

Northwest Namibia – Field Report

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WOW, what an adventure! A large group of people from all over the world got to team up with GCF's Dr. Julian and Steph Fennessy (and their adorable kids Luca & Molly) to help gain much needed information on the giraffe population of northwest Namibia. We were joined by renowned wildlife vet Dr. Pete Morkel and vet assistant Chéri Morkel, as well as GCF researchers Emma Hart and Andri Marais. Along with myself, other conservation supporters included Patrick Nepp (Blank Park Zoo), Lachlan McFeeters (Taronga Western Plains Zoo), Emily Grotz (Dartmouth College), Simon Retief (Bushwhackers), Tony, Maggie and Rachel Edmunds (PointBreak Weath Management), and Anna Lena Burger (Goethe University Frankfurt). Also joining us on this journey was Ivan Carter (host of the TV series *Carter's W.A.R.*) and his four-man film crew (Rayno Egner, Quinton Meyer, Johan Vermaak and Sean Viljoen). With such a large group and wealth of experience, it really was a collaborative effort to get the job done in a timely and safe manner.

When most people think of giraffe, they picture the very touristy image of them eating from many lush Acacia trees spread across green plains filled with other wildlife and of course hosting the obligatory oxpecker. Many of us had either worked with giraffe in a zoo setting or been studying them at University, but nothing can prepare you for that unforgettable moment when you see them in such a harsh and desolate climate as northwest Namibia. Why are they even here? You can drive for hours and see nothing but sand, dust, rocks and more dust. This is why studying these giraffe is so important and gaining a better understanding of what they eat, how far they travel in search for food and how their social dynamics may change throughout the year, and compared to other populations.



Our journey started by making the 12-hour drive from Windhoek to the Purros Conservancy. Our plan here was to collar three female giraffe with GPS satellite units. With a very mixed bag of field experience between us, Pete and Julian put the team through multiple capture scenarios before any real attempt on a giraffe was made. These scenarios consisted of multiple runners riding in the back of a truck/ute/bakkie (take your pick!) while far ahead of us our darted practice giraffe (played brilliantly by Simon) was running around for us to try and safely rope down. The lead runner would ideally get in front of the giraffe and pass a rope back to another person, and once stretched out and held high, the rope would pull across the giraffe's chest. Three to four other runners would then be on each side to help slow the giraffe down. Once slowed, the rope was

crossed over behind the giraffe to basically trip the giraffe. After it fell down, we jumped on the neck and body to stop the giraffe from getting back up. All of this sounds pretty straight forward in theory, but trying to run full speed in sand, around bushes and over rocks is not that easy! Ropes were dropped on purpose to test our skills, the practice giraffe would get away and we'd have to run back to the truck and do it all over again and again and again. We were all pretty tired after all of this so the decision was made to only collar the next morning and we spent the afternoon surveying giraffe in the Hoarusib River area – and picking some preferred candidates for the next day.



Our second day started full of anticipation as our involvement in such a once-in-a-lifetime event was just moments away. After just a short drive, Julian picked out a female giraffe for Pete to dart and everyone huddled in the back of the truck with arms and legs hooked together to prepare for the very fast and bumpy ride to get to the giraffe as soon as possible. As soon as you hear the sound of the dart being fired your heart starts racing as you realise you are about to jump out and run towards a wild giraffe! It only took a few minutes but the giraffe ended up going down on

her own accord not far from where she was darted so the rope was left in the truck as we all ran towards her to keep her on the ground, while Pete swiftly administered the antidote. Sitting on the neck of a giraffe that is fully awake and sometimes kicking to the side with only human weight to keep it down is an awesome and unsettling feeling at the same time! While the collar was properly sized for a good fit under the jaw and on top of the head, a DNA sample was taken from the ear and a number of measurements were collected including the ossicones, hooves, neck and legs. The whole process from firing the dart to the giraffe being released and walking away took less than 30 minutes, but time seemed to pass much faster than that. We all were super excited and relieved that everything went so smoothly, but there was little time to relax as we had planned to collar a second giraffe during the cool morning hours.

The second female gave us a very exhilarating chase after being darted! Trying to keep your eyes on the giraffe and also dodging branches coming at your head is not easy, so having some extra eyes was a benefit. Even though a giraffe is a very large animal, they can hide amongst the trees and bushes extremely well and losing sight of the giraffe was extremely risky as Pete had to give the antidote as soon as possible. Every minute counted for the wellbeing of the giraffe. Again, the giraffe went down on her own just like the first one and once again we did not have to try and rope her down – we suspect that Pete upped the drugs just a little to make sure no roping was needed! All of the same measurements were taken while the collar was fitted. However, this giraffe landed straight on the dart, so retrieving it was extremely difficult. Pete had to dig under the giraffe's belly to reach the dart – not a safe place to be with long legs kicking. Being the expert he is, Pete improvised and managed to tie a thin to the dart, which he attached to a bigger rope to get enough force to pull the dart free! Once released, the female who had our truck going all different directions just calmly walked away, stopping just a short distance from our group and standing perfectly still for all of us to soak up the moment. The camera crew had deployed a video drone high in the sky just before the



release, so they got some awesome footage of a newly collared giraffe and the GCF crew observing a job well done.

That night we all sat around the campfire under the gorgeous stars of the Namibian sky and discussed how awesome the day had been. We all knew that we would be taking part in an incredible experience and had tried to picture it before, but even the most glamorous of thoughts could not do the real thing any justice. We tucked into our tents and tried to rest up for our third collaring in the morning.

