

Erin Weingarten

I spent 10 weeks of summer 2017 in South Africa's Kruger National Park and in several reserves of Swaziland. In our small group of 10, we conducted field research and presented our findings regarding the impact of elephants on biodiversity and the vegetative landscape of savanna ecosystems. It was a phenomenal experience.

All my life I have been a pre-veterinary student, in love with animals and nature. Thus, when I discovered a study abroad through the Organization for Tropical Studies, I thought it could be a good fit. It was more than that, and leaving South Africa after a semester left me feeling more confused than ever. I had fallen in love with research and the world of ecology that I had never before studied. So much so that I needed to decide if becoming a Veterinarian is truly the right choice for me. I needed to return to South Africa and pursue my newfound love of research, in order to determine if I should chase this lifestyle while leaving the veterinary track behind. Thanks to the Duke University Center for International & Global Studies, I did.

Returning to South Africa felt just like coming home. We immediately jumped into things with a week of lectures ranging over a variety of topics from the ecology behind the research itself to statistics and scientific writing. What made this internship so special was the fact that I was working alongside three South African women, all just a few years older than me. This was my first close interaction with black women from South Africa. In a post-apartheid, *de facto* segregated society, it was very important and interesting to get to know them on such a personal level. While one of these girls lived in a city near Cape Town, two of them were from very small rural villages. These two girls had their first child at 16. They have never owned a computer, have very few possessions, and live with many members of their extended family. They are some of the hardest working and motivated individuals I've met. They could have me crying laughing as I listened to their crazy stories, or actually crying over difficulties they are still working to overcome. These girls taught me so much about life and culture and opened my eyes to society in ways I didn't expect.

Together, we endured arduous days in the field. We stayed in tents. We woke up at 5am to spend long and hot days in the savannas doing vegetation and bird surveys, capturing rodents, and placing camera traps and bat meters. We would return between 4 and 5pm, enter data, eat dinner, and be fast asleep by 8:00pm. Wake up, repeat.

But the beauty of spending these long days in the field together is that the opportunities for learning are endless. We are a group of common minds. We would discuss ideas behind the project itself or ask any of the field experts and professors about bird calls, grasses, and trees. We might delve into long debates about a variety of conservation-related issues or simply discuss life, love, or whatever people are possibly thinking about as we walk under a baking sun, getting bitten up by the rodents we are trying to measure, or falling over logs hidden under the three-foot-tall grass.

But what I really learned from this past summer, even after all those long days in the field and the office writing up what we had discovered, is that there is truly no other place that I should be. I wouldn't have wanted to spend my summer any other way. I know I've found my place because of the constant curiosity and desire to know more, accompanied by such happiness and pride for the work we did together. Never before have I felt so impassioned. It also didn't hurt that the drives to the field in the morning were accompanied by sightings of elephants, lions, leopards, rhino and more, or that data entry took place by a beautiful riverside, full of hippos, crocodiles, and birds.

A defining moment was actually when I was on a run with one of my closest friends, Annie, in one of the game reserves in Swaziland. We normally run on paved roads, so this was a

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fun change of pace. We could hardly get through our run because we kept seeing so many cool frogs and insects and just *had* to take a picture of every single one so we could ID them later. But the most amazing moment of that run was running straight into a large male giraffe on the dirt “road.” He was just 10 feet away, so close I thought I could run up and touch him. He stared at us, clearly as shocked as we were to be so close to each other. This moment likely only lasted a fleeting second or two, though it was slow motion in my mind. Annie and I were giddy with excitement as we sprinted back to tell the others what just occurred. How lucky was I? I was running through the Mbuluzi Game Reserve of Swaziland, seeing crazy looking white frogs, adorable geckos, and massive spiders, running straight into the largest giraffe I’ve seen, *on foot*, with someone who feels as excited as I am about all that is occurring! I couldn’t ask for anything more.

I came for the research and left with more knowledge and insight about savanna ecosystems, life in a post-apartheid society, myself, and the world around me than I could have imagined. Currently, based on what I’ve learned from professors and fellow researchers, it has become clear that I will need to continue to travel and experience as many types of work in the field of ecology as possible. Not knowing my exact destination is scary at times, though I’m beginning to understand that life is all about the journey.