

## CU Voices

### Thirteen days in the bush: CU study abroad experience like no other

September 11, 2012 by [Christine Sounart](#) | [CU Voices archive](#)

By Abigail Faires

As of this very moment, my computer has crashed. My car needs more than \$500 worth of labor put into it. I just put my dad on a plane back to Florida. My brother and sister-in-law are living on my couch. I haven't spoken to my roommate in days, and in one week, I'm supposed to board a plane to go study abroad in England for three months. The only coherent thought I'm able to form is that I wish I was back in the bush, back in Tanzania.

It's hard to believe that only three months ago I was living in Tanzania, camping in the bush with 12 other CU students. We were living in a place where family and friends took precedence over money and work, where cars and paved roads were virtually nonexistent and computers were nowhere to be found. Aided by an inspirational professor, one of only three female safari guides in the country and her brother, we formed the core of CU's first ever global seminar in Tanzania: "Conservation and Indigenous Peoples in Tanzania."

The term "indigenous" often refers to people or things that are native to a place and have originated there. In Tanzania we not only were studying these indigenous people, we were living with them. Far removed from any cities or modernized society, these people aren't easily accessible. So once our trucks left the bustling city of Arusha and made the half-day trek out into the Simanjiro Plains, we were there to stay. Well, for 13 days anyway.



We weren't there just to study these people, however. We were there to better understand the damage that westernization, and more specifically, western models of land conservation are having on the locals' livelihoods. Nearly one-third of Tanzania's land has been devoted to the national park model of conservation. Based on the American national park model, Tanzanian conservation consists of designating certain areas land that humans are no longer able to live on or cultivate.



One of the Tanzanian government's biggest arguments for land conservation is to preserve the beautiful and rare wildlife that is native to the country – Cape buffalos, black rhinos, African elephants, lions and leopards, not to mention magnificent birds, wildebeests, zebras and more. While forcing indigenous people out of conservation areas, the government has increasingly invited safari tour groups into the protected areas.

In so doing, the government has reaped exponential benefits from wealthy foreigners in search of the perfect African vacation. Staying in grand lodges that have all the comforts of home, including breakfast buffets and hot showers, tourists ride on safari trucks to take game drives out into the rough and tumble bush of conservation areas. As they lay down to sleep at night, wrapped in the safety of their lodges' crisp, white linens, these tourists rest assured that they are experiencing the real Tanzania. These thoughts, however, could not be farther from the truth.

What they don't see are indigenous communities, forced off of their land and struggling to survive. They fail to see Maasai herders, Iraqw farmers and Hadzabe hunter-gatherers who no longer have land for their cattle to graze on, for their crops to grow on or to forage on.

These were the people who we were studying and with whom we were living. Moreover, these were the people who welcomed us onto their land and into their homes, despite the color of our skin and the implementation of misguided western ideas.

A Maasai man by the name of Olaseki spent three days with us, and let me tell you, three days in the bush felt like an eternity for me. Because he was with us, Olaseki was able to enter into conservation areas and national parks that he otherwise could not afford. The sad irony is that this land was once a part of his backyard. In fact he knew the land like it was the back of his hand.

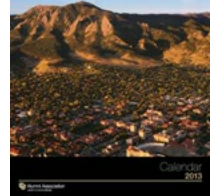


We took a short hike up a mountain in the midst of the Simanjiro Plains. It was one of the toughest hikes I've ever been on in my life, and that includes the 14,000-foot mountain I've summited in Colorado. The sun was high.

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There was no trail. We had only Olaseki and his large wooden staff guiding the way. It felt like we were hiking straight up but getting nowhere. It was as though we were on some sort of massive hamster wheel, spinning and spinning and spinning.

Then nearly an hour later the summit reared its head. We had made it to the top. We left our fate in the wise hands of Olaseki, a man with whom we needed two translators to communicate. Yet, he never let us down.

We had five minutes of silence at the top of that mountain. Five minutes to sit and just be. I spent the great majority of that five minutes watching Olaseki. He had borrowed the Nikon binoculars of Douglas, one of our guides. He spent the entire five minutes surveying the land. He was surveying his backyard, the backyard from which he was now forbidden to enter – the backyard that had been stolen from him.

The following day, we paid the \$30 per person fee that it cost to enter Tarangire National Park, plus an additional \$35 per person to camp each night for two nights. Each of the 12 students paid \$125, putting \$1,500 straight into the pocket of the Tanzanian government. Olaseki and his community, whose land we were paying to stay on, would see none of that money. Tomorrow, Olaseki's cattle would get a little bit skinner, his children a little bit hungrier.

Despite all that was being taken from them and how unbelievably hard their way of life seemed to us, these people were some of the happiest, kindest people I have ever known. For no matter how little land, money or material possessions they have, their bonds to each other and to their culture will not be severed.



Take the Hadzabe people, for example. They inhabit a small area called the Yaeda Valley, located in the middle of the Great Rift Valley. Each year, this area of land is encroached on by impeding communities, including Maasai and Iraqw people who are being pushed off of their own land and into the valley. Each year, Hadzabe populations are diminishing.

