From the University of Northern Iowa campus to the University of Minnesota to African savannas, UNI Alumna, Sarah Huebner is living her life to the fullest. “I wanted to feel like I was making a difference in the world. I wanted a job that made me excited to get out of bed and go to work every day, and being an ecologist, I definitely feel that,” she says.

Sarah was an 2016 Ecology and Evolution graduate of UNI’s Biology Department. She worked as a lab assistant for Dr. Jim Demastes and Dr. Theresa Spradling in the Biology department while at UNI. Her longstanding affinity for animals, experience at the Research Institute of the University of Kansas Medical Center, and her time at UNI led her to the realization that she wanted to conduct her own research.

Sarah’s primary interest is studying trophic cascades initiated by predators. This is the study of what happens to the plants and animals in an area due to the removal or reintroduction of the top carnivores of the region. Using historic records, camera traps, and satellite images, she is looking at woody vegetation changes that have occurred over the past 30 years in relation to lion density.

Preliminary results indicate that predators, such as lions, play an integral role in maintaining a balance between plants and other animals in a particular area. About her work Sarah says, “I get to work with talented people throughout North America and Africa to protect and conserve some of the most charismatic species on the planet: lions, elephants, rhinos, leopards, etc. Our work directly impacts the well-being of wildlife in protected areas in eastern and southern Africa.”

Sarah is also the Research Manager for Snapshot Safari, a camera trapping network in seven African countries. Snapshot Safari cameras are placed in national parks and reserves in a five square kilometer grid pattern. The cameras run continuously,
capturing the movements and behavior of wildlife in remote areas and providing valuable data for ecologists and reserve managers.

The cameras are calibrated as they are set in the field. A photo is taken with the camera name, date and time in case something happens to the camera’s clock before the team checks it again. This sometimes happens when an elephant or a hyena tries to destroy the camera. Elephants have been known to remove the cameras to either play with or destroy them. Hyenas determine if the camera is something tasty to eat.

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Once the images have been collected, they are uploaded onto the citizen science website Zooniverse.org. Volunteers help researchers by classifying the photos. The website provides guidance on identifying animals, so anyone can learn to do it and help researchers like Sarah. For more information on this program, visit www.snapshotsgiraffe.org.

While at UNI, Sarah went on a field trip to the University of Minnesota where she was not only impressed with the mammal collection, but also the facilities, and resources. She applied to be a graduate student with Dr. Craig Packer, Director of the University of Minnesota Lion Center and long-time Director of the Serengeti Lion Project in Tanzania. She was accepted and is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Minnesota in Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior.

As a graduate student she teaches and mentors undergraduates, plans her own experiments, reads literature, conducts data analysis, and writes research articles for publications. Sarah says, “One of my favorite things as a scientist is mentoring others and watching them start along their own paths to discovery.”

Sarah wants to help drive change on the global scale. Humans have had negative influences on the environment, yet they are a part of it. Whether it is driving to work or having a picnic in the park, humans are constantly connecting with and experiencing nature. This is necessary for life. “I know we can do a better job of taking care of nature. It’s imperative—not just for the wildlife I study, but also for the humans who rely on the same plant life for sustenance,” Sarah said. Her education at UNI and UMN have inspired her. Everyday she is excited to work, study, and make a difference in the world.