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International Internship: Cape Town, South Africa

Cape Town Environmental Education Trust, Gantouw Project

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Upon arrival to the Cape Town airport I logged onto wifi as quickly as I could to make contact with the person picking me up, Loyiso. As soon as I got on I had an email from Loyiso stating that he was there and in the arrivals area. This was a relief and set the first impression of my host organization, Volunteer Adventure Corps (VAC). However, it was not all smooth sailing in my first week with VAC. They are helpful and a great service, but it seems that with so many interns to help, little details that could make the transition for someone in a foreign place feel so much better are often missed. I had issues with getting a South African phone set up. I had been assured that upon my arrival, I would be able to purchase a phone from VAC to use during my time in South Africa so that I could avoid using my US phone, which was at risk of being stolen. However, that phone did not work, and it then took me the full first week to get my US phone set up to just use Uber, which is needed to get to work from the train station, and WhatsApp. I also did not get a walking tour of my neighborhood which is supposed to be conducted very shortly after I had landed. The person who was going to do it was too busy and had to be somewhere else and then canceled the next day because they forgot about a meeting. It is important with this organization to be vocal and firm in what you ask for, as there have been other issues that I have voiced that were addressed quite efficiently. Despite the issues with my onboarding, overall, they have been very friendly and the activities they organize are fun.

My initial impression of my work site was very positive and met all of my expectations. The first two weeks were a little mundane, completing tasks for which I already have the skills, but my supervisor was very willing to let me join in on other people's work when it is available. In the first two weeks I had already seen and been involved in new things and it only got better from there.

There was nothing that I can think of that particular stood out upon my arrival. It took me 48 hours of travel to get to Cape Town and I arrived at 10 pm, went to my house, unpacked and went to bed. I spent the next five days recuperating and settling in to my new surroundings. As someone who has traveled a fair bit in the past, I had done my research and understood what the country was like before I came. Everything that I saw, heard, and was a part of are things I had expected to see, hear, and be involved in. However, if there is one thing that stands out is the personal life stories that I had been involved in with my coworkers. They are very willing to share with me their personal lives and this has given me an insight that is not something you would get as a tourist. This is the thing that has stood out to me in the first two weeks, the personal connection I have already made to my coworkers.

Before going to Cape Town I did not have any anxiety to speak of. As someone who has spent time navigating airports and long flights, the anxiety that I had was directed towards this aspect of my journey. I did not give myself the opportunity to be anxious about my time here. As

I mentioned, I had 48 hours of travel to endure so it took up a lot of my thoughts before landing in Cape Town. I was always excited to come, but I did not feel an anxiousness about my stay here until after my orientation and first week here. VAC and many of the interns made it seem that the neighborhood we live in is as bad as the worst parts of the city. It is winter here, which means that it does not get light until almost 08:00 and is dark by 18:30. VAC and other interns kept stressing to not walk around after dark. My problem is that I had to be at the train station by about 6:30 am or I will miss the train and be an hour late for work. This means either Ubering five blocks or walking. So, the first day I Ubered to the train station due to this anxiety, but since that first work day I walked in the mornings. It is important to understand my surroundings and what the neighborhood I am in is like, but I cannot let this understanding turn into fear, otherwise I would have just stayed in my house and only be outside to Uber to work and home again.

During the first half of my internship my time at work went very well. While at my internship site I was able to be very self-sufficient. My supervisor gave me work to do and I was given the freedom to get the work done in a manner and time that I deemed appropriate. I was given a project in which I explored a different method of analyzing data from what had previously been done at my site, which was nice to be able to contribute something that will improve the efficiency and quality of work being done on the project. This work aligned well with my professional goals. I was able to experience new aspects of conservation that I previously had not experienced. However, there is still a lot that I want to experience in the world of conservation here in South Africa. Therefore, it was my continued goal that during this second half of my internship I experience something new at least once a week. By trying to learn and experience something new each week that I was there, I greatly exceeded my expectations for professional goals. I believe that I have also created a good rapport with my supervisor, which meant by the end of my internship I received a great recommendation for my future endeavors.

