

Life and death on the plains of Africa

by Aaron Garland

Since 2013, 40 high school students from Glenwood to Aspen have traveled with my wife Molly and me to Kenya and camped out on the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy under the acacia trees and within earshot of roaring lions. We have explored the nearby marsh and the vast plains that unfold beyond it by foot and in rugged safari vehicles. In the process we have become intimately connected to a world vastly different from the Roaring Fork Valley.

Conceived and supported by John and Laurie McBride of Old Snowmass, this internship is designed to replicate the profound shift in thinking that took place when the McBrides started bringing their children to that part of the world four decades ago. Yet despite the glorious setting and rare and unparalleled exposure to some of the greatest wild animals on the planet, the purpose of the internship is less dramatic. The goal is to challenge our students' thinking, push them to improve their observational skills and to trust the evidence of their own eyes.

Unplugged from the digital world for two weeks, the students quickly refocus their attention on the unscripted drama in which we find ourselves in the midst. And as each day ends, we settle into a group conversation around a topic designed to put conventional wisdom aside and examine critically what they saw that day. It is intellectually stimulating and opens

young minds to a broad range of topics from poaching to ethics, evolution and population growth, to how to sustain a place such as the Lewa Conservancy in the face of a rapidly modernizing Africa.

As directors of the program and fellow observers on the five McBride internships since its inception in 2013, Molly and I have likewise been impacted and have had our thinking about what young people are capable of absorbing in two weeks completely flipped on its head.



One night this summer, the two of us were startled by a loud crash and thrashing noise followed by a low moan. Fifty yards from our tent, a lioness chased an adult Grevy's zebra into our fence (4 flimsy feet of chicken wire) and quickly dispatched the Grevy by breaking it's neck. Our interns — Shane Beckley, Tyler Clayton, Fernando Ruiz, Nikki Blizzard, Emily Driscoll, Katia Galambos, Preston Rubinstein and Chloe Brettman — were soon standing next to the freshly killed corpse and processing the stark

reality of life and death on the plains of Africa.

One of the biggest challenges for our interns is to understand the slaughter of elephants and rhino for the spoils of their tusk and horn. It's a multimillion-dollar illegal trade that could drive into these animals into extinction. We meet the Lewa staff who are on the frontline of this battle, who have been shot at many times



by poachers yet continue to risk their lives to protect the animals within Lewa's boundaries. Our interns have even held confiscated ivory as well as a rhino horn that on the streets of Vietnam would be worth \$250,000.

Despite the magnitude of the poaching problem, the staff at Lewa remain resolute in their mission, which also includes supporting the villages immediately adjacent to the conservancy. From water projects to medical clinics, to schools and scholarships, to micro-credit loans for women, Lewa has made a huge contribution to the villages that border

their 100-plus square miles of wilderness and rolling savannah.

When we drive into the villages residents appear from the doors of small huts or standing in the middle of plowed fields, small faces, smiling, arms waving, and choruses of high pitched "How ah u?"

In August, we visited a nearby high school and sat in on an English and chemistry class. When class was over our interns, Dusty Olivas, Emerson Jacobson, Chandra Starr, MacKenzie Bauer, Felina Cruz, Kaitlyn Wolfle, Nicky Heard and Wayne Qui, disappeared with their Kenyan peers. When Molly and I finally caught up with them on the soccer field they were spread across the entire area playing games, chatting in small groups and running foot races — smiles and laughter everywhere.

When asked to summarize what she got from the McBride Internship Katia Galambos wrote, "It was the best two weeks of my life. I learned more than I thought possible about a range of subjects spanning from human nature to harvester ants, and yet even though I loved it, upon leaving I felt more full than sad because Lewa really did change my perspective on the world."

Chloe Brettman added, "Not only was my time on Lewa a revolutionary learning experience, but it was and continues to be my ever present reminder to chill out, observe and take a deep breath."

For more information, visit <http://www.mcbrideinternship.org>.

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