

Have you ever been asked to marry a tribal farmer in Africa?

By Rachel Steele – 'happy recipient' of a BVA Overseas Travel Grant

After finals, London students have to complete an elective in a subject of interest to us. To the disgust of my peers, I chose to study epidemiology (in the secret hope that I might get to travel and develop my interest in third world agriculture). Well, while they were embracing the prospect of more weeks of clinical studies at the RVC, I was jetting off to South Africa! The purpose of my trip was to collect data for a project that my supervisor, Professor Dirk Pfeiffer, was involved with. I would later have to analyse the statistics and suggest development strategies myself in a thesis.



Rachel Steele, in South Africa's Kruger National Park

At this stage I wish to sincerely thank the BVA for the most generous funding I received – this made my trip possible, and led to the most exciting 5 weeks of my veterinary training.

Over 30,000 African Buffalo (*Synecrus caffer*) roam in herds over vast distances in the Kruger National Park, South Africa. These tremendous animals are unique – distinct from other buffalo species, and one of the 'big five' targeted by tourists on safari. Unfortunately, the buffalo carry many diseases - the dreaded Foot and Mouth Disease perhaps being the most concerning to man. Carried from Mozambique and Zimbabwe, South African serotypes of FMD infect herds of cattle owned by subsistence farmers who live on the borders of the park. In order to maintain FMD free status in South Africa at large, a red-line zone has been instituted around the borders of Kruger. Farmers in the red-line zone are prevented by law from marketing livestock and meat across the zone. These tribal peoples are thus severely limited by legislation and would have great difficulty finding avenues to become more commercialised. Other limitations come in cultural



forms in a society where cattle and children are a man's wealth, and money is very scarce. Farmers here want financial stability but lack education and support. By law, cattle must be vaccinated twice yearly against the prevalent serotypes of FMD. Additionally, all animals must be inspected once per week by an appointed official at government instituted dip tanks. Concurrently dipping cattle for ticks is the incentive for farmers to bring cattle for inspection. Acaricide resistance is fast building up, however, and the situation calls for change.

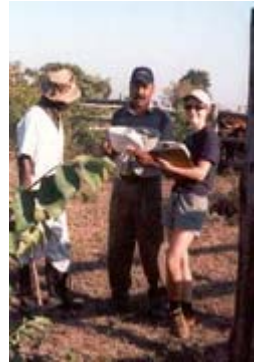
In 2001, the UK government's Department for International Development (DfID) provided funding for a 3-year research project aimed to help these farmers. Serology has been analysed annually for FMD serotypes SAT1-3 and tick-borne diseases such as anaplasmosis and babesiosis. Questionnaire sampling of farmers has also been performed to gain insight into their perceptions. And it is my job to sort out the figures now....aaaahhhhhh! No, I'm joking, it's a pleasure.

So, plunged into deep, dark Africa, I travelled for hours on dirt roads to find dip-tanks and poor farmers, and Nguni cattle with cute bells around their necks, and mud huts, and woman carrying babies on their backs and huge



containers on their heads.

In 500 words, I can't take you with me to Kruger and describe the feeling of being watched by hyenas as we ate our braai to the tune of the crickets and nameless creatures of the night time bush. I can't explain the timid interest of the children at the dip tanks who loved their photographs taken, the hospitality of the South African people, or the pleasure of being shown around Kruger Park by the head vet. I would love to tell you more about the tribal cultures, the frustrations of language barriers and cultural idiosyncrasies in development work...how it feels to be at a dip tank at 6a.m. when the poles have been stolen and we have to build a crush, or waiting until 11p.m. for the first meal of the day...good old African timing! I can only say a heart felt thank you for the inspiration this experience has brought to my life, and hope that my research will in some small way contribute to improvements for the wonderful people who farm on the borders of the Kruger Park. By the way, I respectfully declined my proposal of marriage – opting to at least complete the remainder of my BVetMed degree!



My thesis will be available in mid-June, for anyone interested – contact myself or Professor Dirk Pfeiffer at the Royal Veterinary College.

Rachel Steele
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