



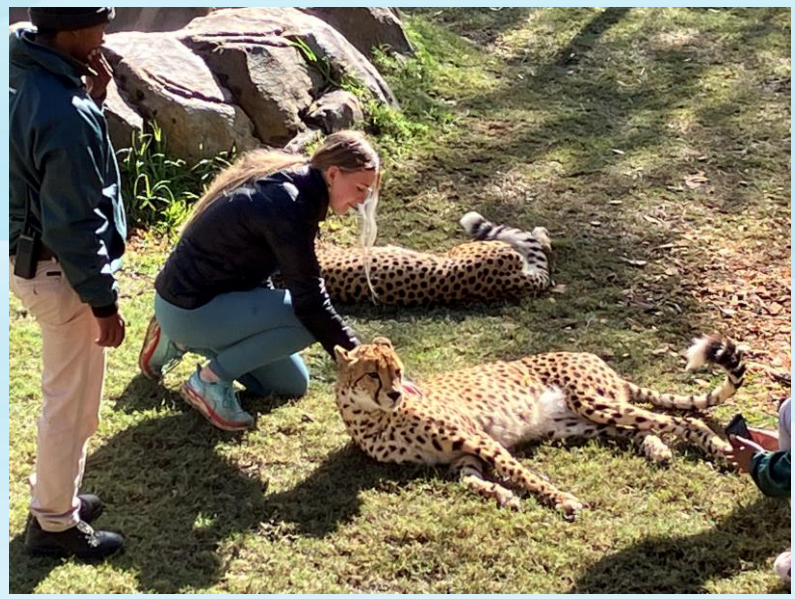
Postcard



From: *Scarlett, USA*

Volunteered:
*Melkhoutfontein +
Montagu, South Africa*

When: *2023*



This past summer I was given the amazing opportunity to go on a unique volunteering trip to South Africa. I had been looking for an opportunity that would allow me to learn about sustainability and help animals and plants at the same time. So when I was offered the opportunity to volunteer with Dreamcatcher South Africa I took it. Whilst here, I was able to learn more about the underprivileged communities and ways in which I could contribute. I have travelled to South Africa as a tourist before, however, I was not aware that so many communities were struggling as much as they were as I was only shown the glorious side of things, so going back and being able to experience this first hand was very special for me. Through this non-profit organization, I was able to serve communities along with delving deeper into specific opportunities that were related to the job I wish to pursue in the future, Veterinary. Because I have been wanting to pursue Veterinary for such a long time, I found this a great opportunity as I was really able to work closely with exotic animals I usually wouldn't get the chance to work with, and I was able to see the specifics of the sort of tasks I could be expected to complete in my dream job. While there are many reasons I chose to take this opportunity with Dreamcatcher, the main factor was their work in sustainability and their commitment to support underprivileged communities over a wide range of challenges. Being able to volunteer for such a life-changing organization is an experience I will always carry with me and never forget.

When I first arrived in South Africa, I was greeted by the organization before traveling from Cape Town to Stilbaai where I received a full introduction and orientation for what my next couple of weeks would look like. Once the plans were sorted, myself with the Dreamcatcher team, drove from Cape Town to another town called Montagu where along the way we would stop and drop off English books at the primary schools who do not have access to English books. In Montagu I joined another volunteer to take the vitals of 14 girls at risk living in challenging circumstances, some of them have been supported by Dreamcatcher for several years. We did this in order to chart their current height, weight, and age to keep track of their overall health and how they are growing.

Dreamcatcher does this twice a year to ensure that the girls are all healthy and reaching their growth milestones. By being a part of this process I was able to gain an inside look on what these girls' lives are like and be a part of the solution to contribute towards their wellbeing. While my entire experience in South Africa was fantastic, I particularly enjoyed this day as I got the chance to dance with the girls in Montagu and get to know each of them on a deeper level. Looking back I really miss this and this is just one of the reasons I hope to go back soon. In the days following this, I was able to volunteer closely with Anthea Rossouw, the founder of Dreamcatcher, to work through my bespoke programme developed around the care of animals and the environment due to my aspirations of becoming a vet.

My first placement was at the Wild Rescue Animal and Nature Reserve with Gill who was my mentor for the week. During my stay I learned how to feed leopard tortoises and vervet monkeys, grow organic food, and pull-out invasive plant species to help save the indigenous plants. My mornings started off by waking up at around 8am to prepare breakfast for Delilah and Princess, the two vervet monkeys at the reserve permanently as they are no longer able to be released back into the wild since they have been in the care of people for too long. Princess was originally someone's pet and Delilah was a part of a petting zoo before both were released into the care of Wild Rescue. After I fed the monkeys, I would go out to pick fresh indigenous food for the leopard tortoises. Because South Africa is the botanical kingdom of the world, there are fresh plants growing everywhere so I was able to go out into the backyard and pick out nutritious food. The tortoises, all 28 of them, also really love prickly pear so I would get rid of the needles on the pear and cut up some of it for them as a treat. At some point, I was even able to take a trip with Gill, the founder of reserve, to the local vet where I was able to pick out and identify whether the monkeys and tortoises had worms. The vet showed me how she was able to take a sample of the stool and conduct a series of tests to flush out and determine what kind of worms the animals had as well.

