

Sopa Oleng KENYA

Collaborative Experiential
Learning in Maasailand



Prescott
College

Dopoi Center
For Research and Education

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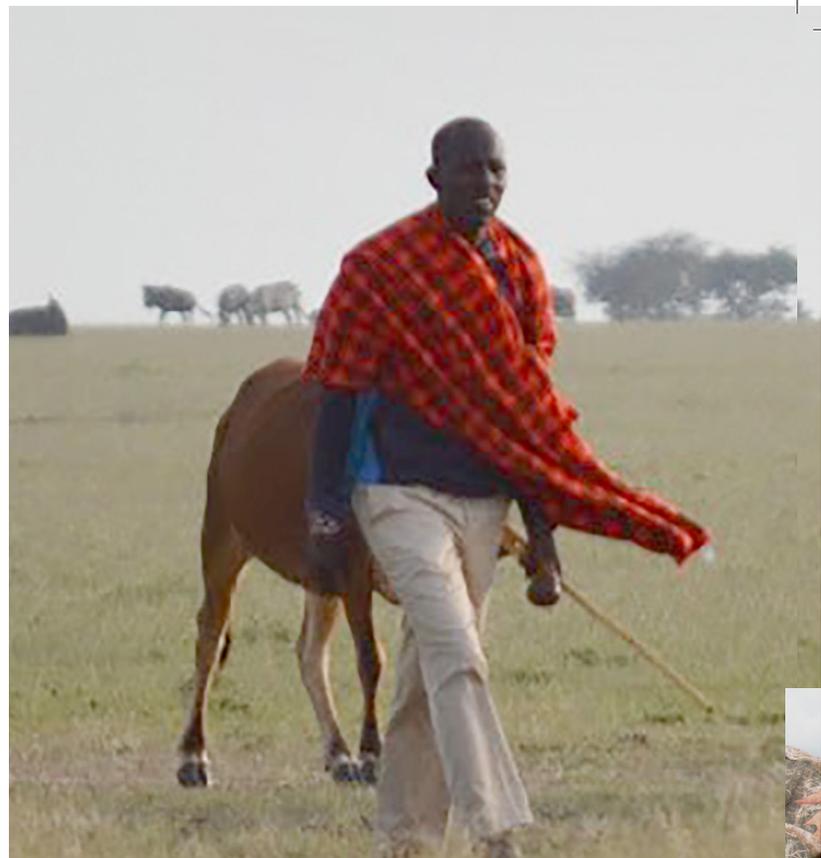
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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

In June 2017 Prescott College (PC) students traveled to Kenya for a 13th summer semester at the Dopoi Center in rural Maasailand. But this year was different. PC students were joined by engineering students from Arizona State University (ASU). Each group came to the program with radically different approaches, not only in how they solve problems, but how they define what problems need to be solved. And they had different ideas of what constitutes sustainable solutions. The one thing they had in common was a commitment to experiential learning.

The Maasai People

Maasai have lived on the border of Kenya and Tanzania for a thousand years. A semi-nomadic pastoral people, they graze sheep, goats and cattle on East Africa's open grasslands. Maasai may travel many miles to find grass and water for their herds and flocks, their meanderings driven by the weather and the seasons. They live companionably, although not always without conflict, with lions, elephants, buffaloes and other wildlife. Like many indigenous communities around the world they are under pressure from the economic and political forces of globalization. The Maasai recognize the threats to their way of life and are fiercely determined to survive the twenty-first century with as much of their livestock-based economy and tribal culture as possible. The Maasai lack many basic freedoms and rights; they are on the lower rungs of the economic and social ladder. The Kenyan government wants to assimilate them into a homogeneous nation that primarily benefits an economic elite. The Maasai have learned to seize any opportunity to protect their sovereignty. Collaboration with outsiders is one of those opportunities



The Partnership

Prescott College (PC) partnered with the Maasai people in 2004 when Meitamei Olol Dapash, a community activist and founder of the Maasai Education, Research and Conservation (MERC) Institute asked his old friend and PC faculty member Dr. Mary Poole to help him create a new kind of field study and to help build a new relationship between his people and the West.

