

'Meno A Kwena Water For Life Volunteer Project'

INTRODUCTION

Involving foreign and local volunteers in our wildlife conservation and rural community development projects has proved to be extremely successful in all respects. The scheme benefits the wildlife, their environment, the people living in close proximity to national parks and reserves, our safari operations, our employees, and the experience of a lifetime for the volunteers. It started, funnily enough, with Princes William and Harry spending some of their 'gap year off' between school and university with us in Botswana.

BACKGROUND

Botswana is an ever increasingly popular safari destination for visitors from all over the developed world, and regionally. Botswana boasts some of the best wildlife viewing in Africa. The country's social stability and general good governance record creates an environment conducive to safety and security conscious travellers to Africa.

Meno A Kwena Tented Camp located on the boundary of the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park, the Boteti River, in Ngwato Tribal District, started operations in early 2003 outfitting safaris into the Kalahari for visiting tourists on holiday in Botswana. The camp is less than two hours drive from Maun, the safari hub of the Okavango Delta. New developments to the Makgadikgadi Pans National Park by the government resulted in our, getting rather more involved in the area, than just doing safaris.

The developments had a marked effect on the wildlife since a new fence was constructed to alleviate a human/wildlife conflict situation. This resulted in a decrease of water available to the water dependant wildlife in the region – particularly the zebra and wildebeest migration. This necessitated us providing pumped water to the wildlife, thus reducing the steady decline of the population. We did not anticipate the demands by large numbers of wildlife for water and were under-resourced to deal with it. This inspired the Water For Life Project that has generated funding from safari guests, and from other sources including the volunteer scheme.

On the other side of the new fence, the pastoralist farmers and their livestock are now having to deal with reduced grazing range, and are in need of an alternative industry to supplement their simple lifestyles. It is my mission to maximise benefits from wildlife and tourism to the rural communities living in close proximity to their wildlife resources. These communities have benefited little in the past from the natural resources right on their doorstep. The tourism industry is potentially, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, for a country with limited employment opportunities. The safari industry is a means of reducing the growing problem of urbanisation, and all the negative effects that creates.

MENO A KWENA TENTED CAMP & SAFARIS

The 14 bed tented safari camp is situated on tribal land leased from the Ngwato Tribe. The lease agreement with the tribe includes maximised employment opportunities in the area, and a bed night levy paid to the Village for every guest accommodated in the camp. The camp started operating in early 2003 with staff from the area employed and trained on site.

The spectacle of the zebra and wildebeest migration utilising the Boteti for their water requirements during the dry season attracts visitors from a broad international and local market. Numerous other species of wildlife occur in this diverse region encompassing the riverine habitats of the Okavango Delta, and the scrublands, open grasslands and saltpans of the Kalahari. The camp is the base from where wildlife viewing and photographic safaris are conducted into Nxai Pan National Park, Makgadikgadi Pans National Park, and Central Kalahari Game Reserve.

The camp is designed to create an atmosphere of the authentic safari experience, coupled with the traditional simplistic architecture of rural Africa that exists on the verge of some of Africa's last remaining uninhabited wilderness.

The volunteers acclimatise themselves to every aspect of safari life in the bush. This is important to understand the connection between tourism, wildlife, conservation and the local rural people and their cultures.

Safari camp tasks are performed with a strict awareness of the wildlife environment. The tasks include safety, basic knowledge of the flora and fauna, first aid, off road vehicle handling and maintenance, housekeeping, cuisine and service. Guiding is the fundamental activity of safaris and so volunteers will learn a great deal from the guides.

The volunteers are accommodated in the research camp next door to the safari guest camp. The research camp is an ongoing exercise of building with local traditional materials by volunteers and the local employees. Accommodation is in tents with bathrooms nearby. The living area hut incorporates the sitting and dining room, and kitchen. All camp chores are done by the volunteers – firewood collection, cooking, cleaning, etc. The view over the Boteti gorge to the national park is stunning.

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION PROJECTS

The volunteers assist us in our efforts to improve conditions for the wildlife, particularly with water and grazing. They learn all there is to know about the geology and hydrology of the area. We pump water from below the dry riverbed, the Boteti River last flowed in the mid 1990s. It is necessary for volunteers to know about the reality of the wildlife's, and their habitat's dependency on economics and politics.

