

Allison Rogers, M.S Environment & Resources - Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies (2022)

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With the support of the IRIS International Research and Training Grant for Incoming Graduate Students, in May 2022 I travelled to visit communities living alongside Kibale National Park, Uganda. My master's thesis research focused on measuring the effectiveness of community-based strategies for deterring elephants from foraging in smallholder farms bordering Kibale. My research team monitored elephant damage in relation to proximity to trenches and beehive fences which are intended to prevent elephants from crossing the park boundary into farms. Due to COVID-19 I had not been able to travel to Kibale during the data collection period of this project (2020-2021), but I was excited to be able to discuss our results with community members during this visit.

We had collected data in six communities, so we arranged small group meetings with each of these communities. Each meeting was with just a few community members, often people involved in leadership roles and knowledgeable about the history of community efforts to prevent crop damage by elephants. We discussed my results – that trenches do seem to prevent elephants from causing damage, but that there are 'crossing points' in the trench that make everyone in the community vulnerable to damage – and provided a space for those community members to talk about their experiences. I learned more about the history of trench construction and maintenance, and how this history has complicated efforts to move forward with these projects. Perhaps most importantly, we talked about the anticipated outcomes of my research. While I can't promise funding or immediate action, published results may bolster future grant applications and community requests for funding or supporting trench and beehive fence construction. My assistants Richard Karamagi and Moses Nyakoojo translated to and from Rutoro as needed (my Swahili didn't help much here!) and I was grateful to have these personal conversations, not only to better understand our results but also to connect with community members about the intentions of our work.

While in Kibale I also got to hike all over our study area to see where the transects traverse the landscape. I was surprised by the beautiful rolling hills - years of viewing my study area through satellite images collapsed my mental imagination to a 2D image, but the reality was much more dynamic. The contrast along the park boundary was stark: tea fields spanning as far as the eye can see on one side, and rich forest of tall trees on the other. Forest animals were elusive (I heard the forest had abundant fruit at this time, less reason for animals to forage elsewhere) but I was treated to a few vibrant birds perched at the forest edge and spotted a couple chameleons too.

During my stay, I was hosted by a wonderful woman who owned a guesthouse just a few kilometers from the communities in my study. My host was engaged with community science outreach efforts and had at one time participated in maintaining beehive fences; her connections to the community made her the perfect host for the short visit. More than that she was extremely welcoming, introduced me to traditional foods such as matoke (plantains with ground peanuts) and millet bread, and gifted me my empaako ('pet name', traditionally awarded soon after birth but visitors can also be given them) toward the end of my stay. She showed me the community science center where she volunteers her time, and

the other guesthouse she's building closer to the park. I have lived in Kenya and Tanzania in the past and had visited Uganda before on a very quick vacation, but the relationships I made on this trip highlighted the cultural differences between this community and other East African communities I've lived in previously.

The goals of this trip to Kibale were to share and contextualize our results with community members, and to grow a personal understanding of the study site. I feel these goals were accomplished in my time there and I am grateful for the support from IRIS that made this trip possible. Finally visiting my study site was the perfect conclusion to this project.
