

Northwest Namibia – Field Report

August 2014



On 3 August, we officially kicked off the continuation of our long-term giraffe conservation project in northwest Namibia. GCF's Dr. Julian Fennessy was joined by two giraffe zoo keepers from the USA, Nikki Shemanski of Blank Park Zoo in Des Moines, Iowa and Todd Maki of Como Park Zoo and Conservatory in St. Paul, Minnesota – thanks guys and great to have you in the bush with us! The Namibian conservation research project builds on five years of field research that Julian undertook for his PhD from 1999 to 2003, and aims to develop a valuable long-term data set to help understand the ecology of giraffe for their conservation in this community-managed landscape of northwest Namibia. This short but action packed week in the field sought to undertake a rapid census of giraffe in the Hoanib and Hoarusib Rivers by photographing and identifying all individual giraffe observed, as well as collecting DNA biopsy samples from known giraffe in an attempt to build up a dataset of DNA material from all giraffe in the desert-dwelling population for social dynamic research.



Julian, Nikki, and Todd ready for the field

To accurately assess giraffe numbers in Namibia as part of GCF's efforts to develop the first-ever Country Profile for the country, giraffe estimates need to be obtained from across their range in both communal and commercial (private) areas. Data collection started right after our departure from the capital, Windhoek. On our way northwest, and again on our return to Windhoek via a different route, all wildlife-looking commercial properties (98 in total) were noted down to be contacted upon return to see if (and if so, how many) giraffe occupy these properties. Namibia has an amazing distribution of wildlife across the country with growing populations of all animals, including giraffe, on both communal and commercial land. The Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) programme is touted by many as the best sustainable development initiative in the country. With increasing wildlife, the numerous tourism ventures are providing great game viewing – for us the drive alone offered amazing wildlife sightings: warthog along the road side, kudu browsing, and eagles and vultures soaring overhead.

On our first night we bush camped near Twyfelfontein, Namibia's first World Heritage Site – it is always an amazing experience to see the rock engravings of the people who inhabited the area and 'read' the stories they etched into the ancient landscape. Onwards and northwards we went, up through the Palmwag concession where we saw our first elephant and the giraffe started to come out of the wood work for us!

Over the next few days we explored the Hoanib and Hoarusib Rivers and any and all areas in between for giraffe. While the majority of the nights were spent sleeping under the stars, we were given the opportunity to stay in the research camp of the brand new Wilderness Safaris' Hoanib Skeleton Coast Camp. While there, we discussed ongoing research efforts and collaboration with Wilderness Safaris' Research Manager, Emsie Verwey – and of course solved many of the world's pressing issues! We are very excited to have Wilderness Safaris as one of our partners for our ongoing field work in the northwest



Mother and calf near Palmwag

In total we observed 35 different herds of giraffe during the week comprising of 120 different individual giraffe – an action packed week. The majority of these giraffe were found near, or in, the ephemeral river beds as these are the life lines of this arid

environment. In order to accurately identify these individuals from both past and future research, photographs were taken of the right and left side of each individual. Information about each giraffe was logged, including location, herd members, age, and sex, the latter categorised into four groups: new born, juvenile (less than 1 year), sub-adult (1 – 5 years) and adult (5 years and older). This information will allow us to continue following these individual giraffe and see where they travel and who they interact with over time. This trip formed the first step of this process and we have already re-identified five individuals that were previously identified and observed by Julian and Todd 11 years ago. A very cool thing to see these then juveniles and sub-adults all grown up and surviving into adulthood!



Nikki retrieving a DNA dart

In an effort to better understand the complexity of this little known species, we also collected 19 DNA samples from individually identified giraffe for future social relatedness studies. Using remote biopsy drop-darts to collect the tissue, this ongoing study will hopefully give us a clearer picture of who is related to whom, what social bonds giraffe forge over time, how far individuals travel, and also establish the health of the population.



Distributing giraffe conservation materials to Terra Conservancy

During the week we logged >2,250 km while traversing the country, its towns and rivers. In an effort to make these kilometres even more worthwhile, we donated GCF conservation booklets and posters to conservancies, schools, safari companies, lodges, guides, and conservation organisations along the way. We always wanted to jump on any and all opportunities to educate people on the plight and conservation efforts of giraffe, especially those that live amongst them or who work with local and international guests. Feedback was great from everyone we shared the booklets and posters with and as always, most people were surprised to learn that giraffe numbers are so low and the perilous situation of some populations across the continent.

As the project continues in Namibia, GCF is looking forward to host a PhD student from the University of New South Wales in Australia from early 2015. Understanding giraffe and their role in the landscape is critical to provide conservation management support and this new study will build on previous efforts as well as focus on competition with other wildlife and humans in the desert. So... of course we had to also 'observe' other wildlife while in the area to get the ball rolling, and luckily the wildlife was plentiful – elephant, black rhino (very exciting!), leopard, springbok, gemsbok (oryx), jackal, baboons, ostrich, vultures and the newly identified endemic elephant shrew!

After it was all said and done, Nikki added “what a fantastic trip in what is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable landscapes to find giraffe in the wild”. We at GCF are excited that the data gathered adds to the Namibia Country Profile and will in time help to assess the conservation and Red List status of the Angolan giraffe. Stay tuned for our next update and please contact us should you like more information: steph@giraffeconservation.org or julian@giraffeconservation.org

Thank you to our private donors as well as the following donors for supporting this trip financially:



