

Bill: My name is Bill Heinrich and welcome to the Hubcast. The Hubcast is co-sponsored by MSU's Hub for Innovation and Learning and Technology and MSU IT Services.

Today we're here to talk about the Snares to Wares Initiative and course. One of the greatest threats to the survival of large mammals in East Africa national parks is wire snaring. Wire snares harvested from the innards of disused vehicle tires are used to capture bush meat. The intended targets are medium-sized mammals such as cob, hartebeest and bushbucks. However, these rudimentary traps are indiscriminate and just as capable of catching a species such as elephants, giraffes and lions.

While this may appear to be a wildlife conservation problem, the quest for the root of wire snaring reveals that this is actually a human livelihood issue. The Snares to Wares Initiative seeks to address the wellbeing of human communities bordering national parks in East Africa so that via human livelihood improvement we can simultaneously benefit wildlife conservation.

That information came straight from the website from Snares to Wares and you can read more about that at recaplaboratory.com. The Snares to Wares co-founders Bob Montgomery, whose a faculty member at Michigan State and Tutilo Mudumba, whose a doctoral candidate in the lab, co-founded this project in order to obviously benefit human livelihood and wildlife communities. When they brought the idea to the Hub for a course, the course idea was a really interesting opportunity for the Hub to contribute a little bit, but really Bob wanted to engage undergraduates in a meaningful project that could allow them to apply skills and talents and their abilities to this exact conservation and livelihood issue.

From some initial conversations and then growing those conversations, the idea of doing high impact experiential learning course emerged and the Hub was uniquely suited to have spent some time and energy supporting that idea and helping it get off the ground. And so, today we have our guests who I'll ask to introduce themselves now.

Shelby: My name is Shelby Robinson. I'm a senior in the School of Packaging.

Waldemar: My name is Waldemar Ortiz and I am senior in Fisheries and Wildlife.

Ben: And I'm Ben Lauren, an assistant professor in writing rhetoric in American cultures.

Bill: Thanks everybody for joining. I'm going to ask you about this big event. The Snares course had a big event last week. It was at the art museum. There were hundreds of people. There was music. There was drama. Tell me about why this event was so powerful for you as members of the course.

Waldemar: For me, the biggest thing was this was definitely the capstone to our whole semester. It's the culmination of what we've been working for throughout the semester and it really came out to be very emotional and very emblematic of what we were trying to achieve throughout the whole semester, especially when we wanted to impact other

people's lives and let everybody know the types of impacts that Snares to Wares can have on local communities such as Pakwach, Uganda.

Bill: What was the event?

Shelby: Yeah. So, the soiree event was an event that we had been given at the very beginning of the course. We're like we really want you guys to have this big event at the end of your semester. This is such a non-traditional classroom that there wasn't a final exam. This soiree event was our final exam and we were supposed to share our stories of what the Snares to Wares course had done. We had brought over a musician from Uganda to play. He had never been outside of Pakwach. We were unveiling a 15-foot giraffe sculpture that two Ugandan artisans had spent a whole semester creating here. They actually used 40 boxes of snare wire to create this giraffe. And it was an opportunity for us to share our student voice with people who not only have supported us along the way, but also people we hope will support us in the future.

Bill: The snare wire. Waldo, can you tell me a little more about why the snare wire is central to this project?

Waldemar: In our study area, which is Murchison Falls National Park in Uganda, one of the biggest issues in wildlife conservation there is the use of snare wire to poach wildlife. In these communities this activity is very much to feed families. It's not out of ivory trade. It's not one of those situations where the circumstances are very much different. In this case, families are trying to feed themselves and they use this tool to be able to gather bush meat. The problem with this is that the snares don't necessarily discriminate. They do get non-target animals such as lions, elephants, giraffes. And as many of you know, these species are endangered.

So, this becomes a very troublesome issue when it comes to their conservation. And the reality is that we are trying to take this snare wire out of these parks and try to repurpose them for something better. And we're just trying to do that in a way that is sustainable that it can work once we are complete with the project. It can remain in the community and be able to sustain these communities so they don't have to resort back to poaching.

Bill: Powerful story coming from Eastern Africa and from Uganda, in particular. And it comes to MSU and it shows up in this idea for a course. Ben, you've taught and designed a few courses in your career. Why is this one different?

Ben: This one is different for a few reasons. I would say the first reason it's different is the interdisciplinary collaboration, not just of the faculty but of the students. Typically, in experiential learning courses, we aren't affording the possibility of having students from ... I believe it's somewhere between five and seven different majors represented across campus. And so, getting those students together in the same room to learn from each other and to teach us as faculties as we're also working and teaching and learning alongside of them is something that's pretty unique to Snares, I would say.