To add to the stress on this community, the Tanzanian government has begun sending soldiers out into the Yaeda Valley to round up as many Hadzabe children as possible to ship off to boarding school. The hope is

that these children will become more westernized and will want to either leave their families behind or encourage them to modernize, to settle, to become farmers and to pay taxes.

But the question that keeps biting the Tanzanian government right in the face is: who is to say that leaving for westernized life is any better than a Hadzabe life? I can say that I have lived 22 solid years in America, and my way of life is in no way superior to that of a Hadzabe.

Tomas was a Hadzabe boy who we had the pleasure of living with for three days. He was probably somewhere between 10 and 12 years old. I am confident in the fact that he was one of the happiest children I will ever know.

He woke us with the sunrise every morning. Sprinting up the giant rock formations that surrounded our campsite, he would click and sing songs in praise of Hadzabe people. Although we could not understand every word, his pride and his happiness were unmistakable.



Tomas had dodged the government soldiers this year; he had escaped boarding school. To imagine this child sitting behind a desk, away from his family and forced to be silent, well, I can imagine nothing sadder in the world.



Looking back on that trip to Tanzania, I can safely say that it was one of the most physically exhausting and hardest things I have ever done in my life, but it was also one of the best experiences I have ever had. Fighting dehydration, vigorous hikes, lack of showering and sleeping without a bed, I found myself missing home often. But now that I'm here, fully immersed in my western life of modernization and convenience, I find myself missing the bush more and more every day.

While our global seminar was CU's first in Tanzania, I hope it was not the last. The sense of closeness and togetherness of our group extended beyond us and was fully reciprocated with each group of indigenous people that we encountered. It's almost an indescribable phenomenon that I will never forget. In fact, it's something that I think of every day. It's something

that I'm not sure I will ever find again, but I could not be more grateful for it.

Abigail Faires is a “super senior” majoring in journalism, on the news-editorial track. She is pursuing a minor in technology, arts and media (TAM) and a certificate in international media. Her trip to Tanzania was her first time leaving the country, and now she is spending this semester as an exchange student in Brighton, England. When in Boulder, she works as a barista at Alfalfa’s Market. Her ultimate goal is to travel and write.

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## 6 Responses to *Thirteen days in the bush: CU study abroad experience like no other*



**Katherine Klein** says:

September 12, 2012 at 8:32 pm

I would absolutely love to know more about this program. I am a CU journalism alum ('10) and I am currently in law school studying the Tanzanian court system. Our class may make a proposal to the Tanzanian courts for some reform of their legal system. I was just thinking to myself the other day that I needed to learn more about Tanzanian culture to take a comprehensive approach to this project. Could I possibly get in touch with students who went on this trip last year, or the professor(s) in charge of it? Thank you!

[Reply](#)



**Nonie Lam** says:

September 12, 2012 at 9:52 pm

When I was partway through this beautiful and emotional description of an extraordinary experience, I began to feel that the young woman must have perfected some of her writing skills at our great CU school of journalism (regardless of what it is now called). Reading Abigail’s credits at the end, I was delighted to see that she is indeed a journalism major. I graduated from CU with a BA (I know—it’s now a BS) degree in journalism so long ago that Abigail’s grandparents probably weren’t born yet; but I’m still an active alum and proud to see that we are still attracting and nourishing the talent and enthusiasm of young writers like Abigail. I hope you can continue to travel, Abigail, and keep writing about your experiences—and I would like an autographed copy of your first book.....

[Reply](#)



**Cloud** says:

September 13, 2012 at 11:34 am

Thanks Abby for writing this great article about our Global Seminar: Conservation & Indigenous Peoples in Tanzania led by Dr Laura Deluca of Anthropology. Interested students can learn more here: <http://studyabroad.colorado.edu/?go=TanzaniaGS>

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**Verle Hansen** says:

September 18, 2012 at 5:48 pm

Having lived in Tanzania for nearly a year on two occasions while I designed hospitals to serve many of those people in



remote villages, I very much enjoyed reading how much Abigail appreciated and valued other ways of life. Nevertheless, the issues that brought about government policies toward indigenous peoples is not balanced in this article. Nomadic indigenous people occupied the Serengeti for about 200 years and seem to have a right to occupy the land. A nomadic lifestyle works as long as a clan can settle in an area, use its resources, and move to another place as resources are exhausted so as to allow the land to recover. When the human population rises to the extent that there is no recovered places to move to or those places are already occupied, the nomadic lifestyle fails everyone. If the nomadic lifestyle is to persist for some, the number of total people in that lifestyle must be limited. There is no choice for most people to change to an agrarian way of life even without government intervention. The responsible way to live on this planet is to do so within the capacity of ecosystems to sustain human life. If that includes wildlife, the needs of wildlife also must be considered so that ecosystems remain intact and functioning. Because land use in whatever form will take something incrementally and cumulatively from natural systems, it is essential that our human impacts on natural systems be systematically counteracted so that systems still function. Also, it is true that the government obtains a lot of money from tourists. Much of that goes to buy petroleum which must all be imported and paid for with foreign currency. Some of the money goes for many other programs including to support schools and to train people in ways to live in the area outside of a nomadic life so that some can still live within it.

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