

South Africa Journal

Date: Day 1 (16 Sunday)

Today marked the beginning of an unforgettable adventure in my life, as I went into the enchanting Amakhala Game Reserve. After a two-hour plane from Johannesburg, I found myself immersed in the landscape that seemed like it leaped straight out from the wildlife documentary. On the way to the lodge, I saw on my left-hand side a massive area of trees and bushes that reminded me of Tay Nguyen, a beautiful city in Vietnam with mountains and primary forests. When we went to the lodge, the breathtaking scenes around the lodge left me awe-struck, and I couldn't wait to explore this place.

Upon arrival, the warm hospitality of Dr. William and the people here greeted us, and we were treated to a delicious lunch at 3 PM with sandwiches and refreshing orange juice. Surrounded by fellow HornedFrogs, my beloved Professor. Slattery, Dr. Bennett, and Amakhala staff, the excitement in the air was palpable, and we listened to Dr. William introducing the history of Amakhala Game Reserve. At this moment, I wonder who they are and why they are doing this. Is this a luxury hotel business for rich tourists that was told on TV?

After receiving the room with Jackson and Riley, we went around to explore. The lodge itself was a marvel in its design, perfectly blending with the natural surroundings. It nestled amidst the picturesque landscape, and from my room's balcony, I could see the vast expanse of the lodge stretching out before me. For the first time in my life, I saw warthogs running around that looked funny, interesting, and cute. Their distinctive tusks and peculiar running style provided us with plenty of amusement. With stress accumulated from my internship, career pressure in my 20s, and a little inevitable overwhelming when coming to a new country, I feel

eased now at Amakhala. The air was filled with the sounds of birds chirping, creating a harmonious symphony that put my mind at ease.

Soon, we got the first game drive, and I couldn't contain my excitement. Quickly climbing aboard an open-air safari vehicle, I felt amazed and unreal, as going on a safari was always my dream when I was a kid watching the animal discovery channel. As we set off into the wilderness, everyone shouted. Then I realized it would be tougher than I expected with the bumpy road and tons of needle bush on the side. As we ventured deeper into the reserve, we saw a male eland standing and grazing near the bush. The excitement has not stopped for me, as we continuously meet a jackal and then a herd of kudus. On the way back, my heart skipped a beat as we spotted a majestic cheetah lying on the grass. I was almost screaming, but just shouting “Wow, it was not a single cheetah. There were three of them.” I saw a cheetah once in the zoo when I was a kid, but this time was special for me, as I could watch them in nature, and in freedom. Even though it was difficult to see them clearly, as their skin hides them in the grass, I was trying to take “millions” of pictures of them. Honestly, they were much smaller than I expected, but the scene of three cheetahs still grabbed my attention, as I was staring at them for the whole 40 minutes.

As the sun began its descent, we parked at a scenic spot overlooking the vast reserve. The sky painted itself in hues of pink, orange, and red, as the golden orb dipped below the horizon. Witnessing my first sundown in the wild was awe-inspiring and memorable. The serenity of the moment added with the giggles and conversations of my fellows chatting about what they saw today made me feel relaxed and connected to the natural world in a way I had never experienced before. I felt satisfied and wanted to seize the moment for hours to completely feel the beauty of Amakhala and the nature here.

The dinner today was amazing with the best chicken I ever had. The food here is similar to the nature at Amakhala, always making us feel happy and excited. The first day exceeded all my expectations, and I am grateful for the opportunity to experience the wonders of this beautiful reserve. I can't wait to see what we will do tomorrow, as I continue to explore and revel in the wild nature of Amakhala.

Date: Day 2 (17- Monday)

Today started early with an 8 AM lecture from Dr. William on the rhino crisis as well as the treatment we could use for animal darting. Learning about the wildlife crisis and the management of wildlife animals' environments helped me understand that it is more complex to protect and sustain animals, especially endangered ones. The passion I could feel from the lectures proves that Dr. William and many people are working tirelessly to protect nature and wild animals.

