

My heart thumped fast and irregularly as if my body was as unaccustomed to the experience as my mind was. My breath reversed, shoving itself back into the depths of my chest. My stomach churned. Simultaneously, I felt my entire body jump, moving itself from one edge of my seat to the opposing edge, as if trying to run from the scene. It was all happening to me, but it happened so quickly and with such great intensity that I could not perceive the movements as they truly were; my own. All I could perceive was what my body did for me when the male lion lunged toward me.

It was the late afternoon of an early June day. I sat in a jeep with one of my instructors, three fellow students and a native Maasai man. We were driving along the rough dirt roads, periodically holding on for dear life and utter enjoyment as our driver gunned the jeep through patches of thick mud that had been left behind by the previous day's downpour. Suddenly, the car's radio crackled and intertwined in the static fuzz I heard, "Simba." I turned my head, making eye contact with my friend in the adjacent seat. We shared smiles.

Our car rumbled down the road with increased speed, splashing globs of mud behind it and fishtailing over that mud's slick source. In the distance I could see the procession of tourist vehicles parading toward our destination. A bitter-sweet sensation flushed through me as I was concurrently reminded of the financial benefits of tourism and of the way in which that tourism engulfs the freedom that is wilderness's most precious possession.

We pulled up next to a van with safari-gear wearing tourists. Their heads were popping out of the van's open top and their hands held high tech cameras. I was briefly distracted by my envy for their photography equipment, but when our jeep inched past their van and I saw the

object of their camera snaps, my attention was redirected to one of the most amazing sights I had ever seen.

Sprawled out on the grass was a pride of lions, known as “Simbas” in Swahili. Several females were lying down, their bodies draped over the savannah’s short grass. One slept belly-up, her back legs stretched out and her front paws bent at the wrists in a delicate way. Her awkwardly large, round stomach extended up into the air. She wasn’t pregnant. She was well fed.

The rest of the pride was still munching on a large, already mostly eaten Topi carcass. Two young lions snacked freely, shaking pieces of meat from the kill and playfully chewing the bones. One had the comical mohawk that is characteristic of a young male. An adult male, the only adult male and pride leader, ate on the opposite side of the carcass, enthusiastically shaking meat off of the body as the young lions had, only with a noticeable prowess and a lack of clumsiness. At the far end of the carcass at one of the legs an adult lioness also ate. She did not show the ease that the other diners did however. Her eyes were not on the carcass, but were instead wandering around, scanning between the adult male and the other adult lions resting in the grass nearby. She was reserved and nervous, and every one of her movements seemed overly calculated.

The lioness continued to chew on the leg for a tense several minutes. Then she made her move. She reached her neck out slowly and cautiously, and pulled her body in to follow. She opened her large mouth, exposing her impressive teeth and clenched down on what was left of the stomach of the carcass. She seemed to gain some comfort with the ease with which she had advanced on the carcass, but that comfort had come too soon. In an instant the male lion sensed her disobedience and lunged. His body pounced forward, illustrating the immensely powerful

muscles that create that body's form. His mouth gaped open until the skin surrounding it looked like it could stretch no further, exposing a set of canine teeth that put the lioness's to shame. He tilted his head back slightly, making his fangs even more visible and impressive, and a deafening roar that rumbled as though it originated from a tremendous earthquake projected from his mouth and across the savannah. Complete silence followed. Every head, human and simba, was staring toward the male. Mine was staring directly *at* him.

The male had been oriented on the carcass in such a way that his head was directly facing mine. I had been watching him eat, marveling at his size, his strength, and his appearance of nobility. When he lunged at the lioness, he lunged directly towards me. When he lunged at the lioness, it was as if he was lunging *for* me.

Months later I sit on my couch, typing this essay by letting my fingers instinctively follow the flowing thoughts of my mind as I reminisce about my most unusual encounter. When I had decided that I would go on the study abroad program, Behavioral Ecology of African Mammals, as a freshman at MSU, I never expected that I would feel the rush that is created by the threatening lunge of one of nature's most powerful kings.

That moment in Kenya's Maasai Mara exemplified why I chose to participate in a study abroad; because there is no better way to experience true nature, true science, true life, than to completely immerse yourself in it. When I saw the description of "BEAM" in the study abroad catalog, I immediately knew that participating in the program would allow me to do just that.

Three years later, as a junior, I was faced with one of the hardest decisions in my life. I had applied for BEAM. I had been accepted. I also had no idea how I was going to afford my participation. As an out-of-state student I was faced with elevated tuition fees. As a dependant on

my father's salary, I was denied need-based financial aid. As a student with grades less than exceptional, I did not receive any scholarships.

I almost did not go to Kenya because for a moment I thought that I could not afford the financial costs. Then I remembered the slogan for MSU's study abroad program, "You can't afford not to go."

Suddenly it made sense. I had been so consumed by the stresses of the financial situation that I had overlooked the true meaning of that slogan. It is not about money. It is about experience. It is about unmatched experiences that can only be found when one immerses themselves in the areas of their intellectual desires. The areas of my intellectual desire are animals, science, and nature. I knew that MSU was right; I couldn't afford not to go.

Participating in a study abroad will forever live in my mind as one of the most outstanding opportunities I have had as a student at Michigan State University. I will forget about the finances. I will never forget about the sensation I felt when I stared at the fangs of a roaring wild African lion.