

Where we belong

by Bill Kenney, High School science teacher

Early April found me sitting alone on a mountaintop in the Drakensberg Mountains. It was late afternoon; the sun's light was turning a golden hue. Below me, on a plateau above the Pholela River valley, a group of eland grazed while a troop of baboons, looking for a bivouac, skirted the edge of the herd. As the sun lowered towards the escarpment, I gazed across at Pinnacle Rock. In the distance, I could see eSiphongweni, where we had camped two nights earlier.

Large galleries of rock paintings depicting the life and history of Bushmen are found at both these places. The Bushmen, humanity's oldest living representatives, lived here for thousands of years. Here was game, which must have been even more plentiful and varied just 100 – not to mention 2,000 – years ago. The water that dripped from cliff faces and ran into the streams and rivers was clear, cold and sweet.

That morning, we had found a juvenile Black Eagle feather just as the student trailists left base camp to begin a 24-hour fast in a cave somewhere along the cliff face. An adolescent eagle molting as it assumed its adult plumage – it seemed a fitting symbol of the process our trailists were embarking upon. This was truly a powerful, magical place. It is no wonder humans have chosen to live here for thousands of years.

My summer reading after this year's trail included David Orr's *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to the Post Modern World*. In making his case for our society's desperate need to educate our citizens to be



"eco-literate," Mr. Orr draws a distinction between residents and inhabitants. He defines a resident as "a temporary occupant, putting down few roots and investing little, knowing little, and perhaps caring little for the immediate locale beyond its ability to gratify. As both a cause and effect of displacement, the resident lives in an indoor world of office building, shopping mall, automobile, apartment, and suburban house."

An inhabitant, he writes, is one who lives "in an

intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing relationship with a place." He sees "inhabiting" a place, as opposed to merely "residing" in it, as an important element of being eco-literate. Thus, if we are to educate toward eco-literacy, we must teach how to inhabit a place. And direct experiences of nature are an essential component of this education.

The ASL spring 2004 South Africa trip, associated with the High School courses Ecology: Environmental Policy Studies and Ecology Expeditions, provided just such an experience of nature. This, the eighth annual trip, included 14 Grade 12 students enrolled in the Ecology Expeditions course, High School social studies teacher Judy Kisor and Grade 4 teacher Elaine Robertson. Each of the three areas we visited evoked a wide range of emotions and reactions among the trailists.

Our first night in South Africa, we slept on a beach overlooking the Indian Ocean at Twin Streams Nature Reserve, north of Durban. This area, where the native coastal dune ecosystem has been restored, served as a way station between our full-on urban lives and our species' native home, the wilderness, giving us a chance to slow down the pace of our lives. It was here that we began the process of dropping the multiple masks that constitute our London personae, rather like a snake sheds its skin.

We then traveled to the Umfolozi Game Reserve, an environment that initially feels intense, harsh and dangerous. The Big Five (lion, leopard, rhino, elephant and buffalo) all live there. The thorny trees and shrubs that tear at your clothing and conceal animals, the sounds of predators hunting at night, all contributed to a sense of unease, of danger. We mounted a night watch: For an hour at a time, one individual had responsibility for the entire group's safety, tending the fire and keeping a lookout.

Our last stop was in the Drakensberg Mountains, where the students were given more responsibility for taking care of themselves. Here, this year, we introduced a 24-hour fast to culminate the journey, an opportunity for these seniors to reflect on what they had experienced and learned, to reflect on the future, and simply to be alone. By now, the students had learned how to take care of themselves in this wilderness. Moreover, they felt at ease and at home outdoors.

I would even posit that, by the time we reached the mountains, the primitive part of their psyches had stirred, remembering and recognizing the wilderness as home. Maybe this was triggered by our being surrounded by and interacting with animals alongside whom we have evolved, or maybe by living in a way somewhat similar to that of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Or maybe their ease in the wilderness came from having wrestled successfully with the challenges posed by the



From left: Diana Lazareva, Jaclyn Hummel, Ariel VandeVoorde, Katie Jenkins and Julianna Frick, all Class of '04. Jaclyn's photos, which accompany this article, illustrate the profound effect she felt from this spring's Ecology trip; on page 17, read what valedictorian Katie learned from it.