“I had grown up in Maasailand seeing students from Europe and North America traveling through our land. Were they getting educated or just going on safari? What I saw was that both the students and the community were shortchanged. They did not learn from each other. They would just come and take pictures and leave. I wanted to create a different kind of field study. We knew that we would locate the program in the community, not at the lodges in the parks. The students would be treated as serious people, not children, and their work would matter.” – Meitamei





Prescott College students support Maasai community priorities. Under the tutelage of the Maasai, they study indigenous peoples' approach to wildlife conservation, help create programs for better hygiene and medical care in the community and design culturally supportive educational programs for Maasai youth. They also research indigenous peoples' land rights issues. Prescott students investigated the history of the 30,000 Acre Mau Narok section of Maasailand that had been appropriated during the Colonial era. They found evidence to support a lawsuit for the recovery of the land for the Maasai. The students have also established a training program for Maasai who work in tourism and conservation. Prior to the establishment of the Mara Guides Association, an outgrowth of the training program, Maasai were shut out of the tourism industry even on their own tribal lands. Poaching by outsiders was rampant.

As Steven Ole XX says: *"The poaching has really gone down. We (Maasai game rangers and guides) are now the eyes of this reserve."* All of the student work has a direct impact on the present and future of Maasai people and all of their work is done in collaboration with community.

The Maasai Way

Using Meitamei's vision for a new kind of collaborative learning opportunity, Prescott College and MERC slowly built the Dopoi Center facility on the edge of the Mara Game Reserve and adjacent to Maasai villages. But the Dopoi Center was not designed to bring a Western model of development to Maasailand or to pamper tourists; the Center embraces and compliments the Maasai way of life.



The Maasai enjoy a lack of structure foreign to Europeans. Maasai simply allow what is meant to happen unfold in due course. For newly arrived students from the West normal daily habits become challenging tasks; things taken for granted become rare. Water is precious, carried from a nearby river and boiled; no more daily baths and washing clothes after a single use. Wildlife roams just outside the thorn fence that surrounds the Center so going for a morning run is impossible. The Center is spartan: there is a building that serves as a classroom and gathering place, a modest kitchen and a few living quarters.



Most of the students live in tents for the duration of the program. Life on the edge of the Mara game preserve changes the students' perspective about their place in the world. Nature and an unfamiliar culture are blended together all around them. PC student Sage Chase-Demsey says, *"Other students said 'you're gonna unlearn a lot, it's like a really intense program' and I was like 'sure, whatever' and I didn't really get it..."* Miles Maeby from ASU said, *"We got a tour of the camp we realized that we're going to be here for a month, we're going to be camping for a month. There's the shower, there's the toilet, oh boy. This is going to be a camping experience unlike anything we've ever had."* **Gage from PC said,** *"You're just in this little space, with these Maasai friends, with cattle roaming around you and elephants roaming around you and giraffes, and zebras and hyenas. And it's a mind trip, it's like really unlike anything you'll ever experience in your life."*

Collaborative Learning

Meitamei and Professor Poole believed that collaboration between students with very different academic orientations could accelerate the learning experience for everyone and magnify the value of the Dopoi Center to the Maasai community. So in the summer of 2017 the Center hosted groups from both Prescott College and the Arizona State University (ASU) School of Engineering. Prescott students come with backgrounds in experiential education, environmental studies, social justice and community development; the ASU students brought their knowledge of science, engineering and mechanics. As their relationship with their hosts deepened, everyone became eager to serve the interests of the Maasai. "PC has mainly focused on court cases and research so it was really amazing to collaborate with people that had an entirely different skill set... And to be working with engineers that have the skills to build things but want to do it in a way that incorporates what the community really needs, that just completely changed the way that we showed up for the Maasai people." Sage said. "I think we ended up discovering that it was a complimentary difference." James Larson from ASU said, "The program taught us to work together and use our different backgrounds, expertise, and skills to develop community initiatives that we probably would have overlooked before."

"I thought, 'how long would I even last out here without Maasai people?' It was very humbling..."

- Prof. Brad Rogers (ASU)



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"This is going to be a camping experience unlike we've ever had...It's definitely not necessarily for everyone, because it can be quite intense at times...but the rewards you get out of it are amazing. You get to meet real people, you get to interact with them, and really make an impact on their lives and make friends. To see a project that you're working on get implemented, to see the gratitude, to see the real impact, not grades, and not just the feedback you get from a professor."

– Miles Maeby





Life Changing Projects

One of the first projects for the ASU team was to design and build smokeless stoves at the Dopoi Center. A group of Maasai women gathered to help. The project brought all the students, faculty, and locals together to learn from each other. More collaboration followed. Miles Maeby tells one story: *“There is a water tank up on the hill, and they had a 25 foot tall really rickety ladder that went up to the top of it, and they would climb up carrying two buckets, which was nerve wracking every time they did it. So we wanted to help fix that.”* The engineering students got together and started brainstorming. One student was an automotive engineer. He realized he could apply his knowledge of pistons to a water pump design. One of the Maasai staff was a civil engineer by training. He assisted them with some of the design but, more importantly, he was also able to help them communicate with the welder and other shop keepers in the village and help them to buy or manufacture parts. These students learned very quickly they would have to be resourceful; the usual tools and materials readily available in the West were hard to come by. James Larson spotted a gem: “I paid 3000 shillings (\$30 USD) for the rustiest, most decrepit looking bike you’ve ever seen and I’m pretty sure a lot of the camp staff thought I was actually insane for paying that much for a bike like that. But what we needed



