

Vet students go wild for South African course in conservation management

Author : ROBIN FEARON

Categories : [Vets](#)

Date : February 18, 2008

ROBIN FEARON reports on the business that is turning veterinary students into managers of dangerous wild animals

A PALE sun vaults into the sky over South Africa's Eastern Cape. It washes the harbour around Port Elizabeth with its watery light and a stiff breeze buffets the industrial waterfront. It is a raw scene, but a little way inland among the tributaries of the Bushman's River, the land blossoms in fierce beauty.

Heading east past the township of Motherwell and on towards Paterson, the bushveld thickens or drops away into river canyons. Quinton Gillson eases his four-by-four past afternoon commuters. The operations manager at Worldwide Experience, he coordinates activities on the Vets Go Wild (VGW) programme at Shamwari Wildlife Reserve.

Shamwari, the brainchild of entrepreneur founder Adrian Gardiner, nestles between the Addo Elephant Park and the Amakhala Game Reserve. When it is not providing premium-rate conservation safaris for guests, it uses spare capacity during the winter months - August and September - to provide veterinary students with practical experience of its wildlife management programmes through VGW.

Quinton has already nurtured the BBC through its inaugural series of *Safari School*, hosted by Charlotte Uhlenbroek. Shamwari was the setting for a six-week shoot with 54 crew and eight celebrity contestants in competition to prove themselves as field guides. Turning veterinary stu

students into competent handlers is peanuts by comparison.

Big five

It is easy to see the attraction of this area. Even in winter the Eastern Cape experiences days, sometimes weeks, of unbroken sun. The land is verdant with sumptuous brown and orange soil, and it is richly inhabited. Shamwari's 25,000 hectares (60,000 acres) is "big five" country - lion, buffalo, leopard, elephant and rhinoceros - so-called because of the skill level required to hunt or capture these dangerous and intelligent animals.

"I got into conservation work through a friend," says Quinton. "I didn't know the difference between a mouse and an elephant; it was like being dropped in at the deep end. I was charged by a white rhino, shit myself, climbed up a tree, and thought 'Wow, this is awesome'."

And while VGW can't promise a white-knuckle introduction for all its participants, it does highlight the unpredictability of dealing with dangerous wild animals.

Course

To give students the background they need to explore a career as a reserve vet, the programme employs a 16-day course packed with lectures and practical sessions covering identification and tracking; game capture; diseases and husbandry; and the ecological and societal impacts of wildlife reserves.

Head veterinarian Johan Joubert is joined by assistant Murray Stokoe and local consultant William Fowlds to deliver the programme, alongside ecologist John O'Brien. The students - 14 of them - take up residence at the adjoining Amakhala reserve, and the first night is a heady stew of beers, bongos and braai - a traditional barbecue that draws them deep into South African life in the bushveld.

Over the course of the next two weeks, a bewildering array of sensations and experiences will show them the possibilities in living the wild life.

"The bush and nature are very important to me," says Quinton, a FGASA-qualified (Field Guides Association of South Africa) field guide. "I still enjoy the sighting of an elephant and I can tell you about many species of plants and their medicinal value. If I hadn't met my wife Catherine, I would be a trails guide up in Kenya or the Kruger National Park right now."

He explains that Worldwide Experience began six years ago after requests for voluntary work were made to the conservation department. Out of that grew the VGW concept and a trial run in 2006 led to the first course date proper in July 2007. Partnered with the 6,000-hectare Amakhala reserve, a conglomeration of stock farms owned by descendants of the original white settlers who banded

together, and the huge 120,000-hectare (and expanding) Addo National Park, there is a lot of ground for the students to cover.

The Port Elizabeth area itself is unglamorous; labelled the Detroit of the Eastern Cape, General Motors is vaunted for a return to the area after quitting due to apartheid. There are huge employment problems and figures vary between 80-90 per cent in the district - so much so that it is viewed as a social responsibility for the game reserve, and it extends work programmes into local communities wherever possible.

In 1990, Adrian Gardiner was buying up property and land surrounding Long Lee Manor, a settler's house originally owned by vet William Fowlds' greatgreat-grandfather (also called William Fowlds). He had a vision for Shamwari that extended beyond its use as a pit stop for people heading through to the Wild Coast and Durban.

“He used the diaries of [renowned natural historian] Jack Skead who described the land as rich farmland,” says Quinton. “The area thronged with wildlife too: black and white rhinoceros, elephants, and the cape lion. The cape lion and hunting dog were shot and driven out; the rhinoceros and elephants were almost cleared out too. Around Addo there were 11 left at one point.

“Adrian was the first person to reintroduce the black rhino into the district. He sourced lions from the Kalahari because of their similarities to the cape lion and set up a footprint for tourism in Port Elizabeth, putting the country back on the map from an eco-tourism perspective.”

Now much of the big game hunting is in the north of the country. It is big five trophy hunting, or “canned hunting”, on large fenced reserves. And while the Eastern Cape has its fair share of hunting, none of it is big five.

