For most vet students, their early years of study involve lots of work on cats, dogs and farm animals. However, for a fortunate group of 4th and 5th year vet students at Murdoch, they have quite a different experience with wild animals on the ground in Africa!

Each year Dr Kristin Warren, from the Conservation Medicine Program at Murdoch, leads a group of veterinary students on a trip to South Africa. The annual South Africa trip aims to give students an immersion experience and an opportunity to explore issues related to conservation at the grassroots level. The experiences that the students have inspire them to continue to engage in local and global biodiversity conservation initiatives.

A central part of this year’s trip was a visit to Kruger National Park. Rhino poaching has been particularly serious in the Park, with approximately 150 rhinos lost to poaching in 2010. Dr Warren explained, “As I looked at the rhino horn shavings in my hand, I thought to myself that this was what the poaching was all about, rhino horn is the same as keratin, the same as chewing fingernails.”

Another memorable stop during the trip was to Nkomazi Game Reserve, which has been restored to a wildlife sanctuary allowing wild animals to roam freely. Dr Warren explains what the view was like from the helicopter during an excursion to relocate five pregnant giraffes. “I watched the ground capture crew looking like ants running and attempting to throw the ropes around the giraffes. They needed to stay clear of the giraffe’s legs which kick in all directions like rotor blades.”

At the Nkomazi Game Reserve they do not de-horn as they want rhinos to keep their horns for eco-tourism so an anti-poaching rhino squad located the rhinos each evening and stayed with them in game vehicles throughout the night watching over them. While on the reserve, the students were involved in trying to capture three rhinos that had wandered onto the other side of the river, which meant that the anti-poaching controls could not easily reach them to monitor them at night.

The group consisted of a female cow, its three month old calf and a four year old bull that stayed together. The bull had lost its mother to poachers two years ago and had been wandering around aimlessly when the female cow adopted it. While the mother and calf were successfully caught and moved to a safer area, the bull rhino had separated and could not be located. As it was getting late the helicopter had to leave, however just as the sun was setting, the bull was located, darted and reunited with the female and calf.

While on the trip, students participated in anaesthetising elephants, a lioness, rhinos, giraffes, sable and buffaloes. Final year student Aditi Sriram who participated in the trip said, “It was a trip of a lifetime and was absolutely overwhelming in the best of ways. An experience to remember was darting the giraffes at Nkomazi reserve - standing on the back of the ute watching the helicopter dart the giraffe, heart racing, waiting for the right moment to jump off the back and run across the bush to get to the giraffe in time. An exhilarating experience from start to finish. The opportunities we had on this trip are not easy to come by and a once in a lifetime experience. I loved every minute of it and I can confidently say I’ve caught the Africa bug.”
State-of-the-art surgery teaching facility

The new state-of-the-art surgery teaching facility at Murdoch University’s School of Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences opened in 2010 and replaces the original surgery teaching rooms built in 1976 when Murdoch was founded.

The $9 million facility features a large sterile surgery facility including closed circuit cameras to enable students to view live procedures. In addition, there is a surgical preparation area and facilities for surgeon preparation and animal anaesthesia, enhancing the education and training of veterinary students.

Professor David Hampson, Dean of the School of Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences, explained how the new facility meets the growing demands of teaching veterinary science.

“It means we can teach a larger number of students across different species in a positive teaching environment with adequate space and the latest equipment. This is important because over the years, enrolment of veterinary students has increased at Murdoch in order to meet the demand for qualified veterinarians.”

Since its opening, the building has been used extensively, including classes in small animal surgery and anaesthesia, medical examination and animal handling classes. The sterile surgery suite is also the location for the final year surgery classes that conduct sterilisation of dogs and cats for charitable rescue and shelter groups.

Veterinary care for remote communities

Each year, final year veterinary students travel into remote and indigenous communities in their winter break for a two week whirlwind of animal checks, vaccinations, wormings and sterilisations in isolated communities lacking veterinary equipment and expertise.

This year, nine students along with Professor Ian Robertson travelled 2,500km in eight days, treated 143 animals and performed 66 operations. They treated dogs, cats, horses, chickens and a rooster, while enjoying the out of the ordinary treatment accommodations of community halls, a prison and the RSL.

The nearest vets for these communities (Meekatharra, Wiluna, Cue and Sandstone) are up to 500km away and regular veterinary care is inaccessible. While this is an opportunity for students who will graduate this year to get practical clinical and hands on exposure to treating animals, they also learn about the issues in the isolated regions of Western Australia.

Final year student Sandy Smith shared her thoughts on the trip. “As we are so close to graduation, this was an awesome opportunity to hone our surgical and communication skills. We performed one to two surgeries each day, and by the second week with more experience, our confidence had grown and our skill level had improved dramatically.

At university our environment is of a high standard. Working in these remote environments also gave us experience in providing the best service without all the bells and whistles.”

This yearly program aims to aid in the population control of pets in these communities, share information on pet health and care and treat everyday problems in animals such as skin problems, parasite control and wound treatment.

Scholarships for student success

Murdoch University’s veterinary course is incredibly demanding, and the 4th year is regarded as one of the toughest of this challenging course. For students facing economic hardship, 4th year hits especially hard. The increase in time spent doing rigorous coursework means less time to work, while the costs of textbooks and study materials keep growing.