Following the enlightening lecture, we embarked on a thrilling game drive to witness the wildebeest procedure. Everyone felt excited when Dr. Williams shot the first male wildebeest, especially me, as there is no wildebeest in Vietnam (and seeing people holding a gun and driving around on the field is something unusual in Vietnam). My first experience watching, touching, and witnessing the procedure process was incredibly amazing. Experiencing every step in the procedure from checking the temperature, and heart rate to injection and transporting, I was able to feel and connect with the animal closer. I got to learn from staff that we want to blindfold animals before doing the procedure to help them avoid mental trauma later. This was the moment when I understood that the procedure is not moving animals to other places and attaching the tracking device to them purely, as when we do the procedure, we absolutely "take care of them". Looking at others, including my TCU fellows

carefully doing their tasks, I happily smiled and got inspired that I have to focus and finish my task as well as possible. Moments later, we stumbled upon a herd of wildebeests, and we knocked down three other males and repeated the same procedure, and finished all 4 wildebeest procedures successfully. Through the awesome experience, I got a better understanding of how people capture and relocate animals and overall about the management of wild animals in the habitat.

The afternoon game drive was lucky for us. For the first time, I saw a living rhino grazing and walking (even though it was quite far). That moment was fantastic, as I craved seeing rhinos and lions before coming on the trip. We lost our last rhino in Vietnam in 2010 because of poaching, and since then, I thought it would be impossible for me to see a rhino in nature. Today, my dream came true, and I was so emotional. Luckily, I got pictures of videos about them to send to my parents, as rhino is their favorite animal. The fortune was not stopped, as we met the cheetah again, but this time, we had a better, closer view to enjoy. I feel that this animal got used to the existence of tourists, as it looked chill and even tried to pose for us. This gave me another point about cheetahs: adorable. Moreover, on the way back to the sundown spot, we met a giraffe playing around with the other two from the neighbor reserve on the other side of the fence. This moment was special and hilarious for us, as it looked like they were kissing, fighting, and jealous of each other at the same time. Especially, this first time catching up with the giraffe, I could watch them at a close distance. It got me goosebumps realizing how big they are, and how beautiful they are as well. My phone was unfortunately dead, but it also made me completely focus on enjoying the “insane” moment of the giraffe communicating.

As the day drew to a close, we experienced the pinnacle of natural beauty during the second sundown moment. Time seemed to stand still as I embraced the natural beauty. Dr. Bennett invited me to her conversation circle where I listened to her jokes as well as her explanation about nature, science, and life. Today was also the first day I got the chance to talk more closely to Dr. Bennett and I started to understand her more. I also had a better connection with Jackson and Riley through our sharing and a quick chat before bedding. Our day ended with a cozy dinner having delicious pork and I loved it.

Hot-take from day 2: I agree with the Professor. Slattery that “Wildebeest is dumb, as they always run circles”.

Date: Day 3 (18- Tuesday)

The second day of my adventure at Amakhala Game Reserve dawned with a mix of excitement and curiosity. The weather was freezing, and the air carried a chill. Undeterred by the weather, we set out on an early morning game drive at 7 AM, eager to explore the wonders of the wilderness once more.

As we departed before sunrise, I could feel the bitter cold of winter in Amakhala, as cold as winter in Hanoi. Honestly, sitting on the back and being blown by the wind makes me shiver in the blanket. However, the morning game drive gave us the chance to watch small herbivore animals like: aardwolf, mongoose, jackal,. I feel like the peace in the morning is different from the sunset moment, as the air is fresh and frosty. We stopped at a decent spot to enjoy the sunrise moment that was majestic. The air was cool, but we excitedly experienced the scene with joy and coffee. The beauty of these moments made me forget the cold, and I felt truly blessed to witness the animals thriving in their natural habitat.

Upon our return to the lodge, we had a lecture about the intricate relationships between animals, humans, and the environment. The concept of the relationship pyramid, where each element relies on the other for balance, taught me about how wildlife and humans thrive and collaborate in nature. It quite reminded me of the lecture from the Professor. Slattery in his Contemporary Environment course talking about how humans are destroying the environment and natural habitat. It reinforced the urgency of protecting these fragile ecosystems to ensure a sustainable future for the next generation. Dr. William's lecture about how we have to collaborate and incorporate to protect animals and nature was inspiring, as I understand that protecting the ecosystem is everyone's responsibility. I believe that is what we are learning and why we are going for the trip, finding the common goal to protect sustainable wildlife habitat.

