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Working with South African wildlife has been a longtime dream of mine, I used to go on safari when I visited my family in South Africa when I was little, and for a long time I wanted to be a ranger when I grew up. I've since focused on studying other, very different things: international politics and Chinese. But I always wondered about my old dream, and never could stop thinking about South Africa. My Burch Fellowship experience gave me the chance to live out that dream.

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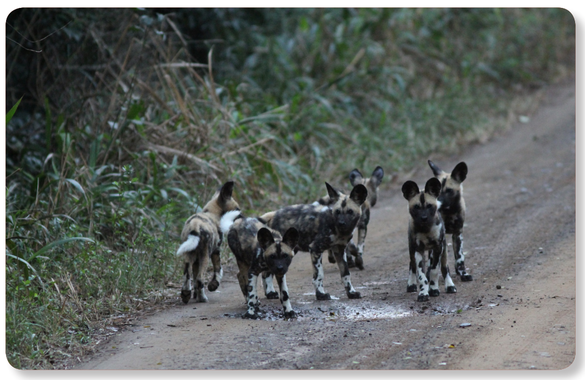
ENDANGERED SPECIES TRACKING AND MONITORING IN SOUTH AFRICA

I got to work with an organization called Wildlife ACT in the Kwazulu-Natal region of South Africa, on several different projects, Hluhluwe, Mkhuze, and Somkhanda/Kwazulu Private projects, tracking and monitoring endangered species in each park. Work in Hluhluwe began before sunrise every day when we would head out to track the African Wild Dogs. Also called Painted Dogs, they are one of the most endangered species in the world, with fewer than 400 individuals surviving in South Africa. These animals live and hunt in packs, much like wolves, and we tracked the only pack remaining in Hluhluwe. We would drive out to the den site – the reason we left so early in the morning is that the dogs tend to hunt early – and wait for the dogs to come out. Because they tend to roam long distances in search of prey, the dogs are particularly susceptible to poachers' traps. We followed



them until they made a kill and then returned to the den. We would often see and make note of other animals as well, especially elephants and rhinoceros, which are also at risk of poachers in the area. One of the most memorable experiences I had at Hluhluwe was getting the chance to interact with (read: play with and pet) a group of baby rhinoceros whose mothers were victims of poaching. These baby rhinoceros were being raised by the park veterinarian until they are old enough to live and graze on their own.

The second project on which I worked spanned two reserves: Somkhanda, and later, Kwazulu-Private. These reserves were very different, both from each other and from the other projects on which I worked. My work on these reserves was focused on the tracking of leopards through camera-traps. We were tasked with going out and removing the remaining cameras, and retrieving and categorizing the pictures they had taken. The work was a lot more physical, especially at Kwazulu Private, where we set up new camera traps in various locations throughout the park where leopards would hopefully pass. We also got to meet the principle researcher for the project, and better understand her need for leopard surveys and the data we were collecting. As with Hluhluwe, we also monitored elephants and rhinoceros, and used this information to assist the reserves with conservation efforts.

The final reserve on which I worked was Mkhuze. Mkhuze was also home to a wild dog pack, which we monitored most days. The rest of the time we tracked a local elephant herd, which had a number of young calves barely at walking age. On several occasions we were close enough to touch the elephants, and though they were a little nervous of us, they never charged outright. At Mkhuze I was able to be involved with more of the day-to-day work of conservation, aside from monitoring endangered species. I helped in keeping track of our sightings, including updating computer records to reflect the number of endangered animals, what they are doing, and where they are located. I also helped keep a record of camera traps in Mkhuze, which were also used to track leopards. Highlights of my time in Mkhuze included following and taking the first ever pictures of that park's new wild dog puppies, and also setting out carcasses to attract vultures for a vulture census (we counted over 190 vultures in the small area where we dumped the carcasses, after returning the next day).

During this adventure I learned how conservation is connected to many other issues. I learned that rhinoceros horns can sell for up to $125,000 in East and Southeast Asia,

where buyers believe they have special medicinal properties. They do not; rhinoceros horns are made of keratin, the same material that makes up fingernails. This failure in education, as well as rampant poverty in South Africa, drives up the rate of poaching; more rhinoceros were poached in South Africa last year than in any year previously. The conservation efforts there are a daily struggle to relate to poor communities, many of whom see poaching as their only means of escape from poverty.

I found to my surprise, then, that this issue is related to what I've been studying. Conservation is about international politics and development. To save endangered species we must first work towards improving the education, income, and standard of living of people around the world. Though the situation is disheartening, I have a greater sense of purpose thanks to this experience. I'm more committed than ever to improving the world and working toward solutions to the interlinked problems of poverty, ignorance, and poaching. I may be more aware of the steep challenges that we as a global community face, but I am more optimistic about solving them, and about my own ability to contribute to a more informed, developed, and equal world.