

Lucia Visits Elephants Alive

I am Lucia Cenni and I am a Master degree student at the University of Pisa – Italy.



This year I have had the possibility to see my dream come true thanks to the help of my supervisors: Dr. Francesca Parrini (University of the Witwatersrand) and Dr. Filippo Barbanera (University of Pisa): I could visit and study in Africa.

It's my first time in South Africa and so far this is the most exciting experience of my entire life.

I surely appreciated Joburg and all the comfortable aspects of a big city life, but I found my real home only since when I found Elephants Alive and its amazing team: Michelle, Michellené and Robin. I have spent with them the whole month of August and I will keep this period forever in my heart.

Thanks to them I have had the possibility to learn so many things about African savannahs, African elephants, Parks and Reserve managements and poaching in the area and many other topics. In this long but short month I learnt a lot of new and practical skills and I want to thank them for this.

I was actually really lucky because I had the possibility to take part of many of Elephants Alive's activities. In the first part of the month I could participate to the annual Vulture Nests Survey in the APNR (Associated Private Nature Reserves). During these field days we had to monitor some trees used by raptors and vultures as nesting sites in order to understand and estimate the elephants' impact on these trees. For each tree we had to take note of the number in the tag, the species of the tree, the exact GPS location, the presence, type and amount of damage, the dominant vegetation around the nesting site, the presence and activity of nests, the presence of fungi activity and the presence and type of insects activity. With these data it will be then possible to assess the type and amount of influence of elephants' damage on the nesting activity of these endangered birds. These days in the field have been long and tiring but at the same time we have had the possibility to live wonderful moments: the sightings of so many animals: wild dogs, hyenas, elephants, mongooses, hippos, rhinos, lionesses, a beautiful cheetah



and many others; the breath-taking landscapes; the amazing sunrises and sunsets; the simple relaxation around the fire during the night under a sky full of stars.



After the Vulture Nests Surveys, I could take part of the regular activity of Elephants Alive of tracking elephants. During these field days we tried to locate GPS collared elephants, knowing the coordinates of their last position and helped by tracking devices, in order to identify them and other elephants with which they were interacting. The identification of

elephants occurs through the pictures that are taken for every sighted elephant, both collared or not and, in particular, the right ear, the left ear and the full frontal images are necessary for the identification. Thanks to this activity, Elephants Alive has created a huge database of elephants IDs, that represents an important tool to understand the habitat use, the population dynamics and the movement patterns of the elephants of the zone. Also these field days have been extremely productive and, in this way, I had the chance to learn many things and see so many exciting scenes, as the one of a herd of more than 50 elephants, a thing that only few people can have the luck to see in their lives.

As last thing, I took part of the building up of 79 beehives with Elephants Alive and Mica Village's teams. In a really hard working workshop of a weekend we managed to build so many beehives that will be used, together with other 40 ones that will be built soon, in the Masters project of Robin. His aim is to hang a couple of these beehives to some marula trees in the Jejane Private Nature Reserve in order to protect trees from the impact of elephants, given that these very big mammals can be frightened by the sound and presence of bees. In these 3 days I had the possibility to join the company of many amazing persons and to have fun, while helping the team.

I will forever remember my experience with Elephants Alive, the persons that belong to its team, their knowledge and the effort that they put in the protection of elephants. This month has taught me many things, both on the personal and working level. Seeing them working so hard, has inspired me to make my part, even if sometimes we think that things would never change or that it is too late. If you really want to do something, it is never too late: we just have to start from little things. Thank you for everything you have done for me Elephants Alive!!

