

UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCES WITH STE-SA

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By Danny Fernandes

Rewarding, humbling, challenging, exciting, tiring, fun, unforgettable- these are just some of the words that best describe my time working with STE-SA and the elephants of the APNR and surrounds. At times, 'frustrating' could also be added to the list, because, as we all know, Mother Nature works according to her own schedule!

Feeling slightly unsure about the direction my life was taking in terms of my future career path, I was excited and determined to make full use of the opportunity I had been given of being able to work with the STE-SA team. Although I was certain that my passion lay in working with animals, I was keen to explore all the different facets of this type



of work, and being at STE-SA was a great way to experience first-hand the ups and downs of elephant research. Being in my final year of my undergraduate Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Stellenbosch, I was well-acquainted with research principles and practice. However, I realized that any form of research I had done while at university would pale in comparison to the years of hard work that had gone into the research by Michelle and STE. I felt privileged to be a part of it, and I knew that anything I learned would be priceless experience and knowledge gained.

The warm greeting and smiles we (myself and my friend, Peter Thorpe) received from the staff when we arrived at the Tanda Tula Elephant Research Camp gave me the feeling of reuniting with old friends, despite this being the first meeting. I immediately felt right at home!



Most of our days working with STE-SA were spent out in the field. GPS co-ordinates of each individual collared elephant would download every four hours. We would use these co-ordinates, as well as a VHF and keen ears and eyes to then track and find a specific individual. Upon finding the individual, we would take

identification pictures of the ears, and fill out data sheets containing information on their whereabouts, condition, reaction to our presence and other important details that

would later be analysed by Michelle. The same would be done for un-collared individuals that we may have come across along the way.

This process may come across as being fairly straightforward. However, as we would find out on our first day, this simple explanation is incredibly misleading! We spent most of 8 hours in the Land Rover trying to track down Classic, one of the larger prime bulls. Michelle wanted to find out whether or not he was in musth, but he was clearly determined to keep her guessing! Without any success on Day 1, much of the same followed on Day 2- a lot of evidence of Classic being close, but unfortunately no Classic in sight!



In a way, it may have been frustrating not finding something you had feverishly been looking for for 2 days, but any trace of frustration quickly disappeared when you were reminded over and over again of the privilege of just being in the close vicinity of one of these amazing animals. It was a very humbling experience to just sit, watch and listen to the elephants, fully aware that you were at their mercy. This was no more apparent for me than when we were being watched by a semi-circle of 5 incredibly large bulls, including 'Intwandamela' (He Who Greets With Fire In His Eyes), or when we were in the middle of a herd of 11 bulls, young and old, browsing majestically in a mopane woodland. It was also touching to experience the human-like love and care shown by the matriarch and the other mothers of the breeding herd towards their young.

We eventually did manage to find Classic a few days later after having given up looking for him for a while. I thought it was slightly inappropriate for us to find him so easily in the end 😊



We also tried our hand at identifying the un-collared elephants we had come across in the field. This was quite a daunting task considering that there was a database of roughly 1500 elephants, and all we had to go by were photos and drawings of their ears, face and tusks. We soon realized that it would take a

lot of patience to perfect this task- Sarah and Jess jokingly informed us of the very high turnover rate amongst males in our position!

After just under 2 weeks of working with STE-SA, our time unfortunately came to an end. Even though I wish our stay could have been longer, it



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without a doubt an experience I will keep close to me forever. No book or scientific article can do justice to the experience of being in the presence of an elephant; it's unbelievable how a creature so large and powerful can at the same time be so silent, elegant and beautiful, without any innate desire to harm us. As Michelle put it: "They really are just big old herbivores".

Unfortunately, there is a small minority of the human race who still feel the need to exploit these animals. It was therefore an honour for me to work with Michelle and the team at STE-SA, who are so passionate about the welfare of these elephants, and are doing everything they can through their research to protect the future of the elephants of the APNR and the surrounding areas. Thank you so much Michelle, Sarah, Jess, Collin, Summer and Prince for giving me the opportunity and sharing the experience with me. I will definitely treasure the memories and friendships made during my short stay, and hopefully be back sooner rather than later.

