

CVE's South Africa Field Trip

VISIT TO DINOKENG GAME RESERVE, GAUTENG, SOUTH AFRICA (Dec 2016)

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In December 2016 I travelled with a group of vets from the CVE to Dinokeng Game Reserve near Pretoria. The Reserve was established in 2011 only approximately 40 minutes' drive from Pretoria and encompasses 18,500 hectares of both private and public land on which free roaming members of the 'Big Five' (lions, elephants, Cape buffalo, leopards, and rhinoceros) have been introduced. The Reserve is unique in being so close to an urbanised area, which presents challenges in management but also an opportunity to explore avenues of care and preservation of biodiversity while maintaining the needs of the local community, thus avoiding both further habitat destruction and also human settlement displacement.

We were hosted by a group called WEI (Wildlife and Ecological Investments, South Africa), a non-profit eco-tourist organisation which provides support for local conservation managers in many areas of South Africa. Our instructors provided us with local information and over 2 weeks we were involved in performance of veldt assessments, game transects and bird watches. We also observed the process of contraceptive implanting in lionesses which was carried out by a group from the Veterinary Faculty at the University of Pretoria. 'Bomas' or traps were erected, the lionesses were darted, physical examination including ultrasonography was performed and then suprelorin capsules were implanted by subcutaneous injection. In lions 4.7mg suprelorin is a safe and effective way of preventing pregnancy for a period of up to two years. A visit to a local cheetah park provided us with more "hands-on" contact with local wildlife including to my particular delight viewing African Wild Dogs at feeding time.

Take homes from the trip were numerous. We became familiar with many antelope and bird species and practiced skills in identification of number gender and species both at short range and long range. We learned the importance of vegetation surveys which assist Reserve managers with stocking decisions. We saw first-hand the effect of invasive species on natural environments (illustrated for example by Australian gum trees, initially introduced to South Africa in the 1800's to drain marsh areas and reduce risks of malaria, but now widely despised for drying out the land and causing extinction of the less robust native species).

I became aware over the fortnight not only of the rare beauty of South Africa's wildlife and bush but also of its fragility and the responsibility that we as vets have in communicating this message to the wider community. There is a wealth of eco-tourist energy and finance in developed countries, and if a system of harnessing this strategically could be further developed, a great deal could be achieved in biodiversity conservation and knowledge sharing in National Parks worldwide.