

Reflecting on my Time in Uganda

This summer I had the pleasure of spending six weeks in the Kabarole district of Uganda working with the Kasiisi Project. The project supports conservation of Kibale National Park through conservation, education, and health programs shared with communities living around the forests edge. It aims to inspire a new generation of conservationists to protect the park and its resources via protecting the health and right to education of rural communities.

Prior to travelling to Uganda, I was somewhat apprehensive about the experience. Whilst I was looking forward to the 6 weeks, I can't deny that having never travelled outside of Europe, the prospect of 6 weeks in a new country surrounded by people I did not know was daunting and I was unsure of what to expect. However, living on the grounds of Kasiisi primary school quickly created a strong sense of community between scholars, staff, and pupils at the school. Everyone was incredibly welcoming, and it was much easier than I expected to settle in and feel at home. That is not to say my time there was entirely without challenge, but the experience I had is one I will always look back on fondly and I hope the things I learnt and experiences I had will stay with me.



The entrance to Kasiisi Primary School and the Guesthouse in which we were staying.

My time in Uganda was divided across two main aims, each of which presented its own unique challenges and opportunities to learn:

The first aim involved working with the conservation education branch of Kibale Forest Schools Program (KFSP) to help update and synthesise the conservation curriculum across the 16 primary schools they support. My team developed talks on pollinators and adjusted the content of a talk on elephants produced by previous Laidlaw scholars, both of which we subsequently presented to wildlife clubs in six schools (Kasiisi, Kigarama, Kiko, Kiamara, Kitere, Kyanawara, and Nyabweya). The prospect of presenting these talks initially felt extremely daunting as public speaking is something I tend to avoid. However, constant exposure to this setting did not leave much room for doubt. The biggest challenge in classrooms tended to be communication difficulties - although all students

spoke English, their ability varied between year group and school. Our foreign accents proved to be a further hindrance as many students, despite speaking good English, were unable to understand me. I quickly learnt the importance of adaptability, altering lesson plans to suit a wide range of abilities, and incorporating a range of teaching methods such as role play and interactive worksheets to increase engagement. As part of our role, we established a shared folder for all of these teaching materials to hopefully save time and ensure consistency for future talks which I hope will continue to be helpful going forward.



The conservation team presenting talks about pollinators in Kigarama Primary School

It would be entirely misleading to say that my time on this project has made me a prize winning public speaker, but it is certainly true that my self-confidence and public speaking ability have been enhanced by this experience; the sense of dread I feel before interacting with a crowd has lessened! This was particularly noteworthy during the week leading up to World Chimp Day. The KFSP staff held whole school assemblies across all 16 primary schools, with the conservation team presenting six of these. It was incredibly rewarding to see everyone's hard work come to fruition, and to see the children so immersed in the activities.



Poster created by the conservation team to celebrate World Chimp Day

The second project I was involved with was analysing existing data related to the health of beehives set up along the forest boundary to deter elephants from farmland. This project was in collaboration with Broodminder, and its aim was to reduce human-elephant conflict which occurs because of elephants encroaching onto farmland. Our role was to develop a hive health scoring system which could be used in the future to help determine the effectiveness of the beehive fences. I had initially thought this would be a rather simple task, involving some basic data cleaning and coding in R. However, the data set was revealed to be much larger and more disorganized than we had anticipated. Add to this the fact that my laptop keyboard stopped working on only the second day, and suddenly the task seemed gargantuan! Thankfully, another Laidlaw scholar on the conservation team was happy to take the lead for this project whilst I focused on the curriculum planning. Although this misfortune derailed our initial plan, we ended up achieving more than expected as our efforts could be split more efficiently across the two projects.

Of course, my time in Uganda was not spent solely on conservation work and I was able to get involved with other projects as well as learning more about the culture of the Tooro Kingdom (within which the Kabarole district is situated). I had the opportunity to attend two mobile health clinic days, a highly valuable scheme run by Dr Patrick Tusiime providing much needed medical care to individuals living in remote communities. Working alongside the KFSP staff and Laidlaw scholars, these two days provided a lot of insight into not just the importance of accessible healthcare, but also the sense of community responsibility that tends to be lacking in the West and is something I aim to prioritize going forward.

In our downtime, we were able to explore Uganda through trips organized by KFSP as well as learning more about the local culture through discussions with staff, pupils, and guest speakers who presented discussions about culture and leadership. I found these talks incredibly valuable as they allowed us to develop a deeper understanding of the community we were working with as well as the wider issues facing Uganda, and better tailor our work to suit their needs. Of particular interest were the talks given by Ugandan women in leadership roles. Listening to them it was clear just how hard they had worked to gain their positions and seeing the resilience, commitment, and strength it took was truly inspiring. Although it was difficult to hear of the immense barriers faced by female leaders, the views on leadership these women held - and the traits embodied by them - are those I hope to incorporate into my own leadership.

I have thoroughly enjoyed my experience in Uganda, and immensely value the opportunities I had to meet so many incredible people during my time there. Working alongside so many new people from such varied backgrounds, and adjusting to such a different environment, I have become so much more aware of the world around me. I am sincerely grateful for the opportunity to be pushed out of my comfort zone into an entirely new environment in which I was forced to adapt quickly and in doing so have become more resilient, confident, and have learnt so much. It has been such an honour to work alongside KFSP and I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr Zarin

Machanda for enabling the experience, and Derrick Kajura and all the staff and KFSP for their continued support and guidance during my time in Uganda. This project is one I would wholeheartedly recommend to all future scholars and given the chance, I would go back in an instant.



The Laidlaw Scholars on our first day in Uganda