

Networking in Africa

A report of the August Study Trip to Kenya & Tanzania

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In August this year I sat face to face with a lion. Only two metres of dry scrubland and the protective shell of my Land Rover separated us. He sat in the midday sun, exhausted and seemingly oblivious to me, as he was too preoccupied digesting the fruits of his labour - a buffalo whose remains were scattered in front of him.

I can easily relate to his situation. My whirlwind tour of Kenya and Tanzania has produced a mass of photos and documents now scattered before me. I am back at home in Staffordshire, exhausted and relaxing at the tail end of a record breaking hot summer, busy digesting all of this information.

Introductions

The purpose of my visit was to introduce the newly formed Africa Network Scout Fellowship to Africa Region Office, and the respective national Associations of both Kenya and Tanzania. I was very fortunate to be joined on the trip by David Bull (The UK's International Commissioner) and two other colleagues from the Africa Network Scout Fellowship, Stephen Clark (ACC International for Greater London South West) and Doug Corbin (DC in Cleveland). Collectively, all of our agendas would strengthen the already good Scouting relations that the UK has established in Africa.

Our most important meeting took place on the third day of our twelve day visit. We met with the Africa Regional Office team, based at the Rowallan Campsite on the outskirts of Nairobi. The Regional Director Kinuthia Ng'Ang'A Murugu welcomed us.

The Africa Network

During the meeting, I explained that the Africa Network Scout Fellowship (known as the 'Africa Network') was formed in March 2003. It is a forum where Members of The Scout Association with a specific interest in Africa can share their knowledge, ideas and experiences. It promotes the expansion of international Scouting, with a particular focus on building friendships in Africa.

One of the issues we discussed was the participation of UK Scouts in activities across Africa. It was suggested that a more co-ordinated approach would benefit all Scout Associations concerned. Such co-ordination would provide greater personal and financial security for UK Scouts and also ensure that whatever projects we undertake and support are actually beneficial to the recipients.

The meeting, which lasted about three hours, was extremely fruitful. We all then enjoyed a splendid spread of traditional Kenyan cuisine. The full minutes of this meeting and all other meetings we attended on the trip can be found on the Africa Network website.

Encouraging expeditions

As is common with many new things, the Africa Network is sometimes misunderstood. It was important that during all of our discussions we made it clear that we had not been formed to create a new layer of rules. On the contrary, the ethos of the Network is to encourage UK Scouts to use procedures already in place and to highlight the benefits that can be obtained by doing this.

We do not organise expeditions or events, but instead enable and assist others to do so by a process of co-ordinating and facilitation. For example, during our trip to Arusha in Tanzania we had a very enjoyable meeting with three officials from the Tanzanian Scout Association. They have kindly offered a reduction (of up to 60%) in the fees for climbing Kilimanjaro, and free entrance to all Tanzanian Game reserves to UK Scouts through the Africa Network. Similar reductions are currently being investigated in other areas of Africa.

These savings will assist in reducing the overall cost of any future expeditions, offering more financially viable opportunities for more Scouts to visit Africa. We will not organise any expeditions, but we will advise anyone doing so how to achieve these cost savings.

Africa for everyone

Another common misunderstanding is that we only work in conjunction with the Scout Network. Those we met were very pleased to hear that we are actually available to assist all Sections of the UK Scout Association. At one end of the spectrum there are currently Beavers and Cubs actively raising funds to assist Scouts in Africa. At the other, retired Scouts have been involving in working on projects in Africa. Scouting in Africa can and should be for all.

Opportunities in Kenya

The day before this meeting, we visited the Rowallan Campsite for a brief meeting with representatives of the Kenyan Scout Association. The structure of the meeting was similar to that held with the Africa Regional Office but with a specific focus on Kenya.

When this finished, we toured the Rowallan Campsite. It is an excellent place to stay for those who are just visiting Nairobi, or for those who may be embarking on a more challenging project like the one we visited at Kawangware.

