

## Musings of Novice Researcher Part II: The Magwinya Chronicle



I have been conducting research throughout Botswana for about 7 weeks now, and I must say, there have been trials but also some triumphs. After the Okavango Delta I headed to Pandamatenga, a little farming village in the Northeast just across the border from Zimbabwe.

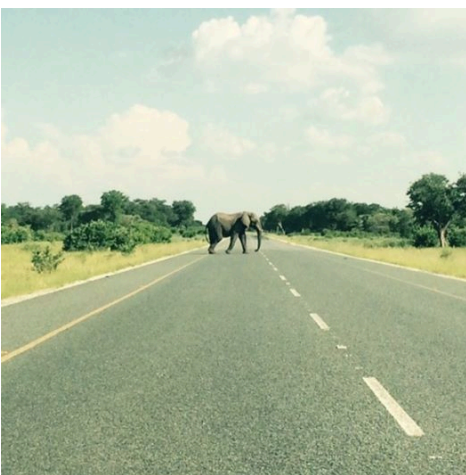
*I had to travel to areas I had never been to, alone... I would be traveling through wildlife areas for hours at a time with no cellphone signal, terrible navigation skills and a high risk of breaking down or getting a flat tire along the way. Add to it, the elephants I would most likely see along the way and I was scared. It had been a while since I had driven such a long distance to unknown territory on my own.*

Most people haven't really seen much beyond the inside of the general dealers where they might pick up a "cool drink" and if they're feeling indulgent maybe a magwinya aka: fat cake, while en-route to Kasane (the tourist hub of the north). Magwinyas are basically the Botswana version of a Canadian donut but without the icing sugar. They are a plain golden brown on the outside, but inside they are filled with delicious deep fried goodness. Panda is kind of like a magwinya. If you're not paying attention, you won't spend much time looking at a magwinya, but if you take the time to admire the scenery and talk to the people, it's possible that you might discover something rich and fulfilling underneath that golden brown soil.

I got a good taste of what life in Panda is like on my research visit. Firstly, it is beautiful, it's green and it not only rained it poured! Once you venture into the villages off the main highway you will find yourself driving through twisty green tunnels of gorgeous and gigantic trees. Secondly, the people are very quick to be friendly and helpful. I was able to collect vital information concerning



how both the subsistence cattle farmers as well as the commercial crop farmers experience human-wildlife conflict, which you can imagine is very different on both sides. In addition to interacting with community members, I was able to gain first-hand experience with dedicated individuals trying to mitigate negative interactions between humans and wildlife. These particular individuals impressed me as their job is difficult. They are not only navigating relationships across different species but also across communities.



After visiting Panadamatenga I traveled West to Ghanzi (just outside the Kalahari!) Farming in Ghanzi dates back hundreds of years and most farmers living in Ghanzi have families that extend almost as far back. I had heard that because of this history it would be very difficult to enter Ghanzi as an outsider, especially as a researcher. I was also aware that everyone most likely knows everyone. I had to be very careful how I recruited participants and diplomatic in my language out of respect of this interconnectedness-the last thing I want to do as a researcher is cause harm to a community. Given that I had limited time in Ghanzi, I had to deal with the fact that many if not all of my participants were not going to trust me.

Surprisingly, I found that most of the farmers were welcoming, especially after I reiterated the fact that I was not a conservationist, a reporter, or even a spy... yes, a spy. I made sure my researcher hat was firmly placed on my head most of my time in Ghanzi...and that was fine with me.

By the end of the week I had interviewed local cattle farmers from subsistence to commercial and learned a great deal about farming. I learned more intricately how the variety of challenges that cattle farmers face, their perspective on approaches to mitigation (shooting, trapping, etc...) and the embeddedness of their viewpoint can all depend on what wildlife species exist in their area, the size of their farm, the structure of the farm, heard composition and don't forget the climate. One farmer may have trouble with cheetah and practice farming with two paddocks and one water point, while another farmer might have trouble with wild-dogs, multiple paddocks and ten water points.

In Ghanzi, I also spent time with individuals working as conservationists and researcher who are helping mitigate the negative effects of human and wildlife coexistence. I haven't spoken much about Human-Wildlife Conflict as a term, however, as you can guess, it generally refers to negative interactions between humans and wildlife in the struggle to coexist within a world of limited resources. Conservationists generally want to reduce HWC to avoid extinction of certain species of animals, but also so that humans and animals can learn to live together in

harmony. Farmers want to...farm, and sometimes predators can pose as major threats to their livelihoods. Naturally, farming and conservation do not always go hand in hand. Areas like Pandamatenga and Ghanzi are meant to function as agricultural zones according to the government and are exposed to little direct benefits from wildlife, including tourism. This raises questions of the value of wildlife vs. the value of livestock. We all value different things depending on the way we live our lives. In an increasing interconnected and globalized world, these values are bound to come in conflict with each other at the community level. Gone are the days where you have small communities that remain untouched by global advocacy groups and social/environmental movements. So, the



question then becomes: how do we learn to live together peacefully as human beings who naturally value different things?

I had mentioned in my last blog that I have begun volunteering with an organization called “The Kagiso Project” in my home base, Maun. This project was co-founded by Daniella Montemarano and Vehae Tjiriange, two dedicated women working to foster peace at the community level. “Kagiso” means Peace, so translated it is called “The Peace Project”. The Kagiso project aims at training local leaders and DiKgosi (Chiefs) in alternative dispute resolution methods so that they can begin peace building at the community level by using new conflict resolution skills, training other leaders and taking part in peer mediation training at schools in the area. The project was built with the mission of unearthing traditional Batswana views of peaceful conflict resolution. As I mentioned, the Kagiso project also runs a peer mediation programme which targets numerous social issues, including helping to address the root causes of teacher/student violence and harassment, gender violence and peer violence- all very real and serious issues in Botswana. My work with the project is just beginning but I was fortunate enough to be able to coordinate and lead a refresher workshop for five local leaders this month.

Although my research and my volunteer work seem to focus on completely separate things (How is Human-Wildlife Conflict related to mediation between people?) it is evident that there are connections. Is existing in harmony with wildlife really an issue between humans and wildlife, or is it a matter of fostering understanding and finding common interests within groups of people? These types of questions are small glimpses into some of my preliminary findings. The conflicting and evolving interests of stakeholders have turned out to be a key focus in my research so far and I can't help but bring it all back to the fundamentals of peace building and conflict resolution practices.

So, all in all- a great, mind expanding, magwinnya filled few weeks! Next week I am off to the delta for one last time!

Lessons learned:

- Always have TWO back up translators
- Make sure your temporary translator can actually understand English.
- Approaching the wrong people at government offices can mean a sacrifice for your data collection.
- Don't joke about being a spy.
- ALWAYS fill up at a fuel station when there is a chance: no power + broken generator = no fuel = stranded in Panda
- Elephants are invisible on the road at night
- People not only value different things but they value things differently
- What is scary can turn out to be empowering

