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Scott Kloeck Jenson International Internship Grant
A Rocha Kenya – Watamu, Kenya

The Scott Kloeck Jenson International Internship Grant funded my internship with A Rocha Kenya, a non-profit conservation organization based in Watamu, Kenya. The Coast Province of Kenya is the poorest province in the country and most rural people struggle to survive on subsistence agriculture in a dry climate with poor soil. There are two areas of prime conservation concern on the coast—Mida Creek and Arabuko-Sokoke Forest. Because of the poverty of people living in villages surrounding these biodiversity hotspots, the creek and forest are becoming increasingly degraded and the endemic species they harbor increasingly threatened. People with no alternative livelihood options destroy trees to sell for firewood or building poles, poach wildlife in the forest, and over-fish the creek.

A Rocha Kenya is a locally staffed organization that works with local communities surrounding the forest and creek to increase awareness about conservation and the importance of natural habitats. They are committed to conservation, education, and poverty alleviation. A Rocha is involved in many efforts to initiate community-based approaches to conservation that can help improve local livelihoods. A core value of A Rocha is community living, and people from a diverse array of backgrounds and cultures are brought together to live and work at the organization's Field Study Center in an attempt to promote global peace and understanding.

As part of my internship with A Rocha Kenya, I conducted an evaluation of the organization's largest project, Arabuko-Sokoke Schools and Eco-tourism Scheme (ASSETS). ASSETS distributes scholarships to secondary-school students from forest- and creek-adjacent communities through funds generated from eco-tourism. By making the connection between the forest and creek and education, beneficiaries and their families learn the importance of these habitats as not only havens of biodiversity, but also as sources of alternative livelihoods and even cultural and spiritual significance. ASSETS was implemented in 1991 and has never undergone a formal evaluation. Upon arriving at A Rocha, I soon discovered that one aspect of a busy, under-funded organization is that there are hundreds of tasks to accomplish and hardly ever the funds nor staff capacity to carry them out. This was one reason why the SKJ grant was such a blessing both for me and for A Rocha—for providing me with funds to travel and live in Kenya, and for providing A Rocha with an intern who could carry out the much needed evaluation with minimal guidance from overworked staff.

As an intern, I devised the methodology for an evaluation of ASSETS and carried it out during my first three months in Watamu. I designed a questionnaire and interview guide and chose three communities in which ASSETS has a presence to conduct the surveys. I then hired a field assistant/translator, a young woman named Mishi, who would go with me into the villages. The evaluation began in late June, a mere two weeks after I arrived in Kenya. The first two communities were rural and isolated, and Mishi and I were graciously given classrooms in primary schools in which to “camp” for 4-5 days at a time

while conducting interviews. During the days, we traveled to community members' homes on foot and engaged in hour-long discussions with them about their attitudes towards the forest and their experiences with integrated conservation and development projects such as ASSETS. We usually conducted 4-6 interviews per day, after which we would return to the primary school to cook dinner, review notes, and discuss plans for the next day. Mishi always cooked dinner for us over an open fire while I read over my notes by the light of a paraffin lamp (there was no electricity in the schools). Thus began a cycle of living in the communities during the week and returning to the A Rocha Center for the weekend to restock supplies and rest. Camping at the schools was also a great opportunity to connect with community members in a more informal way. During the evenings, we would often receive visitors—parents or teachers who happened to stop by on their way home for a chat or to ask about our work. This was a chance for me to improve my Swahili and build relationships, minimizing the community's perceptions of me as a strange, white foreigner.

When I was not living in the communities, I was an active part of life at A Rocha's busy Field Study Center. There were always tasks to be done, many unrelated to the evaluation I was conducting, though no less relevant. I assisted with ecological research and monitoring in and around the forest (including bird ringing, counting tern nests, and helping to implement an insect pitfall monitoring system). A Rocha also served as a guest house for conscientious tourists interested in learning more about conservation and sustainable development, so there were always hospitality tasks to be done. I spent a great deal of time interacting with guests at the Center—explaining to them the work of A Rocha, helping them to feel comfortable in Kenya, and even taking bookings and handling logistics of the guest house. A Rocha prides itself in community living, and all staff, volunteers, interns and guests would pitch in to clean and wash up after commonly shared meals. This created a family atmosphere in which work was shared and long-lasting cross cultural relationships were born and nourished.

My experience as an intern at A Rocha Kenya was rich and fulfilling in many ways. The evaluation component was successful; I interviewed 113 villagers (half ASSETS beneficiaries and half non-participants) as well as a handful of teachers, school administrators, conservation staff, and community leaders. I presented my findings to the A Rocha team prior to leaving in December, along with recommendations for improving ASSETS. I found that ASSETS was having a beneficial impact in the communities, and that nearly all the beneficiaries held extremely positive attitudes towards the forest and creek. ASSETS beneficiaries possessed a strong sense of ownership and protectiveness towards the forest which contrasted with non-participants' view of the forest as "owned by the government and of no use to the community." I also discovered the complexities inherent in peoples' attitudes towards nature and the many ways in which cultural histories, backgrounds, and stories shape peoples' attitudes and perceptions. Many interviewees who were not ASSETS beneficiaries also held positive attitudes towards the forest, but often had a hard time articulating why the forest was important to them. One of my most revealing findings was that, despite a lifetime of being denied access to forest resources and harsh treatment by forest authorities, the majority of people living adjacent to the forest saw it as important and worth protecting for inherent value—though they

could not always describe this inherent value in words. This contradicted my original hypothesis—that the majority of forest-adjacent dwellers would harbor resentment towards the forest which perpetuated and even seemed to mock their poverty with its abundance of “off-limits” resources.

I think that one of my greatest contributions to the community members living around Arabuko-Sokoke Forest was simply taking the time to sit with them and listen to their stories. Many of these people had never before had the chance to tell their story to an interested outsider. Through compiling my interview data and presenting A Rocha with a written report along with a 30-minute PowerPoint presentation, I was able to commemorate these stories in a way which will hopefully improve existing programs such as ASSETS and improve the lives of those living in poverty. Most conservation education programs in developing countries do not include a form of evaluation in their design, and it has been said that when evaluation does occur, it is usually conducted by external evaluators for the purpose of accountability, and results are rarely used to improve programs. Though I was, in perhaps a technical sense, an “external evaluator,” I was in truth a part of the A Rocha team and family and firmly invested in the success of their programs. I was convinced upon leaving that my results would be taken seriously by the program staff, and I left staff at A Rocha with copies of my questionnaires and interview guides so that further evaluations could take place in the future.

This internship opportunity provided me with an incredible opportunity to immerse myself in the culture, language, and issues facing the people of the Kenyan coast. From living closely with rural villagers to experiencing daily life at a busy non-profit, I was enriched and fulfilled in ways I can only begin to express. In the future, I can see myself either working for an NGO which deals with international conservation issues, or becoming a college professor and leading students on trips to Africa where they will be able to experience first-hand, like I have, the ways in which environmental degradation and poverty are closely intertwined. No matter which path I do take, I know that this internship has been pivotal in shaping me as a person and directing me into work for a more environmentally sustainable, socially-just future.