African Impact Conservation Projects – Greater Kruger Area, South Africa

September 2019

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Clemens Lukasser, Photography Volunteer, Austria
Well, where can I begin this month? This month has brought with it some fantastic moments and lots of firsts for both volunteers and staff which is fantastic.

Let’s begin with wild dogs! We have recently been seeing a pack regularly in one of the local reserves we visit but for the first time ever, wild dogs have been sighted on Dumela itself! This included a camera trap sighting and an in the flesh sighting as they tucked into a bushbuck kill!

Leopard sightings have also been abundant this month, with ten different individuals seen and even three leopards sighted in one week at one point. What is even more exciting is that one of these individuals is new to us, a fantastic development for our leopard research.

And finally, our Farmers of the Future project welcomed 70 new farmers after the agriculture class joined us for some practical hands on experience. How fantastic to see so many people involved in the project!

Who knows what next month has in store?!!
One elephant, then two, three, and repeating for what seemed to be one hour. Families and loners, lovers and singles, this sure was becoming one wonderful evening to witness wading elephants slowly yet tactfully cross the Olifants River. Although there was not large quantities to splash around in, these elephants didn’t have trouble finding muddy puddles.

The time was dusk. The last golden yellow streaks of sunlight remained low in the African sky, with only little time left before the nocturnals made their move to bask in their night time rituals. The little time left of sunshine did not hinder this beautiful moment, as it proved to be a great medium for photographing the end of a great day for these lovely large mammals. It would bode well for me as well.

Bushbucks are the smallest spiral-horned antelopes found in this area. This type of antelope are known as tragelaphines. Like many other tragelaphines, they establish dominance through lateral displays.

Perhaps surprisingly, bushbuck are known to be aggressive to both each other and other threats, even humans with there even being instances of bushbucks killing humans in extreme cases. Not an antelope to be messed with!
Elephants are quite a new experience for me. I was a volunteer at the time of the crossing for African Impact at Dumela in South Africa, aiding in research and conservation through the power of photography. This day’s daily mission was a journey to Balule, where my fellow photographers and esteemed guides led the way to our over night campsite, located just above the Olifants River. The group and I tiredly parked the open-air vehicle into the camp site, a time now to drop our bags and relax before dinner. The Elephants had other plans, however.

As the first of the two groups at camp, we had prime viewing of the crossing Elephants. Just down the hill, on the other side of the river valley, a large number of Elephants made their noisy way across. What a spectacular sighting! Multiple groups would slowly traverse, occasionally stopping briefly to spray water or throw mud on themselves to cool off. There was no question that these giants of South Africa are among the top of Mother Natures chain. Birds would fly away, antelope would scatter, and, if a tree so happened to be in the way, it had a great chance of being up-rooted. The number was close to two or three dozen elephants. The last pair of males stopped when reaching the side closest to the group, to size up each other and interlock trunks. This seemed not to be an aggressive tactic, as told by our guides, but almost a playful way to assert the more macho of the two.

This was our chance to be photographers. As we utilised our multi-shot function on our cameras as to capture every moment, other challenges populated in my mind. Finding the right balance with lights is always difficult. Adjustments of the ISO, shutter speed, and aperture were also imperative. Late evening and night photography seemed to be such a science. Embraced in a beautiful elephant wonderland, achieving the correct settings would be icing on the cake, but would also solidify the moment for years to come.

As the darkness slowly took over, under shadowed by the illuminous stars that filled the cloudless sky, our photography group let out an audible exhale. This was followed by jubilation and immediate sharing of photos from each others cameras. The night was not over, the air was filled with the sound of branches snapping and trees being loudly pushed over. What a sound sleep it was.
The Greater Kruger region of South Africa experiences severe unemployment, with 15-24 year olds making up 70% of all those unemployed in Mpumalanga. The cycle of poor education, poverty and health issues create an environment in which communities struggle to escape.

Even if the youth in the area receive an education they are often without the skills to be able to get jobs and create a stable income. This further contributes to the unemployment in the area and an increase in poverty levels. Our goal is to equip young adults to theoretically and practically apply their skills to a career and identify and establish entrepreneurial opportunities. We will create a community garden to help local community members sustain themselves and their families and increase income generation.

To help out, visit: africanimpactfoundation.org/donate

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**COMMUNITY FOCUS**

**CHARLOTTE DEBAUT**

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP INTERN FROM FRANCE

**Having just graduated** in Finance and risk management, I was looking for an adventure in the summer. Coming across the social development and entrepreneurship internship of African Impact sounded like something for me. Developing my business skills further in the African bush, there could definitely be worse places.