As far as my personal goals were concerned, this was an area in which I needed to improve from the first half of my time in Cape Town to the second. I had many fun and exciting experiences during the first six weeks, but there were still many things that I would like to do before I left. The area that I have made the most progress during the first half was doing something different every week outside of work. I attended all activities hosted by Volunteer Adventure Corps, I went on different hikes, to different markets, different hang out spots, etc. every single week. During a long weekend I went on a weekend excursion where I got to go on a safari. Thus, I was quite busy and will not be disappointed when I get home. However, I had not reached out to the local university to talk about their conservation programs and had not met up with local people to whom I have connections back in the states. To address these two things, I reached out to set up times to make these two things happen. During the second half of my internship I made both personal goals I had not accomplished in the first half happen. I visited iCWild (Institute for Communities and Wildlife in Africa) at the University of Cape Town and got to learn about all the different projects that they are working in and learned that Professor Mark Needham from Oregon State will be collaborating with them in the future.

Regarding my cross-cultural goals I far exceeded what I had expected before I came to South Africa. My main goal was to get to know the people of South Africa and this I feel I have done. Every day at work I talk with my coworkers and get to know a little more about their lives. I took an Uber every day to work and made a point of it to talk with the driver and learn as much from

them as I can, even if it meant just talking about the local news from the radio. The cultural experience that stood out the most to me was conversing with the guide for the weekend long excursion that I participated in. I spent four days with this guide and it was just a great time to interact with a local in so many different situations in such a short period. There is not anything more in particular that I want to make sure I experience before I leave, I just wanted to continue with how I had gone about my time in South Africa and learn something new about people every day.

Work takes place Monday through Thursday from 07:30 to anytime from 15:30-16:30. There were also times that I did work outside of those hours from home as it is work that can be done on my personal computer. I did not work on Fridays because this was the day that VAC hosts their weekly activities, which are paid for as part of the host site fees, and therefore I attend every activity that is offered to me. My day-to-day work activities completely varied depending on what my supervisor had going on in that day. I had a specific project that I worked on, which was using a computer program to write data onto camera trap photos to be able to run statistical analyses when I finished. If there was nothing else going on during a given day, I was working on this project. However, every day can be different. We started trailer training the eland in the mornings, so my mornings started off by going to the boma and helping with this activity. Some days I had helped build fencing, repair the deck, and other maintenance activities. Other days I went with my supervisor to visit other reserves and to a feed store to pick up food pellets and luserne (hay) for the eland. We conducted several bird call surveys, which consist of going out into the reserve with a sound recorder and visiting ten different locations in each the control and experiment sections. We then record two minutes in four different directions (north, east, south, and west) at each location. Some days we hosted school groups that come to learn about the eland and the project.

After work I took the train home. The commute can range from 30 minutes to an hour and half depending on when I got to the station and how the trains are running that day. Once I got home it depends on what I felt up to that day. Some days I just wanted to relax so I cooked dinner and hung out either in the living area with my roommates or I go to my room for the evening. Other work days, I went out with friends and hung out, hiked, or did some other activity. On Monday's there is ultimate frisbee at the University of Cape Town sports fields, Tuesday's are a culture series hosted through VAC, Thursday nights we typically went out to the local bar or to city center to hang out as most of us do not have to be to work in the morning. There is always something going on and it just depends on how active I wanted to be on any given day.

My work life balance was pretty straight forward. I went to work at the times specified above and the rest of the time I did things that I hoped would make the most out of the experience, recognizing that the experience is what you make it. Most supervisors who are associated with VAC understand that we as interns are here to learn about the work and gain experience, but even more importantly, we are here to learn about another part of the world and the people who live here. My supervisor is very understanding if there is something going on outside of work that I am really interested in or if there is a time that I need to take a day off because I am ill or something. For instance, I was sick for the better part of two weeks with a head cold and a sore throat and my supervisor completely understood. I took a day off work to rest and was able to work from home a couple other days to get better.

I lived at 49 Milton Rd. This is a ten-bedroom house with a large kitchen, washer and dryer, large living area to hang out, and a large front yard where we had a braai every Sunday with the housemates and other friends we had made. The main part of the house has one and a half baths. My bedroom was in a second detached building behind the main house. There are four bedrooms in this building. My bedroom shared a bathroom with one other room and the other two bedrooms out back have their own bathrooms. My bedroom had a single bed, a desk, a shelving unit, a bedside table, and a wardrobe. There are not really any pros or cons for me to speak of, it was a place for me to stay while I am here in Cape Town. The room is decent, and the house is fine. We had a few issues in the house the first couple weeks I was there, but I emailed Rent-a-Room with our concerns and they came within the next couple of days to take care of them. The only con is how cold the house is. It was winter in Cape Town and although it is not as cold as back home, the house stays cold all the time and my room was also cold all time. I had two blankets that I sleep with every night and occasionally slept in a sweater if it is particularly chilly. The only advice that I would give for a future intern is to do your research on which house you want to stay in before you come and once you are here enjoy that you are in another country and realize that the house is just a temporary place to stay.

