



4-1-2010

Into Africa: Penn Vet Student Allison Wolosz Puts Her Classroom Learning to Real-Life Use in Botswana

Allison Wolosz
University of Pennsylvania

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BY ALLISON WOLOSZ, V'12



After a whirlwind second semester, my first year of vet school was under my belt. Next up? A trip to Africa.

Within 24 hours after finishing finals, I was en route to Botswana, Africa. Having worked with African animals at Zoo New England in Boston for more than six years before entering vet school, I was thrilled to be making my first trip to the country from which those animals came – and hoping to see some in their real-life environment.

Joining me on my adventure was Lindsay Mendenhall (V'11) plus 12 other students from various schools at Penn. We were all participating in 10-week internships offered by the Botswana-UPenn Partnership, through funding from the Provost's Office.

Upon our arrival, Lindsay and I were put straight to work with several different veterinarians and clinics. Our first stop was the animal clinic at the Botswana College of Agriculture. The clinic was rather slow while we were there – an occasional sick dog or goat would be brought in that we'd help with – but the college had a large collection of animals (goats, sheep, dairy and beef cattle, chickens, pigs, guinea fowl and ostrich) that we tended to. In addition, we worked on some of the ongoing research projects and assisted with surgery.

One such opportunity was to assist in surgery that blocked the facial vein in twin goat kids, a study that had just begun. It aimed to cut off the flow of blood to one of the twin's brains, tricking body temperature sensors and making kids not feel cold. That way, energy would be spent making muscle rather than opting instead to shiver to keep warm. The other twin did not receive the surgery so that comparisons between the twins could be drawn.

Another project at the Botswana College of Agriculture was collecting blood and fecal samples from goats and sheep so samples could be tested to monitor parasite loads. Blood samples from the sheep were also used to make blood agar plates for the microbiology department.

Beef in Botswana is big business. We learned that the northern part of Botswana has foot and mouth disease, a contagious and sometimes fatal viral disease of cloven-hoofed animals. Thanks to strict guidelines regarding movement of cattle and the lack of wild buffalo, however, the disease has been somewhat contained and the southern half of the country remains FMD-free.



Lindsay and I had the opportunity to meet with the vets from the local abattoir and toured the facilities.

We also spent a week working with a vet who works with several of the large feedlots. While there, an outbreak at one of those feedlots occurred, which we later learned was caused by *Pasteurella*, bacteria that can cause respiratory issues. At the feedlot, we assisted in collecting specimens, monitoring and treating cattle. That work is important to the local people as that each cattle that dies is an economic loss for the lot owner as well as to contain the disease from spreading and causing a larger disaster within that feed lot and transmission to others.

And, when we weren't tending to cattle, we were chasing monkeys and baboons out of the pens to ensure disease transmission from baboons and monkeys to cattle was lessened.

At a local private practice we assisted with exams and vaccinations for dogs and the occasional cat. Many of the dogs we saw were treated for diseases that are now uncommon in the US, like parvo, distemper and babesia. In the summer months, the Botswana veterinarians treat numbers of dogs for snake bites, but since we were visiting during the winter months of the African country, we did not see any – though we were able to see scars on some of the survivors that crossed our paths. Many people in Botswana have cats to help keep away pests, but like barn cats, these animals stay outside and rarely receive veterinary care.

The 10 weeks was an enlightening experience. The veterinarians we worked with were accommodating and shared their stories freely with us. Because Botswana does not have a vet school, the veterinarians had different educational experiences – some went to school in Africa, the US, the UK, Australia – and so they all had a different tale to tell. The Botswana people we met were friendly and willing to teach us about the culture and customs in their country, and, despite our busy schedules, we managed to travel on weekends to see some of the amazing wildlife and landscapes the country has to offer – a real treat for me given my background.

In mid-August I returned to the states with stories, photos and memories – and a mild case of ring worm. Given all I learned, all I saw and all I experienced, the ring worm was a small price to pay for the once-in-a-lifetime journey. 🐾



Clockwise from top: An African sunset; Allison on-site at one of her stops; Allison (right) and Lindsay Mendenhall, VMD (left) spent their summers experiencing Africa and its animals, scenery and veterinary practices first-hand; African elephants stopping for a drink.