to sixth graders in a small and impoverished town along the Mississippi River. I have lived in the southern United States for all 24 years of my life, and prior



Meeting the local Makuleke

to this trip, my outdoor experience was limited to a handful of weekend camp-out excursions with friends. I graduated from the University of Georgia in 2006 with a degree in Political Science and Sociology. Needless to say, when I signed up to participate in a University of Georgia Study Abroad trip to learn about field guiding and the flora and fauna in South Africa, I was quite a ways out of my academic and personal comfort zones.

I was not the only one anxious about my trip to Africa. My mother was particularly concerned that I would be lunch for a lion, contract some rare and incurable disease, or not have the basic comforts of home. That’s why I nearly gave her a heart attack when I described the lunch before I boarded the plane in Atlanta as my “last meal”. My sister comforted her somewhat when she said, “No, Mom. Not his last meal, just his last American meal for a month”. I thought this calmed her down but the tightness with which she hugged me at the airport told me otherwise.

After nearly twenty hours of flights made quite enjoyable by the company of new friends, we landed in Johannesburg and slept at a nearby hotel for the eve-

ning. Sunrise came early, and I filled myself with the deluxe breakfast the hotel provided. This one I really felt, would be my last bit of comfort before heading to the bush. When I saw two green Land rovers and three men who were instructors at EcoTraining I finally got the sensation that we were actually in Africa. During the inaugural ride in the open-
aired Land rover, I learned the difference between a Mopane and Baobab, Vervet monkeys and Baboons, and male and female Impalas (I told you my experience

and knowledge was limited).

When we arrived, Bruce gave us the rules and regulations of camp, and then did the best thing he could have done: took away our watches. He said, “Time doesn’t matter here. We wake when the sun rises, eat when the drum beats, and sleep when the sun goes down.” My girlfriend has been trying to break me of my strict adherence to unnecessary time frames—perhaps she will be pleasantly surprised when I return to the U.S.A. later this month. At the end of the first night, I was writing in my journal expressing my excitement for what was to come the next day and over the next few weeks. I then wrote, “This should be a cool experience. Wait a minute, why did I just say that? All of this has been incredible. I need to find better adjectives”.

The next morning, the drum beat at an unknown hour, signaling time to wake and enjoy risks and coffee before our morning walk. After the pre-trip brief of safety guidelines, I set out on my first field hike. I remembered when I first visited New York City when I was ten years old, and went the entire day without blinking while taking in all the new sights, sounds and experiences.

Though I found myself in the heart of the wilderness as opposed to the heart of commercialism, I felt the same eyes-wide-open sense of excitement for all the first time experiences that were about to come. One of the first sightings we made was a Verreaux's Eagle Owl flying from a Nyala Berry tree to an Apple Leaf with a Francolin in its talons. It was this sighting of nature's food chain at work that made me realize that I was



Trey & Taylor under a Baobab Tree

not watching this through a television at home or through a pane of glass at a zoo. This is the untamed wild where everything is uncensored, unfiltered and real. That first walk of the first day was great—I saw Zebra, Impala, Bush Pigs, Warthogs, Buffalo and two elephants. Seeing these animals in the wild for the first time and understanding their potential danger was more moving than I could ever have imagined.

Our subsequent field hikes, game drives and other activities have been even more exciting than the first day—something I did not think possible. We have only been in the bush for a week, but the amount of knowledge I have gained about the environment is unquantifiable. Through the instruction from our brilliant field guides, university professors and knowledgeable peers, I have learned the common and scientific names of trees, the difference between Impala, Nyala, Kudu and Eland tracks and even how to identify an animal and its diet based on its dung. Today, I even learned the proper etiquette and form for spitting kudu dung, but that is a story for another place and time and one I never intend to share with my girlfriend.

So where do I go from here? How do I take this once-in-a-lifetime experience with new places, dangers, people and cultures and share it with others? How do I enrich the lives of those who will never get an opportunity to do all that I have done and all that I have yet to do? When I return home, I will be relocat-

ing to New Orleans, Louisiana to teach at a new school. Perhaps the audience for my African adventure will be the inner-city school children who have not ventured out of their own state, much less their country. I can envision my new classroom and my students I have yet to meet listening to me read from my journal in which I describe all of my personal thoughts, fears and amazement about this rich place. I will tell them of times riding on the tracker seat of the Land rover, sleeping out in the open with no barriers between the wild and my sleeping bag, seeing an elephant attempt to knock over a ten metre tree after our vehicle got a bit too close for comfort, or having an impromptu astronomy lesson from a knowledgeable field guide.

I can see myself ending my lessons on my African experience with the same words that concluded my journal writing after the third day in the bush: “We were walking through the Fever Tree Forest as the sun was going down and I found myself saying, “I honestly can’t believe I’m here”. The sun, low on the horizon behind a giant Baobab, cast such a brilliant glow against the yellow-dusted Fever trees that the forest looks truly magical”.



Sunset over the Limpopo River