As a result of generous contributions from Murdoch veterinary graduates, the Veterinary Alumni Fund 4th Year Scholarship awards $1,000 to a deserving 4th year student.

The Vet Trust is extremely grateful for and welcomes gifts of any size to the Veterinary Alumni Fund to support scholarships and long-term projects that improve student education at the School of Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences.
Behind the scenes: pathology

The pathologists at Murdoch University Veterinary Hospital work away behind the scenes specialising in making diagnoses through the examination and analysis of tissue and fluid from biopsies, post-mortem examinations, needle-aspirates and other samples. While their work may not involve treating animals on a day to day basis, veterinary pathologists are involved in saving animals lives, working for animal welfare, wildlife disease investigations and contributing to human health and well-being in some very interesting ways.

Behind the scenes: pathology

Their diagnoses are the result of strict standards in training and expertise and require patience, diligence and professional application. Like other veterinary disciplines it requires 3-5 years before trainees are eligible to sit accrediting exams and gain professional post-graduate qualifications.

The veterinary pathologists at Murdoch have regularly served as specialist witnesses in RSPCA animal cruelty and negligence prosecution cases as well as criminal investigations. They have helped owners discover why their pets have lost their pet, have helped police identify mystery bones and determined why an animal’s death has occurred - to help the remaining animal population. Their role is also important in identifying the presence of diseases transmissible not only to other animals, but humans too.

Associate Professor Philip Nicholls says, “Our pathology team has contributed to a number of successful animal cruelty prosecutions this year, with fines of up to $20,000 being imposed. These cases are distressing to work on, but the convictions are an important result.” Some successful cases have even resulted in prohibition of animal ownership by the sentenced individual.

The pathologists at Murdoch University complete tests on an extensive variety of animals including a diverse range of pets, horses, farm animals, whales, seals, mice, birds, fish, dolphins and native mammals, to name just a few.

Recent research includes searching for a possible disease in dramatically falling woylie populations, working on the health of dolphins in the Swan River, investigating potential causes of mortality in humpback whales following an unprecedented increase in strandings, discovering an entirely new type of virus in endangered Western barred bandicoots, and even studying diseases of oysters. Some of our team also work with colleagues in human medicine, including studies of the allergic response in asthma, and the possibilities for using the lung as a route for vaccination.

Diseases diagnosed by vet pathologists have implications for single animals, populations of animals, in-contact humans and even whole species, impacting upon a range of areas from pets to wildlife and environmental conservation. As our vet pathologists work away behind the scenes, their efforts continue to have an important impact on our world.

Students on film at Vet School – coming to a TV near you!

All the drama and life-saving work of our staff and students has recently been captured on film in preparation for a TV documentary series. Murdoch’s veterinary science students in their final years have recently been the subject of the filming of an observational documentary series commissioned by the ABC and expected to screen in 2012. A Fremantle based production company, Prospero Productions, has been filming the highs and lows of students as they sit their exams, examine animals and perform surgery.

Dr Michael Laurence, Lecturer in Production Animal Health at the School of Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences, who has been liaising with the production company, said he hoped the documentary would show the sacrifices made by students to complete the course.

Michael explains, “Veterinary Science is one of the most difficult courses offered at universities because of the large amount of material the students have to learn. While it is incredibly challenging, this intensity means there is a tremendous sense of community among the students and they are very close-knit which I hope is something the documentary captures.”
New staff

**Veterinary Trust and Continuing Education Administrator**

Bree Johnston joined the Murdoch University Veterinary Trust and Continuing Education offices as Administration Assistant in July 2011.

Bree has previously worked in administration and scheduling roles in the Hospitality and the Building and Construction Industry.

Bree has an avid love of animals. She shares her home with husband Matt, and two very spoilt Burmese X cats, brothers Boof and Jett who are adopted from the Animal Protection Society.

She says, “I’m thrilled to be part of the Murdoch University Vet Trust and CE team. I adore animals and the work the Trust does is for such a good cause. I feel privileged to be able to contribute.”

**Veterinary Teaching Hospital Director**

Dr Mark Lawrie has been appointed Director of Murdoch University’s Veterinary Teaching Hospital.

Dr Lawrie was previously Chief Veterinarian with Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in New South Wales from 1993 to 2008 and was responsible for four veterinary hospitals. More recently Dr Lawrie was the president of the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) and has been a Board Member of AVA since 2006.

Dr Lawrie says, “I think that there are a number of exciting challenges for the veterinary industry here in Australia, in Asia and globally and I think that Murdoch is really well positioned to play a major role.”

**Academic Director Continuing Education**

Dr Kelly Hall has recently been appointed Academic Director of Continuing Education for the School of Veterinary and Biomedical Sciences.

Kelly has been working in the Veterinary industry for the past 11 years, starting her career in private practice whilst studying in 2000. She graduated from Murdoch as a Veterinarian in 2004 and then came back to Murdoch to complete an MBA in 2008.

Kelly says “I am very excited to be in this role and look forward to expanding our continuing education program for Veterinarians as well as developing a new program for Biomedical and Animal Scientists.”

Gifts to the Murdoch University Veterinary Trust will improve the health and welfare of animals, today and in the future...

Your donation can fund the next research breakthrough, prepare new veterinarians to deliver world-class care and provide equipment and expertise for the most difficult veterinary cases.

100% of every dollar given goes to key priorities in the School and you can earmark your donation for a project that is important to you.

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