

In October of 2004, I left for Botswana as a Reynolds Scholar with a relatively straightforward plan. Following in Jane Goodall's footsteps, I was finally going to apply my interest and background in wildlife biology to the conservation of wildlife species and habitat in Africa. A year later, I came home with a set of goals, interests and beliefs that didn't cut such a neat picture as before. "Conservation", as I had thought about it previously—complete with images of wide open savannahs and cheetahs running free—was not so simple, or so unequivocally positive. I had found that conservation could mean displaced people, impoverished farmers angry over losing cattle to predators, and a park boundary fence restricting traditional access routes of villagers and wildlife.

My nine months in the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park (MPNP) of Botswana studying conflict between subsistence cattle farmers and wild predators made me realize that I needed and wanted to incorporate socio-economic and political study into my previously biologically-focused research. I had come to care as much about the people of Botswana as the wildlife and beautiful landscapes that had initially attracted me, and I knew that I wanted to contribute to the field of environmental conservation through an integrated, interdisciplinary approach. Wildlife conservation and rural livelihoods are inextricably linked, and when the two interests clash, both suffer. This point was clearly elucidated for me in MPNP, where predators from the park threaten farmers' livelihoods and farmers in turn retaliate by shooting wildlife.

While success in integrated conservation and development projects in Africa has proved elusive thus far, I am convinced that we need not revert to an "either-or" stance that dichotomizes conservation and local economic development. Novel approaches that truly synthesize knowledge and values from the fields of ecology, rural sociology and international development are necessary, and are what I aspire to work towards in my career. I am equally committed to these disciplines; hence my position as a PhD student in two divisions of Berkeley's Environmental Studies, Policy and Management department—Society & Environment and Ecosystems Sciences. Joint advising from Dr. Louise Fortmann, a rural sociologist, and Dr. Justin Brashares, a wildlife ecologist, will ensure that my research is both rigorous and interdisciplinary. Building on my academic background in wildlife biology, I am currently taking a complementary set of classes focusing on conservation biology in the context of rural community dynamics and property rights theory. My dissertation research will engage tools and theory from both the ecological and sociological fields in order to develop a multi-faceted understanding of the effects of game ranching on wildlife and local communities. As my research and professional history show (see research experience essay), I have the capability to carry out both sound ecological and sociological research, and the dedication and energy to effectively combine these two disciplines into findings that can meaningfully inform conservation and development policy and programs.

I am not content, however, to remain a behind-the-scenes researcher, passing off responsibility and action to policy makers and program managers down the line. Instead, I have made conscious efforts to engage various sectors of the general public in my specific research and the larger environmental issues at hand, and to facilitate meaningful cross-cultural understandings. These contributions are described below, and represent the beginnings of the kind of researcher that I hope to become.

In the summer of 2006 I returned to Botswana to the village of Moreomaoto, where I had conducted most of my sociological research the year before. However, this

time I came not as a stranger asking to conduct household interviews, but as a familiar face excited about collaborating with the primary school teachers to establish Botswana's first-ever Roots and Shoots Youth Environmental Club<sup>1</sup>. The grade 3 head teacher and I led weekly Roots and Shoots club meetings and activities with a group of eighteen 8 to 10 year olds. After a series of projects such as community map-making, "be a zoologist" day, environmental story-telling and skits, and community clean-up day, I organized a field trip into Makgadikgadi park. Not one of the kids had ever set foot in the park before, despite it being only about 2 km away. In all of the Roots and Shoots activities, the schoolteachers and I made sure to combine basic environmental education with community awareness, exposure to outside cultures, and a sense of fun and possibility.

As a member of the greater research community working in Botswana's national parks from 2004 to 2005, I took every opportunity available to convey my own findings to the public. At the safari camp where I was based, I gave talks to audiences ranging from a secondary school group from Botswana's capital to a group of Japanese tourists on holiday. Additionally, I presented my research to a group of Maun (the nearest big town) residents, many of whom had vested interests in the impacts of the new fence on the Makgadikgadi region. At the end of my nine months there, I also sent copies of my research report to every key stakeholder whom I had interviewed. Within both the research community and the general public, I became one of the key local experts for questions regarding the Makgadikgadi fence, and my work was eventually highlighted in an article published in the *Natural History* magazine (June 2006 issue).

Research is never undertaken alone, and I certainly would have gotten nowhere without the help of my research assistant, Poloko Gaolebalwe. Throughout the data collection process, we shared our evolving perspectives on the role of wildlife conservation in a country such as Botswana with each other, and I would like to think that our collaboration was beneficial to both of us.

During my four years at Dartmouth, I seized opportunities to combine my love of learning with my eagerness to share knowledge with the outside community. For three years I mentored a nine year-old girl from a nearby housing project. Becca and I went on numerous eye-opening excursions, including a trip to Boston to see the New England Aquarium and the Freedom Trail, and a canoe ride to a nearby island where she experienced camping in the woods for the first time. While at Dartmouth, I also led incoming freshman on orientation trips through the Appalachian Mountains. Many of these kids had never left home before or spent time in the outdoors, and I was responsible both for teaching them about wilderness survival and their ensuing survival at college. Lastly, as academic chair of my sorority I was responsible for bringing in guest faculty to give lectures, and highlighting members' academic achievements at group meetings.

Working as a researcher in a foreign country is a tremendous responsibility. I am always aware that I stand as an ambassador to several entities—the United States, the research community, my academic institution, and the particular funding agency that is supporting me. For this reason, and for my own personal fulfillment, I look upon my research as a chance not only to increase my own intellectual and cultural understanding of the world around me, but also to enrich my neighbors with new knowledge, added perspective, and a broader sense of opportunity.

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<sup>1</sup> Roots and Shoots was started by Jane Goodall and aims to inspire youth to promote care and concern about animals, the environmental and human communities.