The Youth Education Support (YES) Trust is located on the edge of this large 'slum' suburb of Nairobi. It is an orphanage and day care centre promoting Scouting for children in exceptionally difficult circumstances. The AIDS pandemic has orphaned many of the children. Some are soon to be orphans, their parents having contracted the disease. For these children, YES provides a 'hand over' procedure, finding members of their extended families who may be willing to care for them when their parents can no longer do so.

As with many projects in Africa, YES is in need of help. Anyone wishing to take up this project could not live on site, therefore Rowallan Campsite would provide an ideal alternative. In my opinion the YES Trust in Kawangware would suit UK Scouts who have already experienced the contrasts that Africa provides. It is a very challenging project, but one that would no doubt be extremely rewarding.

The children we met were so happy to be Scouts, and what little uniform they had they took great care of and wore with pride. Most of their uniforms had originated from the UK. It was interesting and very pleasing to see badges from Groups in Wrexham and Solihull.

At school in Tanzania

As a Network, we also aim to encourage those who have never visited Africa to take the plunge. While in Tanzania we discovered potential avenues at the other end of the spectrum for those who would like a 'soft landing' in Africa. We have found a boarding school that provides full board accommodation in dormitories during the school's vacation. It is able to provide a full package for those who prefer a few more creature comforts but must still operate on a tight budget.

The school offers a similar standard of facilities to that found in a UK school. It occupies a beautiful site in the foothills of Kilimanjaro and is within easy travelling distance of many game reserves, including the famous Ngorogoro Crater which is overflowing with wildlife.

The school has excellent and well-established links with the local community and can locate suitable projects tailored to a groups' budget. It can also provide a financial holding centre to ensure that there is no misappropriation of funds.

Fundraising support

Unfortunately, the financing of a trip to Africa is usually the biggest obstacle preventing UK Scouts from travelling there. As a Network we do not have the ability to provide funds. However, we aim to provide avenues to enable Scouts in all financial circumstances to achieve their goal of visiting Africa. We encourage Scouts to find sponsors and find alternative methods of raising funds to support their expeditions.

During our travels we were lucky enough to have a surprise visit from Santa Claus! We took a few pictures of this rare moment, which will be made into Africa Network Christmas cards. These cards will be sold to Africa Network members for around the cost price. They in turn will be able to sell them on at a premium to family and friends, with the profit generated assisting their expedition funds. Please visit the Africa Network website for details on purchasing these cards.

Nyeri and 2007

Towards the end of our trip we made the two-hour drive north from Nairobi to Nyeri, the last resting place of Lord Baden-Powell and his wife Olave. It is also the location of his last home, 'Paxtu', situated in the Outspan Hotel grounds. The Kenya Scout Association is quite rightly very proud that the final resting place of our Founder can be found in their country.

Over recent years, they have commenced refurbishment works on his grave and the surrounding area. The work they have done is commendable. They are currently formulating a programme of events for 2007, which will involve Scouts from all over the world visiting Nyeri to embark on community projects and expeditions, such as climbing Mount Kenya. The culmination of the programme will be a large ceremony in August 2007. It is highly likely that the Africa Network will have members present on what will be a very special day.

Take up the challenge!

There is no doubt that this summer's study trip has been a success, and is a major step forward for the Network. We have achieved many things, but like the lion I saw, we cannot sit still contemplating our success. Once he had digested the fruits of his labour, he doubtless moved on in pursuit of his next challenge. We in the Africa Network will do the same, for Africa is a vast continent with a wealth of opportunities and challenges. It is my hope is that many more of our Cubs will grow into lions and travel through the vast expanses of Africa in the future.

Further information

Please view the accompanying pictures, a copy of our complete schedule, and the minutes from the meetings we had with the World Bureau / Kenyan Scout Association / Tanzanian Scout Association. A complete listing of the people that we met during our travels, with contact information, is available upon request.