“We're lucky here,” comments Quinton. “The vets and ecologists have been so important in our breeding programmes and helping to increase the capacity of the land to bear wildlife through animal management and ecology. We set the ethics of field guiding and make sure it is done with sensitivity to each species and the local environment.”

Opportunity

Murray Stokoe started work as assistant vet at Shamwari in November 2006. After graduating from Onderstepoort Faculty of Veterinary Science in Pretoria, he did a masters degree in medicine (MMed) before surveying his options. None of his family works with wildlife: his father is a poultry farmer and his brother an accountant.

Farming in South Africa is a tough life. There are no subsidies and with tribal land claims starting to bite, it is little wonder he avoided the family business. “Zimbabwe is making a lot of people

nervous,” he admits.

Murray's route into wildlife work was based on opportunity - the family farm is close to the Kruger National Park.

“Ten to 15 per cent of the job is veterinary work and the rest is ecology,” he says. “The ironic thing is that when you decide to specialise and become a reserve veterinarian, you don't end up being a full-time vet. If there's an impala with a broken leg, we don't fix it, we just leave it for the lions. It's all part of trying to create a natural environment.”

If one of those same animals is injured as a result of a human interference, then the vets treat it or humanely euthanise it. Any rare or endangered species receive routine veterinary treatment.

“We are in the process of extending our surgery to accommodate clean and dirty procedures, but most of the work is done in the field. We do a lot of darting and the biggest challenge of the job so far has been learning how to read animal behaviour. You have to get close enough to make sure it is done right first time,” he says.

Murray lectures the students on basic capture technology, darting equipment and animal welfare during capture. He tells them about mass capture systems using nets or bomas, which channel the animals to waiting lorries or secure fenced areas. The wooden bomas must be quiet, and away from human dwellings, because stress is a big killer.

He also runs a rehabilitation centre. Its current resident is a lynx whose mother was shot by a livestock farmer. Murray avoids hand-rearing and limits human contact to ensure a successful release back into the wild. He loves his job despite his pragmatic approach, and would not trade it for any other.

William Fowlds is VGW's principal lecturer on this intake. He owns a local practice and is veterinary consultant to a number of game reserves. Big five animals are extremely valuable - both in terms of local ecology and tourism. He tells me that the Eastern Cape already has in excess of 2.7 million hectares under wildlife management, including national parks and private land.

“These areas are fragmented but photographic eco-tourism and hunting industries are growing all the time, and more and more individual properties are merging together,” William explains. “In the Eastern Cape there are 15 privately-owned photographic reserves, which did not exist prior to the return of international tourism in 1994. These properties alone cover almost 120,000 hectares.”

Socio-economic

The socio-economic impacts of the reserve industry are just as important as its ecology. Sustainability is the real issue. South Africa is now at the stage where privateers have overtaken

the government in terms of land ownership. As a result, Worldwide Experience has allied itself with the Wilderness Foundation, a global charity set up to protect wild habitats.

Given the precarious nature of funding for national parks, the role that private reserves play in conservation is decisive. Politics now plays a big part in conservation management, says John O'Brien, reserve ecologist: "The government has powers to regulate land use, but if land is used effectively in the first place, the tendency to politicise the situation would be drastically reduced."

He fervently believes ecology is a crucial part of the VGW experience: "It is vitally important that students can identify the relationship between what they do as vets and the link they have to the ecological status of an area. We aim to give them a broad outline of the importance of sound environmental management."

Ian Williams, 21, is an undergraduate at the University of Bristol Faculty of Medical and Veterinary Sciences. Like most students he wants to survey the full spectrum of job opportunities available after qualifying. VGW has been an eye-opening experience, he says.

"Conservation is a massive part of the work of game reserves, but the course is so varied and it is a great mix, everything from game drives to capture days, as well as tours of the Born Free Foundation and the aquarium in Port Elizabeth. I thoroughly enjoyed every day and I'd like to return to South Africa again in the near future, possibly to help out on a similar course.

"I keep looking through my pictures," he adds. "The wildlife is spectacular and going out for game drives before the sun comes up, in freezing conditions, is exhilarating. In truth there are so many activities during the two weeks that there is never a chance to get bored. I think you would struggle to find better value considering what I've experienced."

Vets Go Wild is a qualified success. Three more two-week courses are planned: starting on July 7, then July 28 and August 18, 2008. In the midday sun, the smell of sweet grass blows in across the terrace at Long Lee Manor. In the distance elephants take a dust bath. Vervet monkeys cajole and chase each other. Really, it is a day like any other.

Shamwari wildlife reserve. Even in winter the Eastern Cape experiences days of unbroken sun.



Shamwari wildlife reserve. Even in winter the Eastern Cape experiences days of unbroken sun.



Assistant vet Murray Stokoe checks out his darting rifle in readiness for the next capture.



The bomas are used as a passive capture system. Animals are lured in to the wooden enclosure using food and water.