

# Volunteering at *Save The Elephants* (SA)

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*By Peter Thorpe*

As a university student, one always looks forward to the holidays in which there is plenty of time to be spent doing nothing. The time spent doing nothing becomes incredibly boring and when the realisation that we will be thrown straight into the working world after acquiring our degrees hits, holiday work becomes the next best thing on the agenda.

"So, what are you doing these holidays bro? "

"Ah... I'm clocking up some hours at Deloitte's Accounting Firm hey... What about you John? "

"Ja I'm working in a factory observing the logistics of the production line... At least we get paid bru! "

"I'm going to the Kruger National Park to assist with elephant research. Hope you guys have a good time in the city! I won't have cellphone reception so don't bother trying to contact me; I probably wouldn't reply anyway..."

For me, arriving in the bush is like arriving home. I've been visiting the area for 16 years - since I can remember, so each passing tree and bend in the road feels familiar. But this time our journey to the bush had a purpose. We had been accepted to volunteer with Michelle Greyling and the elephant research team based at Tanda Tula lodge in the Associated Private Nature Reserves (APNR), part of the greater Kruger National Park. On our journey up from the Cape, we had taken time to read about the elephant research that has been conducted in the area, including familiarising ourselves with the collared individuals and their profiles in an attempt to prepare ourselves for the field work. I felt incredibly unprepared.

On our first day, we were up in the dark freezing our toes off while preparing our cooler box for the day in the field. We knew it would get hot when the African sun rose above our heads. Our drive from our base at Ingwelala share block to Tanda Tula took a good forty-five minutes in our open Land Rover, with the cold wind beating our bloodshot eyes. Upon arrival at the research base, Michelle introduced us to the rest of the team - Sarah, Colin, Jess, Summer and Prince. We were given the low-down on how everything works. Basically, the individuals with collars are monitored closely as the collar emits a GPS coordinate four times a day. We would be accompanying the research team out into the field to follow the latest GPS coordinate of a specific individual in order to obtain photographs to help build up the Identification database and to monitor the condition of these individuals, some of which are mature bulls with prize tusks.

Our first bull that we were required to track down was one by the name of Inthandwamela - 'The one who greets with fire in his eyes'. This was a comforting



thought for our first day. We found the latest GPS point fairly easily and from there were shown how to use the VHF aerial in order to track down the individual when close-by.

Inthandwamela turned out to be a very friendly fellow in the end - a beautiful mature bull with magnificent tusks. Many photos were taken by the team in order to try capture both his right and left ears on film for the ID database.

The following days in the field proceeded in much the same way. It was a great experience being introduced up close and personal to many of the magnificent bulls that have been roaming the area for many years before I was even born. Think of all the experiences these great creatures must have had!

One of the highlights of the field work for me was on one of our last days in the field. We were required to track down a certain bull that had been hanging around in one of the lesser traversed areas of the park, browsing on the abundant mopane foliage. Upon reaching a high point, close to his coordinate, we spotted a collared elephant in the distance. We also noticed one or two other bulls with him - an added bonus. We rushed in the direction that we had spotted him and were lucky enough to get a clear sighting of him through the mopane forest. When we turned the vehicle off, we heard branches breaking around us and realised that there was more than just one big bull around us. Within a few minutes, we were surrounded by not one, not two, but *eleven* bull elephants going about their daily routine, completely unphased by us. Amongst the bulls was Classic, whom we struggled to find for several days, along with one or two other mature bulls and some younger guys such as Alex - obviously learning from their elder and more experienced companions. Before this experience I had been under the impression that large bull elephants once separated from herds, preferred a solitary lifestyle or enjoyed the company of maybe one or two other bulls. I was obviously mistaken!

It was great being able to tell friends and fellow students our plans for the holidays. I mean, what better way to gain experience in the field? We were incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to travel up to the greater Kruger National Park and work with Michelle on her groundbreaking research. A big thanks must go out to the STE team as well as Prince who we worked with in the field. The memories and friendships formed will never be lost...