The third female that we darted went down rather quickly in a similar fashion to the other two. Again, no ropes were needed for this capture. While some of us were a little disappointed that we did not get to use the ropes as it would have been a huge adrenaline rush to help bring down a giraffe, we all agreed that the outcome was most important. Nonetheless, the training had been important to be prepared had the situation called for it. All went smoothly with this female as well and we got to watch her walk away across some stunning hilly terrain as our group exchanged high fives, hugs and handshakes knowing that all three collars were successfully fitted without any damage to giraffe or person!

While tracking of giraffe a very useful tool in giraffe conservation, so is trying to individually identify each giraffe in the population. So after our collaring was complete Emma guided the team over the next few days splitting up into multiple vehicles and searching for giraffe throughout the Purros area. Each giraffe has its own unique pattern, similar to the human finger print. GCF is meticulously taking photos of both the left and right sides of each giraffe they encounter to help monitor them. This sounds easy, but more often than not the giraffe will walk towards a tree or bush and hide half of its pattern or walk away from you in a perfect angle showing only its backside! Then as you drive around to get a different camera shot, they turn and show you the same side you have already recorded. And try capturing both sides of each giraffe in a herd of 17! GPS coordinates for all giraffe are recorded and compiled in a data base, so the GCF team can figure out the story of each individual giraffe over time. Identifying giraffe by their pattern allows GCF to gain an understanding of how long giraffe are living, how and where they move, their social structure and behaviour of individuals over time. We also observed two different pairs of male giraffe fighting (necking). I had seen footage of this on YouTube and Discovery Channel, but to hear the sound of them hitting each other with such force from only a short distance away was really awesome. What you also do not see on such clips is that once they settled their differences, they both stood side by side eating from the same tree immediately afterwards. It was like watching the end of a boxing match, where two guys had just been trying to knock the other out, suddenly meet in the middle of the ring and then hug it out and congratulate each other on a good fight!



The next part of our trip took us south to the Hoanib River and into the Skeleton Coast National Park to track two female giraffe who had been fitted with collars a month before. Even though GCF can track their movements online, and overlay these on satellite images on Google Earth, it is still very important to check on them in the field to make sure the collars are fitting well and that the giraffe are in good body condition. If for some reason the placement of the collar had moved or the giraffe lost condition, then the plan would be to remove the collar immediately. Thankfully both of the females were doing well and in good condition, and the placement of the collars were not causing them any discomfort.

This part of our trip brought us to an area that was covered by thousands of weird looking circles on the



ground, some rather big, that were spread across the plains. Mostly grasses or small plants lined the perimeter of each circle with nothing but sand in the centre. The circles supposedly stay the same year round even after rainfall when the plains are otherwise covered with grass. Locals believe that these 'Fairy Circles' are caused by the fiery breath of a dragon! Scientists from all over the world have studied this strange phenomenon for years and come up with different theories, but so far no definite explanation has been found. Maybe some mysteries should just remain unsolved!

While looking for the two collared giraffe in the Hoanib River, a local safari guide pointed us towards a lioness that was feeding on a giraffe carcass only a couple of hundred metres away. When we got there, the lioness was nowhere to be seen, so we were all eager to see what was left of the giraffe and try to identify her. When Anna Lena opened her door, I saw a quick movement in the bushes only a few feet away. I quickly grabbed her by her pants and pulled her back into the vehicle and Steph yelled to the others to get back into their vehicles. The lioness had found shelter right next to our vehicle! Thankfully, disturbed by the vehicles she ran away and after our heartbeats returned to almost normal, we managed to identify the dead giraffe by the remaining bits of her pattern. Interestingly, it was one that Julian had first photographed in the early 2000s. What a great example of all of us to see why photo IDs were indeed useful and important. The next day, the lioness was back near the carcass and lucky for us she was joined by a large male lion. So... we all asked ourselves uneasily "where was he hiding when we were out checking the carcass yesterday?" While we all love giraffe, we understand how the circle of life works and it was pretty impressive to see the aftermath of a successful lion hunt. Taking down an adult giraffe is no easy task. Many lions have been hurt or even killed by just one well-placed kick from a giraffe, but the reward of having enough food for over a week was well worth the risk for this pair.

One of the most thoughtful and generous parts of our trip was organised by Patrick Nepp from Blank Park Zoo. Before traveling all the way from Iowa in the USA, Patrick contacted his zoo's board members, volunteers and staff and set up a school supply drive to help gather much needed items that could be handed out to local schools in Namibia. Patrick and the folks at Blank Park Zoo stepped up in a huge way as Patrick brought over 100 pounds of donated school supplies including markers, crayons, pens, paper,



scissors and folders. There were so many supplies that we decided to split them between three local schools in northwest Namibia. The looks on the teachers' and children's faces when they saw what Patrick had brought were just priceless as they literally smiled from ear to ear and were so thankful for what they had received.



I should point out that we did not only see giraffe during our trip, but lots of other cool animals including elephant, baboon, honey badger, oryx, ostrich, springbok, mountain zebra, jackal and the tracks of a cheetah and hyena who came through our camp at night! Overall we ended up camping out for more than a week and were able to successfully ID a total of 102 giraffe and add 19 new ones to our database! It truly was a once in a lifetime trip for all of us and we will cherish these memories forever. A HUGE thanks to everyone at GCF for making this trip possible. If anyone who reads this ever has a chance to sit down and talk about giraffe with Julian or Steph, their passion and dedication for the job they do will truly inspire you to try and do more in your own lives to make a difference in the world of conservation!

Stay tuned for the next update and please contact GCF for more information: info@giraffeconservation.org

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