

Samantha Lauth

Honors Enrichment Award Report

The experiences I had in South Africa were most certainly the best of my undergraduate career, and words cannot describe how grateful I am for the opportunity I was afforded by the Honors Program. Not only did the trip bring my training in anthropology, human dimensions of natural resources, and international development to life, but it invigorated my curiosity in the life sciences and filled my heart with everlasting connections to South African culture through the people I travelled with and those I met along the way.

A year before I travelled to South Africa as part of the 2019 Communities and Conservation cohort, I took Anthropology 310 – Peoples and Culture of Africa: African Cities, Ethnographic Perspectives. Seeing the themes we covered in that course – the legacies of apartheid and colonialism on political institutions and the places people inhabit, informality, the urban-rural continuum, democratization, witchcraft – first-hand was instrumental to me connecting the dots between them and having examples to refer to in my educational and professional future. Many of these themes emerged in our homestays in the villages of HaMakuya and in my interviewing of women in conservation as well.

We studied the urban-rural continuum through human-wildlife interactions which we tracked through a series of camera traps we set up along an urbanization gradient. This was my first time working with camera traps and I learned how critical their positioning and placement is to the study you want to undertake. Things to consider include height (Do you want to capture smaller or larger animals?); angle (You need to be wary of the sun and things that could set it off like vehicles driving by and people); surroundings (What animals are you looking to capture?); and whether you want to ‘lure’ animals in with meat, with placement of the camera near a watering hole, or with no luring whatsoever.

My knowledge of South African flora and fauna, along with socio-ecological processes, is now quite robust. Before I knew nothing of the cultural significance of the regions’ indigenous plants including the Marula Tree which can be made into a tea that is thought to influence the gender of an unborn child and bares fruits that are economically and connectively vital in the Bushbuck Ridge Area, nor the Buffalo Thorn whose branches are laid on the graves of loved ones in order to ‘hook’ the spirit. Several guest lectures and bush walks later, I have a newfound respect for termites which are the engineers and farmers of the insect world, can tell the approximate ages of elephants and gender of giraffes, know how to find true south from the southern hemisphere night sky, and am beginning to understand the complexities of elephant management and rhino poaching. Though I may never work in South Africa and put this knowledge to use, it has inspired me to learn more about the natural world in my own backyard from culturally significant plants to insects to

The skills I learned and the knowledge and confidence I gained from interviewing informants and living in Gondeni were instrumental to my growth as an anthropologist. In Gondeni, I practiced my Tshivenda language skills and was able to communicate very basically with my homestay mother and her family. My group members and I conducted a photovoice

project and from our mistakes, I know how to implement a better photovoice project in the future. I attended a Venda engagement party dressed in traditional munwenda and learned about household metabolism, kin networks, the importance of aesthetic in infrastructure, and the difficulties of resource harvesting. I became very close with our group's translator and the children in our village, so much so that I felt I could live in Gondeni for a year and conduct ethnographic research. This was a confidence boosting experience and exciting realization.

I laid the groundwork for my senior honors thesis when I interviewed four women who worked in South Africa's conservation. Using anthropological methodologies including participant observation and one-on-one formal and informal interviews, I focused on the life histories of these women and many themes emerged including the legacies of apartheid and poverty, gendered and class-related discrepancies in access to education and professional training, and generational changes in religious practices and values. The process of conducting life history interviews was not like that of interviews I had done prior to my travels. Dissimilarly from those interviews, most of my effort was concentrated on following-up with the women on the answers given to my prior questions and getting them to delve deeper into their responses. Many of these questions were personal and related to heavier subject matter, so I had to learn very quickly and in the moment how to make them feel comfortable. Coming up with follow-up questions during the interviews was tricky, but the more I interviewed people, the better I got at it.

The memories I have of South Africa are ones that I will cherish for the rest of my life. Thank you so much for this opportunity and please enjoy the photos I've attached.



Sitting down with the first of four women I interviewed for their life histories. This particular woman was one of our guides for the portion of the trip through Kruger National Park.



Standing on the edge of the cliff overlooking the Lekgalameetse area. The six communities that co-own this area are looking to open it up to tourism.

My homestay group with our translator dressed in traditional munwenda skirts. This photo was taken before attending the engagement party.



These powerlines stretch from Mozambique to South Africa and were used by refugees during Mozambique's Civil War to navigate the bush in Kruger National Park. Unfortunately, a pack of opportunistic lions took advantage and began to prowl the length of the lines, killing several people at the time.



A Marula seed pod whose 3 seeds have been popped out. Marula trees and fruits are incredibly important in the Bushbuck Ridge area of South Africa.



My homestay group and our mother are showing the utmost respect to one another by lying down and bowing while saying “Aa” (Hello). Normally ‘Aa’ (or ‘Nda’ for men) is accompanied by a sideways bowing motion; only in special circumstances do you lie fully down on the ground.



Baobab trees may live up to thousands of years. The scars on their bark, much like this one, are telling of areas that elephants used to or currently occupy as they scrape their tusks on the tree's surface.