

Budding Biologists



The National Museum of Namibia has a wonderful new project called EduVentures, the brainchild of Tharina Bird, our own resident arachnologist (spider specialist) and Nicholas Krone then a teacher at Immanuel Shifidi Secondary School. To quote from their brochure, the programme is centred around two-week long exploratory and data-collecting trips to remote areas, during which groups of school children, accompanied by various experts and teachers, collect data, specimens and artefacts in the fields of biodiversity and archaeology. SPACE met with Tharina Bird and Samanta Mapfumo of EduVentures to find out more.

Established in 2003, EduVentures has completed eight expeditions. They have traversed over 10 000km by car and walked close to 400km. The children have visited the Brandberg, the Namus- / Huns Mountains, the Namib Desert and Kuiseb River, Dikkewillem and Kirchberg, the Chowagas Mountains, the Gaap River and Fish River Canyon and finally, the Baynes Mountains. These excursions are tough, to say the least. They are two weeks long, in the veld in difficult conditions and as Tharina and Samanta told me, there is a lot of walking involved! For the children though, it is a tremendous experience.

Not only are they educated about the all-important conservation of biodiversity as well as sustainable living and development, they learn many skills including leadership, self-reliance and social skills. Many of these children are from the previously-disadvantaged sector of our society and for many, as city dwellers, this is their first exposure to nature, wildlife and natural sciences. Many of them have never been outside the city limits and now, by means of this project, they have travelled to places all across Namibia.

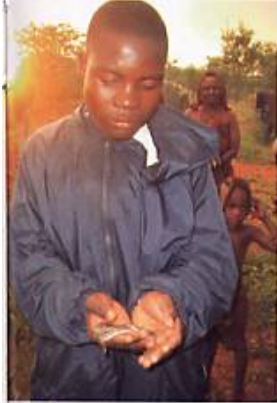
Not only have they seen so many different parts of Namibia, they have met up with different cultures and have been exposed to the country's biodiversity resources – from reptiles, to insects, to spiders, to plants and even archaeological artefacts.

And this, in our opinion, is the most important thing of all. If we are to protect this country's resources, we must start with environmental education and we must implement it while our children are still young.

The group targeted by EduVentures includes Grades 9 and 10 as these children are old enough to understand what they are doing and are at the point where career decisions have to be made. (They are also 'big' enough to carry their rucksacks which may weigh up to 25kg and walk for up to ten days to the various collecting sites!)

Besides all the benefits for the children, Namibia benefits as well. Data and specimen collection in the field permits natural science to take a photo, if you like, of a particular ecosystem at a particular time. When this 'photo' is compared to another - be it taken before or after - assessments can be made about environmental health and then management decisions can be made. Furthermore, the country benefits because its youth learns about sustainable development and they gain insight into our cultural heritage. In this way, the country gains increased interpersonal tolerance and understanding and best of all, skilled youth who are geared to enter into natural sciences.

And this takes us on to the next level of EduVentures. During February/March of this year, they launched their first Science EduVentures. With this project, their initiative is taken one step



further: participants do not merely collect data, but complete all the scientific tasks which are necessary to answer a particular question. For this project, 18 students were chosen to evaluate the environmental impact of mining uranium at Langer Heinrich. According to Tharina, the controversial nature of the project suits them extremely well since it allows the students to learn to approach these issues neutrally instead of being guided by emotions – a very important aspect of science.

They were accompanied by experts from both Unam as well as the Polytech. Collections did not only take place at Langer Heinrich but also at Blutkuppe, some distance away, to ascertain whether that ecosystem is similar to the one at the mine and thus, to be able to monitor changes in the mining area, if any.

A lab was set up at the museum in Windhoek for the students to evaluate their data. The lab is fully-equipped, from computers to textbooks, microscopes and internet access. The lab was made possible by generous donations from the German Embassy, Builder's Warehouse, Worx and the Desert Research Foundation of Namibia.

The students are also trained in presentation of results (which within itself is a very difficult task to accomplish) and future workshops are also in the pipeline for further training and guidance.

Both Tharina and Samanta have worked tirelessly to firstly, get EduVentures off the ground, but also to maintain the excursions and their broadening field of projects. They have made tremendous sacrifices in terms of finance and personal time – and now they are in need of funds. If there is any company out there that can assist with 4X4 vehicles for excursions, fuel, supplies – both for the scientific practice as well as for the children, this would be greatly appreciated. Teachers are also welcome to contact EduVentures if they are interested in these excursions. This really is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for young people and it will be a life-changing experience for them. "EduVentures is a truly Namibian programme, initiated in Namibia and designed for Namibia's future benefit."

EduVentures can be contacted at Tel. 061 – 276 829 or 276 809 or Fax: 061 – 228 636. You can email them at info@eduventures-africa.org or check out their website at www.eduventures-africa.org ■