As part of the reserve's conservation efforts, we participated in a dog vaccination program to protect the local wildlife and local community from the spread of diseases carried by domestic dogs. These dogs were so cute, but resilient and obedient to take the vaccination shot. It was fun to see how "struggling" we are to get all the dogs vaccinated, even a little challenging to do the wildebeest procedure. Seeing the joyful smile on people's faces made me happy, as I also got a better understanding of the support of Amakhala for the local community in return for their effort of protecting wildlife. This facilitates sustainability which I learned from my Professor. Slattery's class as well as the lecture of Dr. William.

In the afternoon, we embarked on a different kind of journey - one that touched my heart in a profoundly meaningful way. We drove to the Paterson charity community, where we had the opportunity to interact and play with the local children. The moment we came to the gate and the children joyfully came to us was touching, as I could feel how excited they were when having guests. Their joy and enthusiasm were infectious, and the laughter that filled the air

was lovely and beautiful. Understanding their family conditions as well as their difficulties in terms of academic opportunities, I love them more and admire them even more for their positive energy. The short period of time playing with them was healing my emotion which was trapped in career stress. It has been a while since I did not play soccer, and the time playing with these children at the charity community was gold for me. It was special that language was not a barrier for us, as we shared the same joy. I also wanted to send the biggest appreciation and admiration to the staff at the community for their effort and commitment to being the big mother of all of the lovely kids. Also, I felt grateful to the Professor. Slattery and Amakhala for supporting the charity community and giving these kids another home, school, and family. We left and came back to the lodge. In the car on the way back, we chit-chatted about how amazing these kids are and giggled when Mason made jokes. I looked far through the window to the massive grass field, enjoying the healing moment and the peace which I lost for a while. Playing with the children in the Paterson community left an indelible impression on my heart, as I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the simple joys of life and the power of human connection.

Today's dinner was fish and rice with the cupcake and ice-cream dessert, which was interestingly new but amazingly great. Today ended with many meaningful activities and memorable moments. Dr. William told us that we would have a boat trip tomorrow to another reserve which excited me.

Hot-take from day 3: I got the first time watching and experiencing how the bat survey of Dr. Bennett was conducted. Julian is an energetic and warmhearted person. Mason is definitely the funniest girl.

Date: Day 4-19 Wednesday

Today's adventure at Amakhala continued with a different kind of exploration, as we set out on a boat trip along the river to immerse ourselves in the fascinating habitat. The day began with a late breakfast at 8 AM, the warmth of which was much appreciated in the cool, rainy weather.

The rain persisted, adding the cold to our boat journey. Wrapped in layers to ward off the chill, we navigated through the winding river, eager to catch a glimpse of the diverse avian life that thrived in this ecosystem. We had a quick visit to the beautiful beach which is timeless and beautiful. It was funny to see Mason, Julian, and Dotsie overreact in their excitement and run quickly down to the shore. We caught a lovely rainbow to have a group picture. As we departed the boat trip, it rained dogs and cats with a decently strong wind. It was impossible for us to stay clean and dry, but it was also impossible to stop us from enjoying the untouched beauty of the river filled up with many kinds of birds. We landed at a special restaurant which is deep in the jungle. The moment we came to the door, everyone wowed. The restaurant is lovely and cute, and more importantly, the food buffet was amazing and delicious. We had a quick group video filmed by Dr. William's drone before going to the Kariega reserve. We got introduced to staff on the reserve and led to the location where Binky and Noelle got killed by poaching for horns. The moment all of us stood in front of their graves and listened to the heartbreaking story on this day, I was emotional. Every staff considered rhinos as their family members, as they took care of them every day with their honest commitment. Imagine one day, you went for a patrol and recognized your "kids" got poached, it was so hurting. At the moment, I believe in the strong connection and caring between rhinos and the humans who are tirelessly conserving wildlife. I would try to spread the story to my community at home, as honestly I think that the awareness about rhinos, and their importance to wildlife, is still in need of enhancement.

The moment we left the reserve and came back, looking in the rainy sky, I was wondering if humans could stop poaching rhinos, and if possible, by which cost, how, and when we could make this happen. I had a feeling I could not describe, asking myself some questions: why do people crave for the rhino' horn? Is it because of their greed or because they are scammed by the exaggeration of the traders? As we landed, we got a social moment: a double rainbow.

