



COLLABORATION ACROSS CONTEXTS

WHEN LANGUAGE AND PERSPECTIVE DIFFER



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Collaborating across disciplines is no easy task. Miscommunications, mismatches, and misunderstandings are common, but rarely are missed opportunities. We found this to be the case when we undertook our own collaboration as students in the Applied Biodiversity Science (ABS) Program at Texas A&M University.

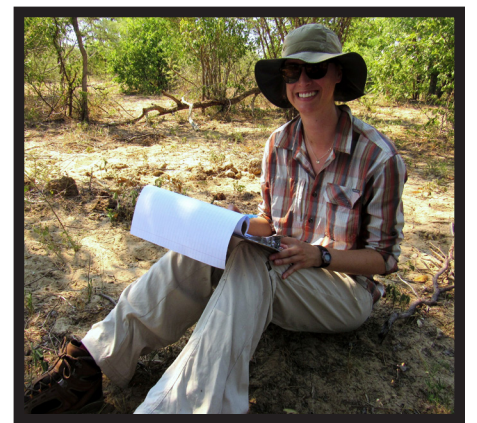
We were awarded an ABS Collaborative Multidisciplinary Research Award last year to expand our doctoral research and explore two species that could not be more similar and yet vastly different at the same time: people and elephants.

Erin is a landscape ecologist studying **elephant movement** in the Okavango Delta of Botswana and Lauren is an anthropologist studying **rural change and adaptation** to elephants in the same region. We are both Ph.D. Research Fellows with the Ecoexist Project, a Botswana-based non-governmental organization working in the Eastern Panhandle of the Okavango Delta that aims to foster **human-elephant coexistence**.

As the collaboration began, language and meaning were the unacknowledged elephants in the room. Even the term “coexistence,” which has usage in common parlance, was an unanticipated barrier. In ecology, foundational works from Chesson and Warner posit that coexistence is the stable presence of two species in the same environment because of a balance between competitive interactions and other stabilizing mechanisms. To social scientists — particularly an anthropologist who studies of human-wildlife interactions — coexistence takes on a different meaning. From that perspective, it is the mutual acceptance of other’s presence and can include attitudes and experiences of tolerance and acceptance. These definitional differences are reasonable enough considering that ecology has its roots in a positivist tradition while anthropology acknowledges, and even encourages, the placement of the self within the study system due to the sometimes subjective nature of interpreting others’ culture.

How we define the concept serving as the nexus of our collaboration was important and a challenge that needed to be addressed. Perhaps less obvious was the challenge of working across vastly different spatial scales appropriate for studying human and elephant use of trees in this landscape. We compiled four years of movement data from 20 elephants in the Eastern Panhandle of the Okavango Delta and synthesized those with locations where people traveled to harvest firewood. Human movement data were the result of repeated firewood harvests Lauren participated in with 14 households over the course of four months while she lived in a remote village in the Eastern Panhandle.

For elephant movements, Erin needed a satellite to examine the broad range of elephant movement. But, in comparison, the collaboration needed a macro lens to understand how people move and the individual species of wood they collect. Lauren struggled to carry heavy bundles of firewood on her head through the deep Kalahari sand back to the village, while Erin struggled to decipher meaning out of the movements of two species that seemed to mutually avoid each other. Methods





from spatial ecology and for studying non-speaking animals lead Erin toward mechanistic “what” and “how” interpretations of elephant patterns. Meanwhile, through day-to-day ethnography, focal follows, and interviews, Lauren was able to parse out human motivations and preferences, delving deeper into the “why” behind their firewood collecting behavior.

This collaboration was a meaningful endeavor toward better understanding the complexity of interactions between people and elephants. Alone, ecological research will improve knowledge of elephant movement and preferences while ethnographic research explores what it means for the people who live with everyday threats of elephant encounters. Together, with a collaborative

lens, we have found that it is impossible to explain the actions of one species without integrating the actions of the other. Our research has shown that multidisciplinary collaborations are critical to develop meaningful conservation research that allows for the emergence of systems-level complexity. The first academic product from our collaboration is a manuscript, currently under



Top, previous: Group photo (from left to right) of E. Buchholtz, field assistants Ipolokeng Katholo and Olorato Ratama, and L. Redmore around the village baobab tree. Middle: E. Buchholtz recording vegetation data in the field. Bottom: L. Redmore Lauren carrying a bundle of firewood. Left, opposite: Browsing elephant. Left: Two women harvest firewood in the Okavango Delta. Below: Elephant footprints along an elephant pathway where fieldwork was conducted.



review. We also look forward to sharing our results with the Government of Botswana, who can transform our work on human-elephant interactions around trees in to policy and on-the-ground action.

Any collaboration is an ongoing, iterative learning experience. It would not have been possible without mutual respect between us and an openness to

persevere through miscommunications and misunderstandings. We each brought our disciplinary backgrounds and theories to the table, but our collaboration persisted because of the shared passion for the work we do and the impact we believe it can have. We encourage others to intentionally build multidisciplinary collaborations in unexpected places for fruitful educational experiences.