**At the start of this four-week adventure,** I didn't think I would get in touch a lot with conservation as a community intern. However, on the first day there was a game drive on the schedule. Besides being able to do things like that, being surrounded by a lot of research interns, watching documentaries about conservation and living in the middle of the bush got me more interested in conservation than ever before.

**Despite my growing interest for conservation,** the real reason I was still here was for the community. The main project they are developing is Farmers of the Future and as community intern I got the opportunity to work on my own project to help support it. At this moment in time, they are in the first phase of the project where the participants learn basic business skills.
As my individual project, I chose to help create a framework of all the important aspects that should be included in the second phase, which is about product development. Doing research online, getting the opportunity to meet with experts in this area and going to conventions were a great opportunity to get more involved in how businesses operate in the area.

Besides my own project, working with the participants of Farmers of the Future, going to reading club or doing partner outreaches like Hlokomela and Nourish were definitely the things I enjoyed the most, just being out in the field! Surrounded by people who are positive on a level I have never experienced before and these different communities that keep on being motivated no matter what. The fact that everyone is working together and wanting to uplift each other is something that opened my eyes, something that you do not experience in a lot of places. Doing these projects every week and seeing the progress you make together with these other people is one of the most rewarding things during my stay.
Is editing cheating? Well that depends. Your camera sensor doesn't see in three dimensions like your eyes, or process the colours in the same way. So, enhancing the photo or removing small distractions to make the most of what you saw with your eyes is perfectly reasonable, and can help draw attention to your subject in a good way. Even in the days of film photography, photos were improved in post-production in the dark room. Having said that, adding additional elements to your photos such as another animal that wasn't present is likely to be going much too far.

**Cropping:** Cropping can help you improve the composition, allowing you to make the most of the subject. It can also make it bigger for your final image, but you need to take care not to crop in too small as you'll lose detail in your shot. It's best to give space for the subject to move and gaze; for animals this means ensuring there's enough background space for them to move into based on the way they're facing. Tall crops work well for subjects with tall necks like giraffes and ostriches. Low landscape crops can work well for low moving animals ensuring again that they have enough space to move into. Finally, it's important to remember not to crop out finer details like feathers, feet or horns.

**Light and shadows, blacks and whites:** Lowering the highlights and boosting shadows allows you to make the most of details in your images. In well-lit photographs this can be achieved by boosting black and whites, but doesn't work as well in night shots. Playing with different sliders will often result in an image you're happier with. Texture can be used to make the most of skin, particularly on elephants and rhinos that have interesting...
hides with lots of detail. You can also remove tinges of blue from skin by reducing the vibrancy and increasing the temperature. With light and shade subtle changes often work best, as its usually very clear when an image has been over edited. Remember you’re trying to do justice to the animal and its environment rather than make it look out of character.

**Removal of distractions:** Light and dark spots and dust can be removed using the spot removal tool. This enables you to remove small items such as insects, leaves, dust or light and replace them with another part of the background of your image. This can help divert the viewers eye directly to the subject, without being distracted by odd marks. You can also use cropping or straightening to remove objects from the edges of your shot.

**As well as making the most** of your photos, editing also has the added benefit of improving your photography. Instead of spending hours adjusting and cropping on your laptop, next time you’ll look for improvements in composition through your lens.
Animal of the Month: STEENBOK

Steenbok take their name from the Afrikaans word for brick in reference to their deep red colouring. They are typically solitary although mating pairs are not found far apart.

Unlike other antelope species, Steenboks are capable diggers, using this skill particularly in the dry season to unearth bulbs and rhizomes to eat. As a result of the moisture content of this food, they do not need to drink, making them water-independent. They further conserve moisture by staying in shade during the hottest part of the day.

There you are with your suitcase in front of you and the packing list of African impact in your hand. You hope everything fits and you pack your clothes, passport and money. Your camera, your lenses, a tripod. Extra batteries and memory cards are not missing. Because you are getting ready for a photography project in the Greater Kruger area. And so you set off, prepared. Right? After all, you’ve got everything with you and you already know a few things about photography.