The rain stopped, and the sky was clear. Looking at the double rainbow, I believe that regardless of the reasons which made people hunt for rhino horns, we could fix the issue, or at least reduce the cases, as long as we collaborate to spread the conservation message to the community.

Dinner tonight was beef soup which was perfect for a cold rainy weather. The fourth day was close with the profound impression of the story about Binky and Noelle getting poached. I am looking forward to tomorrow, as we would have our first rhino procedure which would give me a chance to get more connection with the lovely beautiful animal.

Hot-take from day 4: It was funny to see Dr.Bennett trying to protect the camera from the rain, as well as how enthusiastic she was trying to take pictures of birds. Besides, it was touching to see Julian crying when listening to Binky and Noelle's story in front of their graves.

Date: Day 5 (20 Thursday)

Today at Amakhala Game Reserve was a day of ups and downs, filled with unforgettable encounters with wildlife and a profound understanding of the challenges faced in rhino protection.

The morning began with hope and determination as we set out on our first rhino protection mission. The rain from the previous day had left the ground muddy, but our spirits were high

However, despite our best efforts, we faced unexpected challenges. Our attempt to dart rhinos was met with unforeseen obstacles, as we could not approach them at the appropriate distance to take the shot. It was hard, as I think the rhino has a decently good ear to hear and recognize our engines. Dr. William said we have to give up the mission today and keep it for tomorrow. Despite the morning's setback, the day took an uplifting turn when we had the incredible opportunity to meet a cheetah and her cub. For two hours, we observed the gentle rain. Witnessing their grace and cuteness left us in awe of these majestic felines. The rain seemed to enhance the mystical ambiance as the cheetah and her cub gracefully moved through the road to hunt the prey. It was a humbling experience to be in the presence of such magnificent predators, and their bond as a mother and cub was so satisfying.

In the afternoon, we visited Tanglewood, a conservation organization focusing on plant restoration. Listening to their lecture about their day-to-day work, the corridor project, and the business core behind it gave me a better idea about how a conservation organization works. It was personally interesting for me to understand the finance aspect from their perspective when they operate the organization. Getting introduced to their work to preserve and protect the indigenous plant species was both impressive and inspiring, giving me another viewpoint about protecting the environment and habitat.

Food dinner came back with tender, sauced chicken, and I still love it. Dr. William told us to prepare for the rhino procedure tomorrow which might use the drone. I was leaving the dining house to my room with excitement. I know that tomorrow will be a big day.

Hot-take from day 5: I agree with Kate "It is exciting to count forward for the first half of the trip. But it is sad to count down for the last half of the trip." And yes... I started to feel sad when the trip was over.

Date: Day 6 (21 Friday)

The morning started with a sense of purpose as we embarked on the first rhino procedure.

The team, led by the remarkable Dr. William, set out to take down a young rhino and attach a tracking collar. It was a pivotal moment in the ongoing efforts to protect these magnificent creatures from poaching.

As we carefully approached the rhinos, I couldn't help but feel a mix of excitement and reverence in the presence of these gentle giants. After Dr. William successfully got the shot, we quickly were in the position to do the procedure from blindfolding, checking the temperature, doing blood test and heart rate, to attaching the collar. The first time I touched the thick skin, I got goosebumps. It brought me a special feeling and connection. The first time I saw a rhino in the zoo was when I was a kid, and from that moment, I always wanted to touch the animal once. Now my dream comes true. This animal was a gift that God blessed to humans, and I want to keep this gift for other future generations. However, the moment the young rhino stumbled and got knocked down was quite heartbreaking for me, even though I know that all of what we are doing is to protect them from poaching. Hopefully, when the rhino poaching is ended or at least reduced dramatically, we do not need to do the procedure and let the rhino live completely free in nature.

After the wonderful rhino procedure, we returned to the lodge for a lecture from Dr. William on rhino protection and the significance of community awareness. The knowledge shared during the lecture reinforced the importance of educating and involving communities in conservation efforts. It highlighted the power of fostering a deep sense of connection and responsibility towards these magnificent animals, as they are an integral part of the ecosystem we all depend upon.

During the lecture, I was struck by Dr. William's profound dedication and passion for rhino conservation. His ability to remember every single name of the rhinos on the reserve, treating

them as a family, was awe-inspiring. I was so emotional when watching the video he was crying when knowing a rhino got killed due to poaching. It was a testament to the bond he shared with these creatures, a bond that transcended the boundaries between humans and wildlife.

