Northwest Namibia – Field Report

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Day 1: After an early start we headed north towards the research site. It was a long trip, but we broke the journey by overnighting at Palmwag, a beautiful campsite nestled amongst the spectacular metamorphic geology of the Etendeka Plateau. The next morning, we woke refreshed and ready to start the second part of our journey – into the wild!

Day 2: The morning was spent heading deeper and deeper into the wilderness, before finally leaving all traces of human habitation behind. The Giribis Plains were hit by a flash flood just weeks ago, however, the flood waters had now receded and great swathes of green grass reached towards the horizon. We spotted happy looking herds of springbok making the most of the rainy season glut! Cutting across the plains we pulled into our campsite in the Obias River just in time for lunch.

After lunch, we headed down into the Hoanib River for our first real research session. Luckily, we spotted a few small herds of giraffe as the sun set, and even managed to collect a biopsy sample before heading back to the campsite. A great first day in the field!

Day 3: An early start had us winding down the Hoanib River as the morning light touched the top of the great Ana trees (*Faidherbia albida*). We could not believe how many giraffe we came across, and were kept extremely busy IDing all the individuals and getting into position to dart them with the biopsy dart gun to collect DNA samples. We had a very successful day with the giraffe, and were also rewarded with sightings of oryx, springbok, cheeky jackals and a host of bird life. A sundowner and a delicious dinner topped off the day before we fell into our tents exhausted by 8pm!

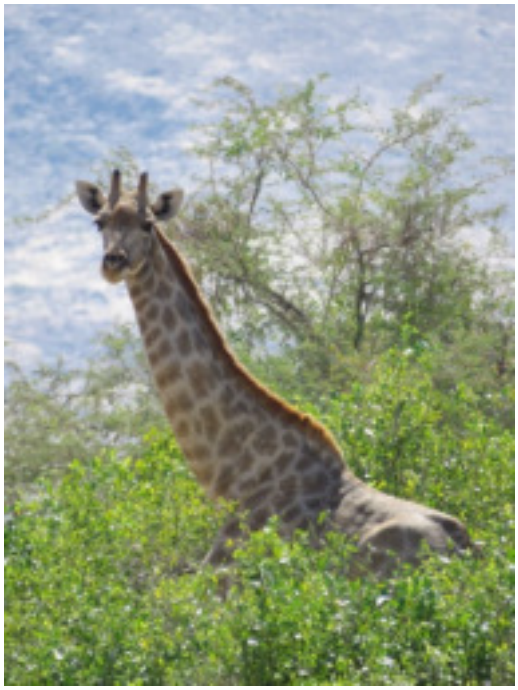
Day 4: Up bright and early to look for more giraffe! We drove up the Hoanib River again and explored the Skeleton Coast National Park, earning our first elephant sighting. We collected location data on many giraffe we had seen the day before, as well as adding new faces to our count. Sightings were topped with a small baboon family and an augur buzzard, along with the many oryx and springbok we had been seeing each day. A sundowner, potjie (traditional southern African meat stew) and stargazing concluded our day.

Day 5: Theresa, who studies bats in the area, joined us for breakfast, and later we bumped into Ruben, the cheetah researcher, so it was a sociable morning in an area with one of the lowest human population densities on the planet! We observed, photographed and recorded data on 24 giraffe today, and even the elusive *Kim* finally co-operated with our darting efforts, after persistently giving us the slip earlier in the day. We also took some 'ground truthing' photos of specific trees to

use in conjunction with remote sensing imagery as part of a vegetation study with the Namibian University of Science and Technology. This data will help to better understand how vegetation affects movement of giraffe.

Day 6: After breakfast and a very welcome morning coffee we packed up camp and bid farewell to our home of the last few days. We set out on a long drive to our next research site in the Hoarusib River, stopping to identify giraffe along the way. One lone male in the remote Okongwe area proved to be our BBC television celebrity *Goober* (from the Planet Earth series, see image on the right) chilling out on his own in the middle of the desert! We stopped for lunch beside a waterhole, a welcome oasis in such a hot and dry region, and finally arrived at our new campsite just before sunset.

Day 7: Our first day in the Hoarusib River began with a sighting of two adult elephant and a calf. After that great start, we drove a long way without seeing any giraffe and then suddenly – giraffe everywhere! After taking lots of ID photos we spent lunch identifying giraffe and updating data. In the afternoon, we photographed another herd of giraffe and, as the sun set, watched a group of seven elephant cross the riverbed! On returning to camp we saw that the elephants had passed through, so before bed we moved our tents a little closer together in the hope that the elephant would walk around them rather than through them.



Day 8: Another beautiful day in the Hoarusib River yielded many more giraffe and four more DNA biopsy samples. We were all amazed at how different the experience of collected data is at the Hoarusib study site as opposed to the Hoanib. In the Hoanib River the giraffe occurred in small groups and were easy to see, whereas on the Hoarusib River the giraffe were frequently found in large groups, scattered amid maze-like arrangements of bushes and trees. What a challenge!

Day 9: This morning began early at camp, where we awoke to glorious bird chorus (every single bird in Namibia judging by the volume!). After a cup of freshly made coffee from camp barista Joan we embarked on our day. Our first giraffe encounter included handsome *Norman* who had yet to let us sample his DNA. After successfully darting *Norman* we moved up the riverbed, but came to an abrupt stop stuck in the deep sand and the hot sun with a flat tyre! Luckily Emma is an experienced mechanic as well as an excellent researcher, and after only a brief delay we were back in business! We IDed a second group of giraffe and recorded another herd of wallowing elephant before heading back to camp.

Day 10: After a delicious breakfast, we packed up our campsite and headed out to work on some botany for the vegetation study. Using GPS, we located a variety of previously identified tree species to photograph and compare against the remote sensing images. We then marked the photography sites so that we knew the exact angle and position for future photos. This process kept us busy, though we managed to fit in some wildlife viewing and photography as well. After completing our tree photos, we reluctantly began to head back to civilization, spending a final night amongst the spectacular granite boulders of Hoada campsite.

What a fantastic trip! We all feel so lucky to have been able to be here and experience these ten days of wild Namibia and to contribute to this valuable giraffe conservation research project. In total we observed 45 groups of giraffe (161 individual sightings). We also collected 16 biopsy samples and mapped three species of vegetation.

A big thank you to GCF and to the sponsors for making this conservation research possible. Stay tuned for the next update from the field!