

Georgia Simmons – Blog 2

Jambo from TBI! (Turkana Basin Institute)

One of my first observations after leaving the airport in Nairobi were the cars. Most people here drive Toyota, and wagons are much more popular here than in the United States. The sedans that I did see were very small, and there were also small, rectangular shaped vans. SUV's are also pretty popular here and look similar to how they look in the U.S.. I also found it interesting that I saw a Porsche and a Chevy. I also noticed that all of the signs along the highway were in English and featured white people, or people of color who were much lighter than the majority of people who live here. There are also many American brands like Coca-Cola, Heinz ketchup, Nutella, and Kellogs cereal. There is even Uber, which makes white America feel impossible to escape.

After staying near Nairobi for one night we drove four hours to the Mpala Research Center. On the way there Professor Nasa was telling us about Kenya and I learned China is working closely with the Kenyan government and is helping to fund the roads. Ester, one of Nengo's students, also said that many Kenyans are trying to learn Chinese because it can be helpful in business.

In Mpala we went on a few game drives to see all of the wildlife and it was exciting to see zebras, giraffes, and hippos not in a zoo and in their natural habitat. I found it interesting that the giraffes were living in an area where there are very few tall plants and Professor Nasa noted that animals are much smaller here than in south-west Kenya because there is more competition for food.

At Mpala we had presentations from a few different researches including Kemani who is a plant ecologist. We helped him with his fieldwork to study the interaction between camels and giraffes. One of the presentations that I found really interesting was by Professor Rubenstein from Princeton on whether or not livestock and wildlife can live together. This is important because two-thirds of the 650 million people living in sub-Saharan Africa live in rural areas and survive directly off the land. I was surprised to learn that livestock and wild animals living together can be beneficial depending on how the land is used. Professor Rubenstein explained that holistic management (planned grazing) helps the animals, specifically in keeping the cows from losing so much weight during the drought.

For the first lecture in TBI we learned about Darwin and the history of evolution. Darwin changed the way people understood the world and transformed Lamarck's linear hierarchy into a branching order. Darwin introduced the ideas of variation and natural selection and that change is slow and gradual. I took anthropology at De Anza, but this lecture not only covered primates but also many other mammal classes.

Following the lecture, we were assigned a mammal class to study in depth. I was assigned the Suidae (pig) where my group set up the skeleton and began sketching it out. We also had an opportunity to examine the other group's skeletons. This activity was really helpful to better understand the shapes of the different bones and how to differentiate one animal from the other. I have spent some time working with different human and hominoid skeletons but never another mammal. The pig skeleton was interesting because it had a very large third molar, and a unique metacarpal specific for animals that have hooves. I noticed that this same metacarpal was on the zebra skeleton. Professor Nasa also pointed out how you can tell that the human skeleton available was an African. He said that because there is no bridge on the upper part of the nose it is likely to be African. Following that, we all began examining our own noses as well as discussing how body types vary depending on where the person's family lived. For example, people that live in warm areas near the equator generally have long, tall bodies. This is called Allan's rule and is expected to help people stay cool.

Overall, I am really enjoying this experience and am so thankful that Professor Nengo gave us this opportunity. At both Mpala Research Center and here at TBI we have been around so many researchers that have shown me what it is like to study plants and animals, both alive and fossilized. We are also experiencing environments and people that would have been impossible to visit without being apart of this program. I am extremely nervous, but also excited to camp for nine days and to maybe discover a new species!