Pumping water for wildlife and maintaining a natural balance is a complexed and fascinating task. Wildlife management is a constant exercise – 24 hours a day, every day of the year, it's a responsibility of unimaginable dedication. And it's not just about the water. The process involves maintenance of equipment, patrolling, monitoring mammal and habitat condition, being sensitive to climatic change, lots of surprises and risks. It's never dull and certainly never boring.

The Meno A Kwena waterholes provide water for 5000 to 6000 zebra, plus wildebeest, elephant, several species of antelope, giraffe, warthog, and the predators – lion, leopard, wild dog, cheetah, hyaena, the small carnivores – jackal, wild cats. And a large and varied population of birdlife, insects, etc. A delicate ecosystem is sustained by our efforts, and those volunteers and staff involved in our projects.

The nearby village primary school is very much a part of our wildlife conservation project. We put a lot of emphasis on educating the very people who will be leading this country in the future. The very people who will take responsibility for the future of wildlife and the environment. We encourage the teachers to allow the children to get involved in our safari activities.

RURAL COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT PROJECTS

Botswana is a democratic country and so policy is dependant on the voices of the people. It is imperative that, for us to secure a future for wildlife, we must educate the people to realise its value indirectly and directly to them, otherwise it will be overpowered by short-term progress and developments that disregard the importance of this valuable natural resource.

The volunteers will be educated on this principle as much as they will be involved in sharing it with the local peoples who have far less education opportunities. As much as the children's education is important, the adults need employment and upliftment. The volunteers will be involved in our mission to involve the local rural communities in tourism and the wildlife potential.

We do this with maximised benefits to the people living in proximity to their wilderness areas. Employment, training, traditional crafts and industry support, locally sourced building

materials and furniture to develop, furnish and maintain the camp. We have a policy that gives consideration to their culture, and a patient understanding of the changes in attitude required for them to understand and embrace the culture of tourism.

VOLUNTEER REQUIREMENTS

First of all, it is a determined individual who wants to do something extraordinary for the good of others and the environment. A sense of responsibility is important, as our projects are sensitive and occasionally demanding, both mentally and physically.

Compassion for wildlife and the environment is an asset but not a necessity. This will be instilled in the volunteers while involved with our projects anyway.

Open-minded flexible attitude is a helpful attribute.

Valid drivers license and responsible driving skills are essential.

Health and travel insurance is necessary to cover all eventualities.

VOLUNTEER BENEFITS

The African wildlife and cultural experiences will be thought provoking and inspirational. The experiences will create a better understanding of the reality of the environment, and the need to conserve and maintain delicate balances. Sustainable reusable conservation will secure a better future for the natural environment and us. This knowledge and understanding improves self-esteem and confidence.

The volunteers will come into contact with people working in all aspects of the safari industry, influential and important safari visitors from all walks of life around the globe. They will meet and occasionally get involved with active conservationists, wildlife researchers, and their studies. Most importantly, the volunteers interact with the local people and their traditions and cultures, this is where a deeper understanding of the nature of Africa will be an inspiration. It is an environment filled with networking possibilities that may bode well for the futures of the volunteers.

...And of course there is a lot of fun and excitement to be experienced. Human nature can be accommodated, even when dealing with serious and necessary issues. From time to time the volunteers will be given time off to go to Maun to relax and recover from 'bush burn out'. Maun is a fun tourist town filled with 'wild' characters and other 'animals'! There are opportunities to accompany other safari operators and wildlife researchers to other regions of Botswana.

SUMMARY

Botswana is a very young developing country. At independence from its British Protectorate status in 1966 Botswana had no infrastructure, no government, no currency, no economy. But lots of wildlife and wide-open wilderness, and a small peaceful and gentle population of under a million people. There were just seven kilometres of paved roads in a country the size of France, or Texas!

And so, it is our belief that we in the wildlife and tourism industry must do everything we possibly can to help and nurture and involve the people of Botswana if we are to secure their wildlife resources to help them develop into a modern and sustainable society. Tourism in Africa has so much potential, the growing desires for the developed worlds' populations to seek out nature is becoming a very big business.

The blend of our project benefits all aspects of the possibilities and benefits to the people of Africa, the tourism industry of Africa, the wildlife of Africa, ...the volunteers of the world!

IMAGES



Village School visits camp to learn about wildlife.



The view from Meno A Kwena Tented Camp



Richard from Wales thatching the research camp.



Waterhole maintenance



Barnes Ed Jamie from the UK



Nocturnal wildlife monitoring



Art classes at camp



Traditional entertainment

'Passionate about wildlife'