The second reason is that the students really got to see the results of their work in the world and I think that's soiree event is sort of symbolic of that. One of the things that struck me about the event while I was there was what it must have felt like to be a student in the class to see this is all the work that I've done this semester coming together in one specific moment, right? And it was a beautiful moment. And it was a moment that I think everybody will remember. It's something I will certainly remember. I can't recall another educational classroom experience that had culminated in something that large or symbolically important, I would say.

Another way that Snares is a little different from other courses, and I was just speaking with another one of the instructors in the class center, Logan, about this, is that the students learned on their own how to collaborate with each other across their teams throughout the semester. From an organizational studies perspective, we often will see teams become siloed, right? They kind of stick to their team and they don't really go off and work with other teams. In particular class, we saw that that was very much different. The students almost networked with each other from the very beginning and the teams were their home, but they didn't stay at their home base the entire time. I think that was partially because of the Hub environment, honestly, that it allowed them and afforded them the possibility of going to network with these other teams and collaborate with them.

Bill: So, one of the ingredients is a triangle-shaped classroom with no walls.

Ben: Yeah. Easily.

Bill: Well, that's helpful feedback as we're thinking about more big ideas like this.

As we think about the course ... So, how many students, how many faculty were participating? And how did you know to work in teams as students?

Waldemar: There was a total of 19 students and four faculty member with an assistant instructor, which was Clara Leopard. The way we found out how to work in teams really was one of those things, what Dr. Robert Montgomery would call a collision space environment, where we kind of just bumped into each other a lot and then we just kind of clicked, really. We were given a goal and then we were given four broad categories of the work we could do to be able to contribute to that goal. We would then choose which one of those categories were more in tune with our own personal skill sets or our own interests.

And once we were divided by those categories that we really chose ourselves we then began learning each other's way of working and that was within the team. And just like Ben mentioned, after we established that home base and we knew the dynamic within our teams we then branched out and we began to realize that our work was not independent from other teams; we were working all towards the same goal. So, we kind of started depending not only on our teams but on anybody else's teams, really. And we began working towards this one common goal altogether.

Bill: Could it have happened where you followed the faculty with whom you were more familiar? So, some folks from writing have worked with Ben before and Waldo, I know you worked with Bob before. I mean, what would have happened if you had followed your one faculty along the way and didn't work across those lines?

Shelby: I think what was really important is the foundation that the faculty set up for us. The first weeks were not just a background about the project, but we also spent a lot of time talking about who we are and taking personality tests and learning our strengths and weaknesses. And they really put that as a core of the course so that we would know that solely and individually we can't do this and so we're going to break you into teams that put those strengths and weaknesses with people who have different strengths and weaknesses and splitting us up.

I'm a packaging major, but I was not put on the value chain team. And that was done very strategically because you don't want four packaging majors on a value chain team because if you have four packaging majors on a value chain team you will be siloed into your field and there will be no challenges of the ways of thinking. Everybody will have a very standard voice. I think the coaches did a phenomenal job breaking that up in the very beginning so that we knew that we could reach out to any of the four coaches, any of the 19 students and be successful that way.

Bill: This idea of silos comes up a couple of times in this conversation. Waldo, Shelby, tell me about your experience with your majors and do you feel them as silos? Are you stuck, I guess, is the question I'm asking?

Waldemar: Yes and no. Yes, because we all have the same perspectives on a conflict or an issue. We all got taught by the same body of faculty and we do have a lot of experiences altogether within the department. But no, because it does encompass such a broad topic, so fisheries and wildlife can include ... There's seven concentrations here within MSU, so you can pick your niche and within those niches there's such a spectrum of opinions and backgrounds that play an influence in this.

But when it comes to the bigger context, and this was kind of characteristic of my relationship with Shelby throughout the semester, is that even though I was within that spectrum of fisheries and wildlife, when it came to interacting with other majors and other perspectives then that very much played a significant role in how different opinions and different work styles very much shaped how we would pursue this class and pursue that goal.

Shelby: I think for me it's a little bit different. I didn't realize what a silo I was in until I was in this course. My specialty is medical packaging and I've had two medical packaging internships. And both places I thought I was challenged. I was working with different teams, I was working with different professionals who either had a packaging major or did not and we would work towards solutions together. But we still all had the same technical backgrounds and ways of going about solving problems.

And it wasn't until I sat down with a group that included writing majors, experience architecture majors, and fisheries and wildlife with my packaging that I began to see, okay, not only do we not approach this problem the same way, we don't even have the same definition of the problem. And so I think that that's a really important piece and as I move into my future, the fact that now I can see that people may not even see the problem the same way that I do; that's a huge silo. And that's something that if we can break down those walls, we can be much more successful.