After the first week of workshops and presentations, you’ll know everything about lighting, the exposure triangle, composition and low light. You have all the knowledge and materials, so you are convinced that you will produce beautiful photos. But is that really all you need? Knowledge and material? Or do more things play a part in wildlife photography? How about a touch of luck? Luck to find that one beautiful male lion that is not right next to an electric fence. The luck of finding a leopard during a night drive. Being lucky that a warthog stands still for a moment, so that you can get a clear picture of him. Because although the guide...
is very good at following tracks and knows the area well, they cannot control the animals either. And whether you are an amateur or a well-known photographer, you need the luck to get to see those beautiful animals in a good composition for that one great shot.

**Not to mention you need a lot of patience.** Animals really don't do what you want them to do. Who doesn't want to record that moment that a lion cub is playing with his brother? Who doesn't want to capture a hyena mother carrying her cub in her mouth? Or zooming in on that one dragonfly with all the details of it's wings, making it look like a drone. But all of that means that you have to look for that one place from where you get the animal in the best composition. And have to patiently wait for that moment when an animal sits still and looks into the camera. Sometimes you have to be quiet for a long time with your camera ready to take that shot. Because that kind of interaction is only a fraction of a second.

**But it is also important to take time.** Taking time to enjoy everything that Africa has to offer. How great it is to see an elephant playing in the mud on a hot day. Take time to put the camera aside. Because how wonderful is it that you can see the interaction between a baboon family. Not only to see the world through a lens. Taking time to absorb, see, and experience everything. Realise how special it is that you get to see the rhino that belongs to the animals that are threatened with extinction. Because it is precisely this that ensures that passion enters your photos, that you can tell a story. When you combine your photos with text written from your heart, you can achieve something. Precisely then you can touch people and push them into action.
Don't just share photos on social media to show how good you are at taking pictures. Make a difference in the field of wildlife conservation. Tell your story. Educate people. Explain that the hyena is not just that animal from the ugly five. But that this spotted hyena lives in a big clan and that the cackling smile they make has a function. Explain that there is a connection between the smile, age and status of the animal. Or make people aware that the chacma baboons in South Africa are often seen as a pest. Despite that they have an unmistakable presence on the landscape, their reputation as notorious troublemakers makes them unpopular. Lethal removal is common throughout their range; humans are the principal cause of the population decline. But actually humans have taking over about most of the key areas where baboons are traditionally live. And so baboon numbers are dropping, because their core habitat is diminishing.

In my eyes, a perfect picture is not a photo that is technically perfect. A perfect shot is not the picture taken with the best zoomlens or by a photographer with the most experience. A perfect picture is that photo where you were lucky enough to see that beautiful animal. The moment where you had the patience to wait for that one moment when the composition was right. A perfect picture is a photo where a story is told. It is when image and story come together. It is precisely then that you make an impact. You can show the world how beautiful nature is. How special these animals are that live in Africa. And how we must continue to work for nature conservation, so that more people can take beautiful pictures of African wildlife.
As an African impact foundation intern, I have a bit of an unusual role whilst here at Dumela Lodge. My goal is to understand and contribute as much as I can to the foundation in my time here. The foundation is crucial to African Impact as it provides extra support to specific projects such as community's Farmers of the Future project and research's Forgotten Kingdom project. When I first applied for the Foundation internship I thought I would only be based at the head office in Cape Town working on the project development and fundraising. However, I have also been given the opportunity to be here in the Greater Kruger, allowing me to see what is happening on the ground and how the foundation actively impacts the projects here.

As part of my work, I have been organising and coordinating one fundraising event each month that we can host here at the lodge. I am currently in the process of setting up an auction and cocktail night during which I am planning to auction off things such as professional photographic prints and the ability to name some of the animals that we monitor in the reserves we visit. I get a lot of help and support from the staff here at the lodge which is fantastic and makes for a great working environment. I will sadly be leaving in early October but am planning to leave an outline for a fundraising event that can be held after I have left in October.
Organising fundraising events is still something very new to me but it has been a lot of fun and I have found it to be hugely rewarding. Knowing the money raised is going to such a great cause and seeing your hard work pay off is a fantastic feeling.

The beauty of being here on the ground has been that I have been able to visit the work on the projects that the foundation supports and help the other volunteers that are here to support these initiatives. It is this that drives me to work as hard as I possibly can to make my fundraising events as successful as possible as I can physically see the huge impact the foundation has on the projects and the people participating in them.