My budget worked out just as I had planned. Before I came, planning out a budget was very important to me and I knew exactly how much money that I had available to spend each week. I spent a bit more money than I had anticipated, but there are many activities that are simply worth spending the money on. Per week I typically planned on around \$200 for all of my expenses, from food to recreation. There was not anything that I would do differently regarding my budget other than trying to find more funds to be more comfortable with the spending needs.

On a typical work day, I took the train from Observatory to Retreat, which is 14 stops. A month train pass for the MetroPlus is about \$20. In order to make it to work by 07:30 I had to leave my house at 06:30. The train usually comes anytime between 06:40 to 06:50 and if I missed this train it could be up to an hour wait for the next one to come. From the Retreat Station I took an Uber. It usually takes anywhere from three to ten minutes to call an Uber. The price varies between about \$3.25 to \$5 from the station to CTEET. This depends on the availability of Uber in the area and how many riders are out there. One particularly expensive trip cost about \$11 from the station to work as there was a minibus taxi strike that was occurring that day in Cape Town. Although the minibuses in the Retreat neighborhood were not on strike, it was an opportunity for Uber to raise their rates and take advantage of a situation. My trip from work to home was the same in reverse. A few dollars for Uber to the train station, 14 stops on the train, and a short walk from the Observatory Station to my house. I tried to catch the train home by 15:40. If I do not catch this train it is about an hour wait and the next train is always packed. If there is a day that I just wanted to get home quickly, I took Uber straight from work to 49 Milton, which is about a \$10 ride. Outside of traveling to work I almost solely relied on Uber to get around Cape Town. As usually hung out with others, we all split the cost of the Uber. This was an efficient and safe way to get around Cape Town and is not particularly expensive. A ride back home in Corvallis from my apartment to downtown would cost around \$10, and the same trip from my house in Cape Town to the city center is about a third of the price. As I had no other choice to get to and from work that would be any more cost efficient, I was neither satisfied or dissatisfied with my mode of transportation. I am a bit frustrated with how much money I ended up spending on Uber to and from the train station for work. I spent the same amount of money on a monthly train pass as I did

on one week of Uber for work. Before I arrived in Cape Town I was connected with several other interns who were working in the same neighborhood as I was and one other that was working at the same internship site. I was under the impression that at the very least there would be one other person with whom I could split Uber from the train station to work, which would have saved me quite a bit of money. It turned out the other person at my site only went into work 2 or 3 times in the 5 weeks our internships overlapped and the others working in the same area did not want to take the train and instead simply Ubered the whole commute. I think that many interns here are discouraged from using the train and other public transportation due to the poor perception the host organization puts on this mode of transportation.

I have plenty of time to explore the surrounding area in my time off. One of the main ways to make sure this happens is by attending all the weekly activities hosted by VAC. As I paid a fee to VAC to be in Cape Town I absolutely took advantage of the activities they host on Fridays. I also tried to do something different on the weekends. This can be hiking, exploring a new market, going to a soccer match, or taking a trip over the weekend to explore areas further away. The amount exploring that one does is completely dependent on what that person wants to do. Everyone's experience is different, and it is what you make of it. I would recommend exploring everywhere possible, from hiking on Table Mountain, museums in the city center, the waterfront mall, to the beach at Muizenberg. There is something here for everyone and it is a matter of going out and finding what you like.

One of my professional accomplishments that I am proud of during my time in Cape Town, South Africa was setting up a new way for my internship site to process photos from camera traps. Before I arrived at my internship with the Gantouw Project, they had been processing photos using the standard photo viewer on the computer and an Excel sheet to record any animals that were on the photos. While this method is effective, it is extremely inefficient. This was my main project during my time with my internship and now that I have completed it, I have set up a much more efficient process for the Gantouw Project moving forward and I am very proud of that. To complete this project, I had to use a photo processing software, Timelapse2, which neither my supervisor nor myself were familiar. This meant reading a long manual about the software, creating a template that reflected the needs of the project, organizing photo files in a manner that was most time efficient, and then testing the software. After I had done all of that, I was able to process a years' worth of photo data in a few short weeks. This is something that could have taken every moment of my 10 weeks here had I processed photos the old way, but by creating and utilizing the new system, I ensured that I was able to engage with other conservation activities throughout my internship. I have also organized the photos from the previous two years and taught the other employees of the Gantouw Project how to use the Timelapse2 software so that they can be more efficient in the future.