was just the pedals and gears. People began to get excited about our project because something they viewed as junk was useful.” After collecting all the materials and honing the design, the students faced the real test—would it work? After many prototypes and multiple attempts they finally created a working system: strenuous pedaling on the decrepit bike slowly pumped water up to the tower. No more rickety ladders! Meitamei reports that the simple and ingenious design is being replicated all over Maasailand. As the ASU engineering students worked on the infrastructure needs, the Prescott students were digging into archival research, sifting through historical documents left over from the immediate post-colonial era. Gabe said, “We were looking at the role the Maasai community had in the various independence movements. The Kenyan establishment contends the Maasai people were collaborators with the British. But we found that’s not true, that Maasai were part of many different resistance movements.

We were asking why and how their true role has been obscured in the historical record.” Prescott student Zoe Caras continues, “Because if you look at Maasai history, a lot of it has been produced by a handful of Europeans writing 50 years ago and it was very racially biased. So we were trying to correct the historical record and avoid falling into the same kind of colonialist mindset.” Again and again collaboration accelerated learning. James said, “And so, for instance, with that water pump project, it was like, “well, we want to build a water pump, but we don’t have any materials that we would normally use. We would often ask the Prescott College students how should we approach this or that with some of the locals, and sort of having them help us get conversations started.” As he observed the all the activity around him, Meitamei reflected: “We have been able to transcend professional borders because we understand that whatever you are professionally, you are first a human being. We have learned the human spirit is no different whatever your training. A student of social justice might be fighting for human rights, while the engineering student can invent a machine that pumps water from the ground and delivers it to the people. What else is water if not a human rights issue? An engineer, an activist, they all know that we need clean water.”

The Takeaway

Sage said, “I didn’t realize how much of the work would be inner work. I kept coming up against myself in a way I never had before. And I was surprised when I got back to the States how different I was. I was literally a different person. It felt like I had jumped five years in age, but that I had also become younger too, more open, more aware, more, well...Maasai. They begin by telling you how many elephants they saw that day, or just how the Mara River was rising and falling and how that affected the zebras and where they crossed, and the wildebeest migration and how those two were integrated together and it just like day-to-day conversation because they are part of the land and the animals. There’s no division. So just understanding their social structure altered how I see the world. They extend their definition of community beyond the way we do. They just have less of a consumptive culture.” Gage talked about his experience: “I think the biggest culture clash was with myself, rather than the external environment ...mostly trying not to interject my way of being and my interpretation of

reality onto Maasai culture. Which I think was the premise of the whole program, the subtle curriculum outside of the research and the reading. It was really hard to overcome designating what things were ‘right or wrong’, or ‘normal’ and ‘not normal.’” Another student said, “I didn’t quite appreciate how deep my own western biases were in me, and how hard it is to put those aside. And to be there long enough to spend casual time, informal time with the Maasai, talking with them and just building a relationship ...the beauty of sitting up at the fire at night, and talking and getting an appreciation of how they look at the world. That is beyond anything I could imagine.” Zoe Caras said: “So there’s always some people from our culture who’re like ‘alright, let’s go on a walk, let’s go find lions.’ And our Maasai friends will say, ‘you’re crazy, that’s absolutely ridiculous, you don’t want to do that!’ And so part of my experience of traveling between cultures is really trusting people. And learning to see so many layers of reality there. And the more time you invest, the more those layers get revealed to you.”

The Future

Prescott College was founded in 1966 to infuse higher education with student-directed, experiential learning within an interdisciplinary curriculum. The Prescott/ASU collaboration in the summer of 2017 proves conclusively the power and the value of the Prescott experiment. The Dopei Center has come a long way since 2004. In the early years, everyone lived in tents, without electricity, running water or flush toilets. Everyone ate simple meals of cabbage, beans, and *ugali* cooked over camp stoves or open fires. Dr. Mary Poole says “*We’re building out a five year plan right now so our Center will become a hub of activity for the Maasai community and for students and faculty from Prescott College and other institutions that share our vision. We are very excited about the future and it’s already underway.*” When there are no student programs in residence the Mara Guides Association intends to use the Center as a way station for wildlife tourists. Any fees earned will subsidize the educational and community development programs. Meitamei believes the Center can be self-supporting in five years or less.



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