Current Fundraiser
Check out and share the Farmers of the Future Fundraiser

Facebook
You can also check out Facebook for our latest updates

Book Your Place on Project
If you would like to volunteer with us you can get in touch with Nicole who will be able to tell you all about all of the wonderful projects we have on offer and answer any questions you may have. Book your front row seat: Nicole@africanimpact.com
Regardless of each volunteer’s personal reason to join African Impact there’s certainly one thing all of us have in common and that is the passion for wildlife and its conservation.

Ironically, I had the most compelling experience at the place which was least expected - Kinyonga Reptile Centre.

Some reptiles, like lizards or geckos, I have always found very appealing, but when it comes to spiders or snakes the story is completely different. I have always had a big phobia of these animals. However, at the same time, I’m the kind of person that intends to overcome such fears. So that's why Kinyonga Reptile Centre was such a surprise and a positive experience to me.

African Impact has a partnership with Kinyonga Reptile Centre to send their volunteers to assist with the maintenance of some of the reptile enclosures, which became more an opportunity of learning with the centre curators, than just a simple task experience alone.

I was extremely fortunate to be in charge of one enclosure housing two lovely chameleons. This provided me the opportunity to share close proximity with these creatures, as they were inside the enclosure while I was cleaning. They were two big boys, not so young anymore, but were very relaxed animals nevertheless. Both of them were ex-pets of owners who didn't want them anymore, which unfortunately is the background of many of the animals Kinyonga look after.
Nevertheless, the very best experience was left to the end. They always offer us the chance to hold and take pictures with a snake. Much to my surprise, this time they chose a huge python weighing roughly 12kg. When I first glanced at it, a mixture of emotions took over me, from fear to excitement. It’s a very unique sensation to be face to face with such a powerful animal.

I never imagined myself touching a small snake, never mind an enormous one. However, once I touched his skin I was totally surprised. Because their skin is covered in scales I had the idea that somehow it would be very rough. Well, I couldn’t be more wrong as it was unbelievably smooth to the touch. At that precise moment all my fears completely faded away, and holding that huge python and having it sliding around my neck and all over my head was one of the most exciting experiences I have had so far.

Throughout the whole process, and by talking with the lovely curators working there, I came back far more educated and with a much more positive appreciation of these animals.

In summary, I believe we can state that Kinyonga Reptile Centre, despite not being such a big place, is undeniably a huge educational experience for everyone.
As part of my Applied Biology degree at HAS University of Applied Science, I am required to do an internship abroad. Two years ago I was in South Africa with my family and in that moment I literally fell in love with the country, so the choice of where to do my internship was not that difficult. A few students in my class have also interned with African Impact before and they told me great stories. I signed up for my internship and now, I am already 7 weeks into enjoying my stay.

My first week at African Impact was overwhelming, meeting so many new people, new impressions and of course great drives and community projects. In my second week I needed to choose what to focus my research project on. I knew I was interested in giraffes and that I wanted to do behaviour research. In the last few years, ID kits have been created for the giraffes one of the reserves we work on but in many cases, these ID kits need updating. Therefore, I have spent the last few weeks updating the ID kits so that they can be used whilst out in the field. As part of my research, I am going to identify the giraffes in this reserve in order to recognise their social group networks. A few years ago, researchers thought that giraffe herd daily, or even hourly, coalesce into larger groups or break apart into smaller groups. They thought that giraffes did not live in family groups or were not even

BACKGROUND
AFRICAN HARRIER-HAWK

The African harrier-hawk is one of only two species of harrier-hawk and are perhaps unsurprisingly closely related to the harriers.

Unlike normal raptors, the African harrier-hawk will hunt by climbing around trees and can often be seen hanging upside down on a branch. This is possible to their knees being double-jointed, allowing them great flexibility. Their diet consists of primarily tree-dwelling animals and they are known for raiding other bird nests.
To properly understand population densities and distributions of leopards we must conduct camera trap surveys, record spoor and signs of predator presence.

Ultimately, this focused research is vital to the good development of sustainable conservation solutions that will protect the future of this iconic apex predator.

Sign up for regular giving or a one-off donation below to help support the protection and better understanding of leopards in Southern Africa.

globalgiving.org/projects/leopard-research/

social animals. But recent work suggest that giraffe populations have a more complex structure with some reporting that giraffes do not live in family herds but create their own herd with non-familial giraffes.

