

SARAH TAYLOR reports on educational trips for scholars, which emphasise the importance of nature conservation

For seven Grade 10 students from Jan Jonker Afrikaner Secondary School in Windhoek, it was the experience of a lifetime – hiking over rugged terrain; carrying 20kg or more on their backs; discovering the wonders of creepy crawlies; and learning more about themselves.

The students were selected by their teachers to attend the fifth Edu-Ventures excursion in southern Namibia over two weeks in August and September 2004. Previous trips have taken students to the Brandberg, the Huns and Namus mountains, and the Kuiseb river in the Namib desert.

Edu-ventures is a project of the National Museum of Namibia, which was started last year by teacher Nicholas Krone and arachnologist Tharina Bird.

Edu-ventures introduces the importance of biodiversity to the youngsters, who also help collect specimens, mainly of invertebrates, such as spiders, scorpions and insects, for the museum collection.

"Many kids in Namibia have limited opportunities to get into nature," says Bird. "Through Edu-Ventures we try to give some of them this chance."

This year's trip included four-nights on the mountain Dikkewillem and a three-night stay on Kirchberg, both of which are close to Aus, on the edge of the Namib desert. The intrepid hikers had to carry their own water, clothes, food and collecting equipment for the trips. The excursion culminated with visits to the ghost town of Kolmanskop and Shark Island, off Lüderitz.

Says Bird, who is the museum's curator of *Arachnida* (spiders, ticks, mites etc) and *Myriapoda* (centipedes and millipedes): "I tell you, these kids surprised me! Miriam's rucksack weighed 20kg, almost half her weight! The trip had a powerful effect on them – they showed personal change, but



The tough team from Jan Jonker Afrikaner Secondary School. Photos: Nicholas Krone

also a change in attitudes. After the trip some of them have been so inspired that they are still bringing in to the museum uncommon specimens with good data which we don't normally get from the public! Kids that have taken part in Edu-Ventures also participate more in local and regional science fairs."

Bird says the youngsters learnt different collecting methods, and "we found a lot of very interesting things", which a specialist will identify once they have been incorporated into the museum collection.

Participant Monica Hengari (16) says: "It was very difficult, especially climbing up the mountains and carrying heavy packs. But if I had the chance to do it again I would! I learnt that if I want to achieve any goal in life, I have to work hard."

She says the most wonderful thing she saw were the wild horses of the Namib.

For Daniel Jason (16), getting to know his colleagues and learning how to pick up snakes and scorpions safely were highlights.

Fifteen-year-old Hilma Nuule aspires to be a doctor or a medical scientist one day.

"I learnt a lot of things on this trip," she says. "We should walk in a zig-zag up a mountain to prevent soil erosion. We mustn't

trample on plants because one day they might find that a plant which is now extinct was the cure for AIDS. So we must take care of nature. I am not scared of snakes or scorpions anymore. I held a snake for the first time – we were taught that they will only harm you if you hurt them.

"The trip was tough. It was the first time I have carried such a heavy load and climbed mountains. But I learnt that it's a challenge to challenge your soul and your spirit. If you believe you can do it, then you can!"

As with most of her peers, it was the first time that Miriam Hamunyela (14) had visited the south. "It was very nice – just looking at nature and seeing what has adapted to the desert. Before I went on this trip I used to litter. Now I know this is wrong and I will tell my friends this if I see them littering," she says, adding that she would encourage other kids to take part in Edu-Venture trips if they have the opportunity. "I respect nature now," she says. **BT**

• The trips have mainly been sponsored by the National Biodiversity Programme, the Rössing Foundation and the Swedish International Development Agency through the Namibia Nature Foundation.