Dr. William's unwavering commitment to their well-being left a lasting impression on me. I also got a chance to learn about Thanh Bui, a famous Vietnamese songwriter and singer who founded and supports a rhino protection organization. Even though I honestly felt ashamed when Vietnam had one of the biggest black markets for rhino horn, I feel proud that in Vietnam we still have people and organizations who work tirelessly to protect and sustain endangered animals.

In the late afternoon, we were treated to a one-in-life sighting - a lion kill. We luckily came across a herd of lions feasting on a warthog. It was a raw and primal scene, witnessing nature's cycle of life and death unfold before our eyes. This moment was satisfying and special, as it was the first time I met lions, my favorite animal, on this trip. Moreover, we could see them from a very close distance and I felt that I could touch them. It was too much satisfaction for me for a day: the rhino procedure highlighting the tireless efforts and dedication of the conservation team and the majestic lion kill

Today was a big day for me, filled with experiences that have left an indelible mark on my soul. So far, it was the best day for me on this trip.

Hot-take from day 6: The food and drink at the gas station here were underpriced for the quality.

Date: day 7- 22 Saturday

Today, our journey at Amakhala Game Reserve took us to the remarkable Albo National Park. As we went into Albo National Reserve, we saw an elephant grazing peacefully. What

made this encounter particularly fascinating and special was the sight of the elephant losing one of its teeth while grazing on the grass. It gracefully came across us. I felt small compared to this giant animal. We went to a high spot where we could overlook the whole national park which is majestic. I immediately recognized that the obvious difference between the national park and Amakhala is the road. Even though the road at Albo is decently great, I enjoy nature at Amakhala more because of the wild and untouched beauty. However, Professor. Slattery said that Albo National Park is more financially accessible for local people to enjoy the wildlife. That is an interesting point that made me think about whether every private reserve should become a national park.

After the exhilarating morning drive, we came for a well-deserved lunch with the steak. The waiting time was valuable for me, as I got a conversation with Kaitlyn which helped me to understand her better, about her personality and her passion. The joy of bonding over shared experiences and the satisfaction of a delicious meal added to the camaraderie of the group. Also, we had an amazing experience at the gift shop where I got amazed about South Africa's culture through beautiful and unique souvenirs.

After the dinner, we had a night game drive to experience the thermal drone to understand how it could help rangers to protect and manage animals. Everyone was excited when seeing animals at night displaying on screen, and I believe that we also feel happy because the thermal drone is supported by TCU. Moreover, it was amazing to learn about the implication of technology into wildlife conservation.

We do not have a busy plan for tomorrow, so tonight I would have more time to talk and do bonding with my TCU fellows. Since coming to the trip, I spent more time observing and listening to people, understanding them through the way they talked and behaved. That was also another interesting part about the trip, helping me become more social and confident.

Date: day 8- 23 Sunday

Today at Amakhala Game Reserve, we started early with a light breakfast at 6:30 to prepare for another morning drive. Today, we had more leisure time, as we just had a lecture at 3PM from Kathie, one of the founders of Amakhala talking about the black rhino protection and the existing support for the rural school for local students. I was impressed about how she focused on the importance of education for the community which would help wildlife protection later. After that, Dr. William talked about the one health framework, as we learn more about the relationship between humans, animals, and environments. It was inspiring, as from the previous lecture we also learned about how people have to cooperate to protect the animals well. Moreover, through the wildebeest and rhino procedure as well as the dog vaccination, I got the experience and believe that we should collaborate and do meaningful jobs for the overall benefits of society and ecosystems. The lecture ended with a quick explanation about how much drug we should use to dart the rhino, as well as the task allocation for the last rhino procedure tomorrow. I was even more excited compared to the last one, as Dr. William said we might conduct the de-horn step which was fantastically special to witness. This chance could help me understand why people risk their life hunting for the horn which was scientifically proved worthless.

Date: day 9 (24 Monday)

The day began with special excitement, as we prepared for the first cheetah procedure. This was a pivotal moment in our journey, as it was the first time to do the procedure for a carnivore. The moment we saw the cheetah panically running away after getting the shot was touching, making me feel sad for it. However, we understand it is necessary for them to relocate to the new reserve. The procedure had the same process as we did for the rhino and

wildebeest. I got the chance to touch the cheetah: a special feeling with the fur and the majestically wonderful claw. This gave me a memorable experience, as well as enhancing my connection toward wildlife animals.