Through the identifications I have made so far, I have already seen some structures in the group networks. Besides these networks, I am also looking at the individual social behaviours within each group. I will then transfer all of the data I collect into statistical analysis. I cannot believe that I have already been here for 7 weeks but am so happy that I still have 13 weeks to go. I am enjoying every drive and feel a real sense of excitement every time I see one of ‘my’ giraffes. I am excited to see what the results of my research will be. I have already learnt so much and I am looking forward to learning new things every day!
As the dry season hits its peak, food availability for many herbivore species decreases. What was lush green vegetation becomes yellow and barren, and species have to take more risks (such as venturing to open areas) to obtain the food they need. This provides the perfect opportunity for predators to flourish, as picking off weak individuals becomes easier. Not only does this benefit the predators, but it also benefits us as researchers, as the likelihood of seeing some of these elusive predators increases.

One of these species is the leopard, *Panthera pardus* – one of the rarest animals to see of our focal predator species. Perhaps the most difficult to see of the Big Five, information on leopard numbers is lacking – their behaviour and large home ranges mean that the opportunities to collect information on them is often few and far between.

However, luck has been on our side recently, and we have been privileged to experience multiple leopard sightings. These amazing experiences have allowed us to total almost 10 hours of leopard research in the past month, giving us insight into their behaviour, distribution, and even habituation towards humans. One of the main components of our leopard research is facilitated through identifying leopards, which is performed by using their rosette patterns, each of which is unique to the individual. Through camera trap images and photographs from sightings, we are confident that we have seen at least 10 different leopards, including four females, two males, and four cubs. This number may be more, but unfortunately blur on camera traps has prevented us being able to identify some leopards.
What is incredibly exciting is that we have identified two female leopards in the area around our lodge and one of the reserves we work in that we have not seen before. Recently, FBL7, or Chizi (as she is now named from one of our fundraisers), has been the only female sighted in the area, and we have even been lucky enough to see her mating with male MBL11, or Vhinyo. However, these two female leopards appear to have encroached into this territory, of which one appears to be pregnant. These two females are also older and larger than Chizi, and so it will be interesting to see if/how the dynamics change within the leopard population in the area due to the presence of these two females. Hopefully we will keep having fantastic sightings of these beautiful animals to keep monitoring them – at least, until the rains arrive again!
When most people go on safari, they want to see the Big Five – lion, leopard, elephant, rhino, and buffalo. The bush is often alive with the sounds of these animals, but if you listen closely on a summer’s evening you will hear a symphony of sounds of a different kind. Frogs and toads of all different species will be calling for hours, each with their own song. The bushveld rain frog is one of these species who has a distinct call, making it easy to hear, but it isn't so easy to see.

You may think that frogs in Africa are just the same as those you have at home, right? Wrong. Surviving on this hot and dry continent is difficult for amphibians that need moisture and water to survive and breed. However, the rain frog family have a rather unique way of dealing with this arid environment.

As far as frogs go, one of their characteristics is that they are good at jumping and can leap good distances for their size. The Bushveld rain frog, however, has back legs that are more well adapted for digging and burrowing rather than hopping. They therefore have a rather comical walk rather than hopping when they are on the move. If you get chance to see a rain frog, be sure to watch them waddle!

One of the most well-known facts about frogs is that they lay their eggs as frogspawn in water; tadpoles then emerge and grow into frogs. This species, however, has once again decided to go against the norm and remove the tadpole stage altogether. Instead, the adults will burrow underground and lay the fertilised eggs in a small, damp chamber. The young frogs then develop within the jelly-like substance that forms the egg before emerging as little froglets. This removes the need for water to complete their transformation into adults and is especially useful in arid areas where water is scarce.

You may be wondering why this species is called the Bushveld Rain Frog when they don’t need water to grow into adults. However, this name actually comes from the way that these frogs emerge from their underground burrows after the rain. During the rainy season, they will gorge themselves on as many insects and insect larvae as possible whilst they are abundant. Males will also spend their evenings calling as loudly and proudly as possible in the hopes of attracting females to mate.

Once the rainy season comes to an end and all of the rain frogs have eaten their fill and laid their eggs, they once again retreat into their burrows.

The Bushveld Rain Frog is one of the many wacky and intriguing species found in Africa, so make sure to look for the small things as well as the big!
"Black rhinos are in critical danger, with only 5000 left in South Africa. Knowing this made this sighting of a mother with her calf under the amazing South African sky a real highlight and privilege of my time I had as a photography volunteer."

1/2500, f7.1, iso1600

Christèle Aubry
Photography Volunteer from Switzerland

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