I was able to look at the worms underneath a microscope to see exactly what they looked like and how the vet was able to identify them. One of my last and favourite tasks with these tortoises was weighing and measuring them. Working alongside reserve staff I took a scale, typically used for regular people, and put each tortoise on the scale to determine their weight and then measured their shells in order to make sure they were growing correctly.

This is done every 3-6 months to keep up with the tortoises' health and see if any changes need to be made to their diet. With this I could see, based on previous entries, whether or not the tortoises' had actually grown and if so by how much. I really enjoyed this process as I found it very fun to take each tortoise and measure them as some of them are very large.

An important issue in South Africa at the moment is the invasive plant species called Acacia Cyclops. This plant made its way into South Africa many years ago and now threatens to kill the indigenous plants that grow in this beautiful place. Acacia starts off as a small, one root plant before growing into a very large and strong tree that kills all other plants surrounding it. Because of this, one of my tasks was to go around the reserve and pull out as many of these Acacia Cyclops as I could to ensure that eventually indigenous plant species would be able to grow in that area again. Doing this job was very fulfilling as I knew that due to my efforts new life would soon be able to blossom again.

When I was not pulling Acacia Cyclops, I was rescuing indigenous plant species. This was done by picking a decently sized plant, uprooting it, and then replanting it in the wildlife reserve's greenhouse so that the plant could grow to be big and beautiful. I did this whenever there was an Acacia Cyclops too big to be pulled but the plant nearby could be saved.

After I had completed the beautiful and fulfilling experience at Wild Rescue, I was given the opportunity to volunteer at the local Stilbaai Dierekliniek (vets), where I was able to watch several surgical procedures and sit in on appointments to gain a better understanding. During these procedures, I was able to see what goes on during a specific surgery as I have always known the purpose of specific procedures, but not how it is done. The vet was kind enough to explain the step-by-step process of what they were doing to the cat or dog and why. Whilst some people would maybe have found this squeamish due to the blood, I found this very cool as I was able to monitor and learn about minor procedures that I will one day be completing myself. These procedures ranged anywhere from teeth pulling, and spaying/neutering to removing cancerous skin tags. Along with the steps of the surgery, I was able to acquaint myself with the aftercare the cat or dog would need based on the procedure they had undergone. I was also able to ask the veterinarians questions about this career path and advice they would give me to ensure my best chance possible when applying jobs. Because I have always been so fascinated with the care of animals, I found it very informative to speak to professionals about the job I wish to have in my future. As much as this experience was about the care of animals, I was also able to learn a great deal about how to interact with the owners of the animals. There is a certain way which you must address the owner based on what their animal is in for, and so I was able to see how the veterinarian kept composed during this time. Spending my time at the surgery made me realize why I chose to become a veterinarian in the first place. Whilst I was not able to spend as much time at the Dierekliniek as I would have wanted, I am still very grateful that I was given the opportunity to observe such procedures and interact with trained professionals.

Whilst my time in South Africa was about volunteering, it was also about having fun and exploring – this is a great thing about Dreamcatcher – they ensure you are given the time to explore the beautiful country. They also let you bank volunteering hours (for example volunteering at weekends) – freeing up days to travel. On the days that I

was not volunteering, I was able to go on the longest connecting zipline in the world, visit Botlierskop (an animal reserve), and stay in Mossel Bay. Botlierskop was created many years ago to house the endangered species of South Africa and to help build up populations so they do not go extinct. It was a very magical experience to be able to go to this reserve as I was able to capture so many pictures and see so many beautiful animals. After this visit it was time to pack up my things and depart back to America.

During this time I was able to reflect on my journey while in South Africa and all the things I gained from being here with the Dreamcatcher. When first arriving in South Africa, I thought I had seen all there was, however I was not aware of how many communities were struggling and how many people lived. Now coming out of this experience I realize all my misconceptions and realize how important it is to be humble and sustainable as many communities do not have the privilege that I have. The biggest thing I noticed while in South Africa was how little the children had yet how happy they still were no matter what. This taught me to be grateful for all that I have and to humble myself whenever I feel that I start being ungrateful for all the opportunities I am given every day. Everywhere I went, the people were also always very kind and hospitable towards me even though I do not speak Afrikaans. They would try their best to help me and ensure that I felt comfortable when there. Along with this I was able to immerse myself in these different opportunities related to animals and learn what it takes to complete these jobs as well as how to get to a point in my life where I can eventually earn my degree and do these tasks on my own. Through Dreamcatcher I was able to learn how much of an impact I can make on the world and how important being sustainable is. In the future, I wish to encourage and bring back more youths and students who want to learn about how they can make an impact, give back to others and develop insight into humanity and the environment I never knew existed.

Scarlett - June 2023