After the cheetah procedure, we took a leisurely walk along the beach, enjoying the tranquility and beauty of the coastal scenery that made me feel relaxed. I and Jolie had a quick talk about how we could reach the famous press in Vietnam to spread the rhino protection message and share our experience on this trip.

The Second Rhino Procedure:

In the afternoon, we returned to the reserve for another important rhino procedure. This time, I had the incredible opportunity to be directly involved in the conservation efforts. After the rhino was safely dehorned to protect it from poaching, I participated in applying cream lotion to its horn stub, further ensuring its protection and helping it feel more comfortable. Being so close to this majestic creature and being able to contribute to its well-being left me with a profound sense of responsibility and pride. At this moment, I did not know that the rhino felt painful when we dehorned, but I believed that it would protect it from poaching for another long period of time. Also, we had better proof and insight about how worthless the rhino horn is for human usage. This amazing chance reinforced the importance of active involvement in conservation initiatives and the significance of every individual effort in preserving wildlife animals.

It was almost the last day of our trip, and I continuously gained memorable experiences to connect with animals and contribute to the protection of the ecosystem. I understand that it was sad to see the animals getting knocked down by drugs, but it would be even more heartbreaking if they were attacked and killed by poachers.

We came back for dinner, everyone enjoyed the food. However, no one wanted to talk about how many days we had left for the trip, as at this moment, I believed that everyone felt Amakhala is their second family. I came back to my room a little sad that we just had 1 more day at Amakhala. I do not know when I started to feel closely connected to nature and people here. Nevertheless, I still had some excitement for another interesting mission tomorrow - the giraffe procedure.

Date: last day (25 Tuesday)

Today was the last day of our extraordinary journey at Amakhala Game Reserve. Our day began with a visit to the Born Free organization, an organization dedicated to the protection and welfare of animals who do not have the ability to re-habitat in wild nature. The dedication and compassion exhibited by the members of Born Free left a lasting impression on me. We have many ways to protect wild animals, as long as we have the same goal to develop a sustainable habitat and ecosystems.

After that, we were granted a unique and wonderful opportunity to process the giraffe procedure. The procedure was high-risk for the animals, as it was sophisticated. It took us time and effort to collaborate well together and finish the mission to relocate 2 giraffes. I feel so grateful for Dr. William for giving us the opportunity to have this wonderful experience that enriches our life after.

As the sun began its descent, we gathered one last time for the last sundown moment. The sight of the vibrant colors painting the sky served as a poignant reminder of the beauty and ephemerality of every precious moment we experienced during our time at the reserve.

Dr. William had the last lecture, and we had the last lesson at Amakhala. The lesson was not about animals and nature but about us. At this moment, everyone silently focused on his lecture, and this scene was like a father trying to teach his children an important life lesson.

Listening to him talking about how we should find passion, partners, and love, I recognized that in the last 3 months, I was too focused on my internship which stressed me. I forgot to take care of my parents, have fun with my besties, and find my true passion. Through this journey, I found myself again: I found my confidence, my joy, and my people who come from anywhere but share the same interest. Five-minute silence helped me re-think about what I have done on the trip and what I learned and gained from this. Everything was amazing!

The night was joyful with the delicious buffet in the middle of the savannah. We had such a great time enjoying the dance and music from local people which helped us to understand about the culture and people here. We danced together around the fire. At this time, I felt like regardless of our skin and nationality, we all shared the same heartbeat. The coziness made me forget the cold outside, warming my heart inside. The trip was over, but every moment, lessons, and awesome experience would be kept in my memory and my heart.

Reflection:

10 days at Amakhala is not long enough for me to discover every animals as well as visit any private reserve and national parks, but is is long enough for me to enjoy the nature, food, and culture here, as well as to learn and develop my passion and connection with wildlife animals and environment to contribute for the sake of the ecosystem. I want to express my appreciation for the Professor. Slattery, Dr.Bennett, Dr. William, Amakhala staff, and my beloved TCU fellow for being with me on the trip and sharing wonderful moments together. I expect to apply lessons and experience I have learned to contribute more for the future of rhino and the whole environment.