Bill: Ben, what has this course experience taught you about being an instructor?

Ben: That's a really good question. I would say that one of the things it taught me about being an instructor, particularly in this environment, is that a lot of the old ways that I've been trained to do stuff don't necessarily always work, right? I was taught backwards design approaches. When we came into this classroom I was interested in developing a model that was more agile, both in it's application of what agile approaches to development actually are but also agile as in flexible and responsive to the environment; to the initiative.

We knew that agile had been successful in helping cross-functional teams in other workplace environments so we thought well, maybe that will work here. But it happened in ways that we probably wouldn't have expected, right? A lot of the approaches that we might take to assessment didn't necessarily function in the exact same ways that we would have imagined in this class, right?

Shelby: Not at all.

Ben: Or the ways that we might have experienced them in other classes. Or the ways that we thought about teams and teaming and getting people to go and interact and talk with each other. Every great plan we had we also had to learn to abandon it when it wasn't working any longer and to come up with something new. And so in that way, we were always responding to each other and paying attention. In some ways, you had to pay far closer attention to what was happening in this class than, say, in other kinds of experiences where there was a schedule that you knew what was going to be happening week 14 during week two. This class was much harder to predict in that way but more rich as a result of it.

Bill: As we come toward the end of our time together, tell me about something that really surprised you. And then where do you think something like Snares can go in the future? The Snares itself or the idea of teaching in this way.

Ben: Something that surprised me. How quickly the students understood what we were going for and how quickly they took over.

Waldemar: That was great.

Ben: In such productive ways. It's a delight to come to class and to see them taking the lead in the ways that they have. The promise of this in the future is I think that this sort of

model ... As with anything, it needs tweaks; it needs work. But I think it could be transformational for learning experiences on campus. I think it's not just transformational for students but I think it's transformational for faculty as well, right? I really do believe that there's a lot of promise to this sort of model and this sort of interdisciplinarity.

Waldemar: I think the biggest thing that surprised me was I've never been outside of a lecture-based paradigm and it surprised me how much more I learned outside of that environment than within it just because I was able to experience different things and learn about myself while learning how to work with others in a very dynamic environment. And I think that it's been on of those classes where I can say that it has shaped me to be a better professional just because it's incorporated so many realistic views and perspectives about a certain topic.

In terms of initiatives like this, I believe it can be not copy/pasted but adapted to other environments. Right now, one of the biggest problems in conservation is the fact that a lot of initiatives are not sustainable. They very much last two or three years and then they move onto another project. And Snares to Wares have that framework where they want the community to be able to sustain this throughout how long they want to, really. And I think it's not much about the animal. Conservation has shifted from being about the animal to the communities that reside with them. And I think that's where Snares to Wares is a very powerful initiative to be the foundation for other ones.

Shelby: For me, I think what surprised me the most is that as a senior about to graduate in May I find myself with a reason that I want to stay. And I want to stay connected and I want to stay and I want to value what has been had and my impact I view has changed. I was so focused on the medical packaging path and I see my impact much broader now. I didn't think that I could be involved with a wildlife conservation initiative, but I can see those connections to be made now and I see those because I have been able to interact with my peers who are pursuing different careers.

I think it has truly changed my leadership style as well because ... I spoke about this in class the other day, but as a student who has always pushed myself towards high academic goals students can follow just to get a good grade. And we weren't striving for grades here; we were striving for impact. And instead of people following me, people were pushing me. And that's a completely different style of leadership that I value so much from this course and that's what I'm going to take with me.

As far as this course being implemented in other areas, in my opinion the possibilities are endless. It doesn't have to be an international thing. You could have one of these around the Flint water crisis, for example. And I don't think it has to be limited to the five or seven majors that we have in this space. I think you can involve poly sci, you can involve engineering, you can involve ... Any major on this campus can get involved with this and I think the more perspectives you bring, the more faculty you bring, and the broader the project scope is the bigger impact that we're not only going to have as students and faculty, but the bigger impact that Michigan State is going to have as a university. And you're going to leave ... I'm going to leave when I graduate and I'm going to carry this with me and it will have an impact on the rest of my life.

Bill: Wow.

Ben: Yeah.

Bill: This is grounding and groundbreaking and I'm grateful to have been part of this as a close observer and support. But thanks for your time today. This was a really nice conversation to end the semester with and I'm really excited to share this experience with you. Thanks.

Ben: Thank you.

Shelby: Thank you.

Waldemar: Thank you.