My course work in the Fisheries and Wildlife Department at OSU prepared me quite well for my internship. I have taken a wide variety of coursework in my department and across other departments and I feel this has made me a well-rounded student with a great deal of exposure to different aspects of conservation. I think the most important knowledge of the field of conservation that I learned before coming to South Africa was how different countries approach conservation. Knowing that the way conservation is approached changes with borders is an important thing to

know; it allows me to remember that the way certain entities approach something is not necessarily right or wrong, it is simply different from the way I have been taught or would think to do it.

The part of my work in South Africa that I enjoyed the most is getting to know all the different people. The project that I worked on is a partnership with CTEET and the City of Cape Town. This means that there are many different actors involved in the success of the project. Along the way, I was fortunate enough to meet many people from many different organizations. This has expanded my professional network far beyond what I could have imagined this early in my career. One thing that I will find challenging going forward is finding a way to stay in touch with the different people I have met in a meaningful way.

Before coming to South Africa, I made sure to study up on the history, the cultures, and the people of this country. I feel that I had a good understanding of what I had learned through my studies and that I was prepared to come to this country and be able to experience what I had read, watched, and heard about South Africa. During my time here in Cape Town I do not believe that there was a time where I had a misunderstanding due to cultural differences. I always tried my hardest to be open-minded, going with the flow in any situation, and be respectful of the fact that I am in a different culture than my own. However, little miscommunications always arise from language differences though they can be easily talked through. Living in South Africa has continued to broaden my perspective on the world. By embracing a growth mindset, I was able to continually learn about the different cultures and people here in South Africa and will be able to take this with me as I move on to other endeavors in my life. There is nothing that I would change to the approach that I took before I came here and since I had arrived. If there was ever a time that cultural difference caused a misunderstanding, I simply would have talked to the person about it and tried to learn from it. I think that one of the most important things to do when embarking on an adventure like this is to spend a proper amount of time reflecting on all the experiences that you encounter on a daily basis. Every day brings something new and learning from those experiences is what can minimize any cultural misunderstandings.

The most important things that I have learned about myself through my experience in South Africa is that I need to continually push myself to not only learn about myself but about other people. During my time in the country I tried to talk on as personal level as everyone I interact with will let me. Every time I take an Uber, or work with someone for an extended period of time, or talk to someone at a bar, I try to read the situation to see how much I can learn about them and the experiences they have had in South Africa or in the countries in which they lived before moving to South Africa. While every person has individual experiences, there are similar lived experiences by those with shared identities, e.g. race or culture. These experiences not only mold individuals but also shape entire societies. It is important to do our best to try to learn about and understand different peoples' experiences and how these experiences have shaped the way they view certain things and how the society of which they are a part of view certain things. This is the most important thing that I have learned about myself. Even when I think I know a lot about something, there is always something more to learn.

My greatest personal challenge was pushing myself to learn more and more each day. It can be easy to sit in an Uber for 15 minutes and just listen to the radio, but it can be so valuable to simply strike up a short conversation with the person driving you around. Sometimes this can lead

to in-depth conversations about your life, their life, the current political situation in their country and yours, and so forth. On occasion I got an Uber driver I have had before, and we could literally pick up the conversation from the last time they drove me. The people I interacted with in South Africa have all genuinely cared about the conversations we had and will remember what we talked about for 15 minutes weeks later. The greatest reward from this is that when I left South Africa and came back to the United States, I can say that I tried my hardest to learn as much as I could about this country and that I have no regrets.

During my time working with the Gantouw Project I did not necessarily learn about any new possible career paths for myself, rather I learned about what are essentially the South African equivalent to different jobs I could do here in the United States. I think that it was interesting to learn about the education and pathways that people in South Africa took to get to their different positions with governmental and private organizations. One thing that I did do was informally interview most people who I met while working on the Gantouw Project. Throughout my stay in Cape Town there were many times that different people from different organizations would come to Rondevlei Nature Reserve to see the eland, conduct different types of surveys, or evaluate the veld for report purposes, and every time I had the chance, I would talk to these individuals to learn about their education background and how they got to their current positions with their respective organizations.

