

Northwest Namibia – Field Report

April 2014



In preparation to continue with our long-term giraffe conservation project in northwest Namibia, as well as gather data on giraffe's current conservation distribution in Namibia, we (GCF's Julian and Steph Fennessy with our two kids) embarked on a two-week recce trip to the area in April 2014. This conservation project is all about continuing the five years of field research that Julian undertook for his PhD from 1999 to 2003, and developing a valuable long-term data set to help understand the ecology of giraffe for their conservation in this community-managed landscape. We had various objectives for this trip including assessing the current situation of giraffe on the ground in this 'last wilderness', exploring the extent of giraffe range across the northwest, assessing potential research camp options and accessibility across the wider project area, obtaining an understanding of current tourist numbers and use, and importantly, reconnecting with people in the area and re-establishing our network of local partners and friends.

While Julian's study had focused on the lower catchment areas of the Hoanib, Hoarusib and Khumib Rivers, this recce trip led us all the way north to the bottom of the Hartmann Valley and Marienfluss, and south through the Palmwag Concession and along the Uniab River. GCF's conservation project seeks to include a wider distribution area yet will still focus on understanding key populations in the desert.



Giraffe in the Hoanib River

After two years of drought, northwest Namibia experienced good rainfalls shortly before our trip. As a result, there was ample fresh, green grass in the mountains and spread across the plains, offering fantastic views and vistas – almost a little surreal in this often rather barren part of the world. With additional food and water sources available, wildlife was widely dispersed and not limited to the ephemeral rivers as during the dry seasons. While traversing plains and mountain ranges between the rivers can be a long and uneventful drive in the dry season, we were lucky to see large herds of the endemic Hartmann's Mountain Zebra, oryx, springbok and ostrich on this trip.

In addition to seeing giraffe in several area, we observed giraffe and their tracks throughout most of the northwest, indicating that over the past few years they have continued to expand their range – let's hope this has also led to an increase in numbers! We even came upon giraffe walking along the barren plains adjacent to the ephemeral Engo River near 'Blue Drum' – less than 60km south of the Kunene River border with Angola. Once spotted, we moved in and took individual identification photos (left and right) of all three male giraffe – a great start to a long day's driving. While we didn't see any more giraffe that day, when driving south towards the Hoarusib River the day after, giraffe spoor (tracks and faeces) were everywhere indicating that they had been up, down and around the area in search of food and friends.

From the Hoarusib River down to the Hoanib River, our old stomping grounds, we observed numerous giraffe although definitely in lower numbers. Not entirely surprising after the good rains and with lots of spoor everywhere giraffe were obviously out and about spreading geographically during this opportune

time. On our final recce drive south of the Hoanib River and through the amazingly spectacular Palmwag Concession, there was no giraffe to be seen but again clear evidence of their presence. You win some and you lose some, but the knowledge that they are thriving and expanding their range is exciting.

While exploring the Hoanib River, the team set up base at Wilderness Safaris' emerging Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp on the border with the infamous Skeleton Coast Park. The camp is under construction in a secluded valley on the south bank of the river in the Palmwag Concession and offers some amazing views back into the river, especially at sunset. A research camp will be part of the new set up and Wilderness Safaris has offered to host GCF's researcher(s). Fixed tented accommodation with individual bathroom facilities, shared kitchen and Internet access can be considered every field researcher's dream – oh, how things have changed since we undertook field research in the area a decade ago!

We also spent a night at our old stomping ground in the Khowarib Schlucht near the Khowarib Village. Sadly our old Desert Research Foundation of Namibia (DRFN) field base, and former Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) camp, was deserted many years before and only a few remnant bricks could be found. However, the adjacent community campsite was a great place to spend a night with familiar noises until late as a large group of conservancy members was staying at an adjacent campsite. After the good rainfalls, the Hoanib River was flowing close to the campsite, so we enjoyed a few walks in the tepid water – a truly amazing and unusual experience in the dry northwest!

