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SEEVIC COLLEGE SOMKHANDA CONSERVATION FIELD TRIP OVERVIEW

SOMKHANDA GAME RESERVE

Somkhanda is a 12000ha community-owned game reserve in the Zululand district of KwaZulu Natal. The reserve is just about to introduce the last of the 'big 5' to the reserve. Somkhanda is home to breeding populations of two key endangered mammal species- Black Rhino and the African Wild Dog. The full complement of species that historically occurred in the area including Hyena, Giraffe, White Rhino, Wildebeest, Zebra, Impala, Nyala, Kudu, Bushbuck, Reedbuck and many more.

HISTORY OF THE RESERVE

The Gumbi Tribe lost their tribal land during the years of Apartheid and in 2006 successfully won an ancestral land claim over a large area of Zululand and on a section of this they established the 12000ha Somkhanda game reserve. The reserve supports the local community in job creation through ethical ecotourism and also by providing schools and support to the local tribe.

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SOMKHANDA CONSERVATION FIELD TRIP

Field trips to the reserve have been running since 1999. The academic team at Somkhanda are able to offer a bespoke course to each institution dependent on their own personal objectives and learning needs. We set out a basis of the trip, comprising of a 10 day academic module at Somkhanda plus an additional 3 day module of the school's choice in whatever area is of most interest.

The students will be taught and work alongside the field guides and conservation team at Somkhanda Game reserve. Activities students will be involved in:
-Leopard camera trap surveys
-Small mammal research
-Wild dog tracking
-Elephant monitoring and observation
-Game Counts
-Fence and road maintenance.
-Water management for game
-Community cattle dipping
-Alien plant control
-Fire management
-Game Capture

The working day: A full 9 hour day will be planned but will vary from day to day depending on the day's task and what surprises come up.

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WILD DOG TRACKING:

One of the highlights of visiting Somkhanda Game Reserve, is the chance to see these magnificent endangered animals. Wilddogs are the most endangered carnivore in Africa requiring a vast area of land to sustain one pack. Somkhanda is surrounded on three sides by tribal communities whole livlihood are dependant on cattle and goat farming. Prior to the introduction of Wilddog to Somkhanda an agreement was made with the community that the reserve would monitor and track the pack of dogs twice daily. There is a permanent team dedicated to this but you will be able to join in with their work, watch the dog hunt and play!

LEOPARD MONITORING:

Due to the importance of cattle to the economy of the rural community outside of Somkhanda and the reserve commitment to fostering good relations with the tribe there are ongoing monitoring of the leopard on the reserve. You will get to learn how to set camera traps and identify individual leopards as well as record their movements.

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COMMUNITY CATTLE DIPPING:

As a free service to the community, the reserve with the backing of the state veterinary department, undertakes community cattle dipping to eradicate ticks. The programme takes place every week throughout summer and every second week throughout winter. The aim is to control tick population and reduce the incidence of tick-borne diseases. This improves the health of the animals which increases milk production and decreasing calf-interval. A great opportunity to experience traditional Zulu life.

CULTURAL HOME STAY:

Students are given the option to spend a night staying in a family home in the local community. Eating traditional African food and sleeping in traditional village huts. Students will stay in small groups with individual families, they will have to join in with chores and help prepare dinner. This is an eye opening and incredibly rewarding experience for students.

BLACK RHINO PROJECT:

Black Rhino populations are under threat throughout Africa with the total number having plummeted from approximately 65000 to 2400. In recent years successful conservation efforts have resulted in numbers rising again to a current population of approximately 3000. South Africa is home to the largest number of black and certain key populations have reached their optimum biological carrying capacity. Overpopulation can negatively impact on population growth and so breeding populations have to be carefully established and controlled in a suitable habitat. Whilst on Somkhanda you will have the chance to help restore the ideal habitat for the black rhino; by eradicating the plant species of Chromoleana odorata. You will also take part in patrols looking for signs of poaching and learn to track the rhino as well as identify birds, plants, animal tracks. Rhino tacking is essential information that has to be recorded daily so the reserve can keep an eye on their movement patterns their physical condition and their associations with other animals and other rhino, there is a permanent team dedicated to this on the reserve and you will be able to join them.

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There is also scope to include time where the students are able to work on their own research programs; either during the 10 day module, or in place of the other add on modules. A level students are able to use this as their individual research component and Schools are able to create group projects.
All research projects are aligned with the game reserve management objective and can be broad and dynamic. The research will benefit both the student and the game reserve. Many research programs allow for hands-on experience where life skills, not available in their present environment are encouraged and taught. Once a project subject is chosen, a project proposal should be made and materials and methods can be discussed. These projects must be carefully prepared in advance of the trip so that the reserve can put all the necessaries in place so the research can run smoothly and the research can run as efficiently as possible.

- **Alien Plant Management**- invasive plants play havoc with natural habitats, infestation need to be investigated, mapped out and recommendation made for their removal.
- **Aquatic systems-river, springs and dams** Mkuzi river forms the southern boundary of the reserve and there are several streams, ponds dams and water holes that need monitoring and measuring rainfall.
- **Geology and Soils**- Current land use practices need their impacts monitored and recorded.
- **Small and Medium herbivore management**- Grazing and Browsing impacts, especially near to artificial water points. Impacts of hunting and sale of game.
- **Mega Herbivore Management**- Cape Buffalo-protected species need to be monitored and tracked daily. Feeding habits, and their impact need to be reported on.

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- **Small Predator Management**- All species need to be identified, mainly via camera trapping. A catalogue of animals is being made so we can identify as many individuals as possible on the reserve. More information is desperately required by the reserve, especially with prey species.
- **Large Predator Management**- Lion, Leopard, Wild dog, Spotted hyaene, brown hyena and caracal. All of these have an impact that needs to be identified and recorded. Mapping the their home ranges and activity.
- **Conservation Management**- related to aspects of the physical management of the environment and other supporting infrastructure needed to manage a game reserve. Fencing, Road and tracks, Erosion, Planning and mapping.
- **Amphibians**- Many of which are threatened or endangered, the reserve has a check list of the species but little is known about there status and distribution
- **Insectavora including spiders:** Only 21 recorded on the reserve when thousands of species occur. Insects are important environmental indicators so they needs to be identifies and monitored.
- **Environmental education**- For children both in local schools and abroad, an adult education course is needed.
- **Biodiversity heritage:** How do we manage the ecosystem
- beyond the fence line of the game reserve.

Once you have chosen your specific area of interest we can provide examples of project titles within that area of research.

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In keeping with the Safari Adventure theme, groups are accommodated on the reserve in comfortable safari tents, with communal hot and cold showers and regular flushing toilets. All meals are provided in a communal dining room. If student opt to sleep out there are basic camps around the reserve that can be used for sleep outs; Sleeping out under the stars and learn how to make a fire and cook on it! There is also a lodge available for students and lecturers at an additional surcharge.

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