During my pre-departure preparations I spent quite an extensive amount of time researching my host country, its people, and culture. I think that this prepared me quite well for my time in South Africa. Because of this I do not think that my impressions changed much about my host culture after I arrived and throughout my time. I think that for the most part my expectations were reaffirmed during my stay. One impression that I did have that may have been disproven was South African, specifically Cape Town's, view on time. Before going I was continually told that there would be a very relaxed view on time in South Africa, which for the most part seemed to be the case. However, I think that it is not as relaxed as many portrayed. At my internship site there was a pretty well-established schedule to which my coworkers and my supervisor adhered. This may not be the same experience that others have when visiting Cape Town, but this was my personal experience with attitudes toward time.

Looking back at my experience in South Africa over the course of three months, I cannot think of any particular aspect of the host culture with which I was frustrated. Living abroad for an extended period of time came with its challenges, however, I think it is very unfair to complain or be frustrated with any part of another country's and another people's culture. I was a guest in South Africa. I went to learn about how conservation is conducted in South Africa and learn about its people and culture. To say that any part of their culture was frustrating to me would be a disservice to South Africans. I went in with an open mind and tried my hardest to always go with the flow. Of course, there were times when all I could have wished for was to be home with all the amenities and luxuries that I have living in the United States, but this does not mean I was frustrated with South African culture at any point.

The most rewarding aspect about South African culture was how willing people were to get to know me when we were having conversations. It is very important in South African culture to have meaningful interactions with others when you encounter someone who you have met previously.

This meant that interactions that would usually last only seconds here in the U.S. turned into full conversations. People cared and wanted to listen to what you had to say about your day or your weekend or even how last week went. This was a nice change from a culture where we ask how someone is only to expect a short response and then move on to the next thing.

Previously having traveled to several developing countries and lived abroad for several months in a developing country gave me previous experience with the W Curve. Because of this, I do not think I significantly experienced the W Curve during this time abroad. As I stated previously, I did extensive research on my host country before I left. So rather than being blindsided by a whole new culture, much of my perceptions and expectations were reaffirmed. I think preparation was key to how I adjusted culturally to moving to South Africa. I feel that there were not many lows during my stay abroad. There was one time that I remember where I did get a bit homesick, yet it only lasted less than an hour. I was sick and trying to go grocery shopping, buy electricity, get cash, and generally run some errands. I decided not to go to the store closest to me that was my normal store in an attempt to get everything in one place. I went to one store and their card machines went down and I had no cash. Went to another store and they couldn't give me cash back. Went to a gas station to buy electricity and it was closed that day. This frustration did not stem from cultural differences, but rather minor inconveniences that piled on top of one another. I was also able to talk to home every day which I think played a role in little cultural adjustment. I also lived in a house with other interns from other countries, so I was not simply learning about the culture of South Africa, but of many other countries. About three weeks in I got a cold that lasted about a week. Honestly, I think every person deals with "Culture Shock" or cultural integration in different ways. As someone who has dealt with it in the past, I worked very hard to prepare myself for this experience and I whole-heartedly believe that I did not experience the W Curve. The same can be said for when I returned from South Africa. This was not my first time returning from an extended period abroad, so I truly believe that I got right back into things as if I had not left. Yes, this experience continued to open my eyes to different things in this world, but I do not think it caused me to have a cultural adjustment period that extended over six different phases. I think had I been more ignorant to the culture to which I was moving, I could have easily slipped into the W Curve. However, I believe that with enough preparation and research, the six steps in the W Curve can be minimized.

My time in Cape Town was a great opportunity for me to learn about the people, the culture, and the country of South Africa. It gave me a wonderful experience regarding how conservation is conducted in South Africa. It provided me with professional relationships that could not be attained without participating in this internship. It helped me continue to grow as a person and better myself every day that I was there. Being able to live for three months and interact with South African people daily is an experience that is not quantifiable and for which I will be forever grateful. By working hard during my time with the Gantouw Project, I can continue working with them on projects that are important to me. I learned so many different things while living in Cape Town. I learned how wonderful the people of South Africa are, how important it is to recognize how environmental conditions can impact a city of over 4 million people (i.e. the Cape Town water crisis), and I learned that everyone has a story to tell and it is so important to listen.