While the Hoanib River was totally dry further west from Dubis downriver, the Hoarusib River with its very large and mountainous catchment still had quite a bit of water west of Puros. When heading north from the Hoanib River, we entered the Hoarusib a little further east than planned to avoid getting stuck in the muddy riverbed. During the almost 20km drive upriver towards Puros we had to master at least 25 flowing water crossings. Great fun – particularly for the kids – with water splashing, but at the same time a tiny bit stressful with the constant hope that the car would not suddenly sink into the pockets of 'quick sand' along the river. Overall a stunning experience in such a dry environment and while it would have been nice to see some desert-dwelling elephant and lion, we were all secretly relieved to not encounter them in the narrow riverbed between steep sand banks, rocky mountains and flowing water.

During part of the recce trip, the GCF team was joined by a Spanish medical doctor, Tomas Zapata, and his family. Tomas is based in Windhoek as a public health care specialist for the World Health Organisation (WHO). News travels fast in the northwest and as the GCF team is well known in the area, we were approached by members of the Puros community conservancy to have a look at two children with severe infections (one with a nasty abscess which needed to be drained) – fortunately we had Dr. Tomas who treated them in true bush-style rather than a 'giraffe doctor'.



Research accommodation at Wilderness Safaris' Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp

The conservancy members questioned whether the infections were a result of poor diet, too much sugar or something similar. The infections however were likely a result from a harmless insect bite or scratch which in the dusty environment had become infected. A roaming bush clinic comes through Puros twice a year but mainly for child vaccinations. This experience highlighted the importance of access to basic medical support and supplies. Maybe we will need to look more closely at the community needs

throughout northwest Namibia as it is not only us who have recently suggested that Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) should rather become CBRM – Community Based Resource Management, which would allow to include important local resources such as people and access to services. Just a thought...



Giraffe researchers hard at work

Lastly, Dr Tomas was not let off lightly when he provided First Aid to two Spanish tourists who had rolled their rental 4x4 car close to Palmwag Lodge just minutes before we passed by. Luckily they were fine (not the car) and could continue their trip after a few stitches, overnight observation for concussion and – of course – after receiving a replacement vehicle. While this trip was part of Tomas' holidays, it certainly left him with a better understanding of health care needs in remote areas of Namibia and helped GCF

in providing more than direct conservation support to the people of northwest Namibia. Conservation is about people and GCF continues to expand its efforts beyond research – and always looking for people to help us with these efforts.

During our trip we met with several prominent conservation personalities and community leaders of the northwest including Duncan Gilchrist (ex-Ministry conservationist and fountain of knowledge after working for more than 25 years in the area), Marcia Fagnoli (CEO, Save the Rhino Trust), Chris Bakkes (Wilderness Safaris, author and recently elected one of the top 25 safari guides in Africa) and numerous community members – some familiar faces from the past but excitingly also young and new local people who are taking an interest in conservation and the environment. Chatting with all these people and tapping into their knowledge and understanding of the northwest were important in assessing the current state of conservation and of course giraffe – sadly the local gossip also included news of a recently poached rhino in the area.

While engaging with people in the area, we handed numerous copies of our Giraffe Conservation Guide booklet (<http://www.giraffeconservation.org/booklets.php>) to community members, conservancies, conservationists and campsites/lodges across the project area and received positive feedback throughout. After such positive feedback we will head back next time armed with more copies as well as laminated versions for community campsites and lodges to have at their reception so tourists can view and learn. Additionally, we hope the information will be a valuable reference for communal conservancies throughout the area to help understand their giraffe and help to better manage them as the populations expand.

All in all an amazing field trip in what has to be said one of the most beautiful giraffe locations in Africa. Lots to take away from the trip and of course lots to plan for the next expeditions although not in our own backyard but to the EAZA Conservation Forum in Leipzig in May and the EAZA TAG meeting in Alphen in June. Stay tuned for our next update and please feel free to contact us if you would like some more information: steph@giraffeconservation.org or julian@giraffeconservation.org

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Dedicated to securing a future for all giraffe populations and (sub)species in the wild.

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