

Northwest Namibia – Field Report

May 2015



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After I (Jimmy) and my fellow keepers at Taronga Conservation Society Australia heard Dr Julian Fennessy's giraffe talk back in early 2014, we were inspired to help spread the word about the plight of giraffe across Africa. For World Giraffe Day 2014, we conducted an array of activities, which raised funds and awareness for conserving giraffe in the wild through the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF). The ball was rolling... Over the other side of the world, I (Amy) had been working on applying for a conservation grant from my zoo (Birmingham) to undertake a trip of a lifetime – to my excitement, I was given the nod. A year later in the lead up to the second World Giraffe Day – 21 June, we both landed in Namibia to join GCF in northwest Namibia. Both of us had never ventured to Africa before and could hardly contain our enthusiasm to 'get out in the bush' and assist in this exciting conservation programme.



Jimmy & GCF on tour!

So...in late May we departed the 'hustle and bustle' of Windhoek towards Namibia's northwest with the ambition of supporting GCF's long-term field research focused on the desert-dwelling giraffe – and of course seeing them in the wild! We had no idea what to expect and we certainly weren't disappointed.

We made our way north with all our equipment tucked safely inside the 4x4, not knowing what we would come across in the week to follow. Our first night was spent camping under the stars surrounded by the 'fairy circles' in the Namibian desert listening to the sounds of barking geckos, jackals and hyenas. The ten-hour drive flew by as we spotted an array of wildlife, large and small, from Mountain Zebra to endless Springbok, jackals and oryx – and many others in between. As we got further north we came across our first giraffe – yippee!

Throughout the week data collection required considerable patience, just as working with any animal would whether in a captive or natural setting. We photographed each and every giraffe (right and left side), collected data on herd numbers and composition, GPS locations, etc., as well as collected tissue samples from giraffe by using a specialised remote biopsy dartgun to help better understand the genetic lineage of these desert-dwelling giants. Our data collection was part of a larger ongoing programme, which future researchers will use for identifying giraffe in the field and unravel the mystery of these animals.



Double trouble!

While in the Hoanib River study area, we were also fortunate to have the opportunity to survey giraffe inside the Skeleton Coast National Park, a restricted wilderness area which we were lucky to enter! While taking a short rest for lunch out of the back of the 4x4 in the heart of lion country, we spotted a giraffe on the horizon and in front of a sea of sand. We made our way out closer to get a better look when we realised one giraffe soon became five. We walked stealthily through the dotted bushes to keep ourselves hidden and patiently waited for the giraffe to make their way towards us. The



Amy & Jimmy spotting giraffe in the Hoanib River

wind picked up spinning the dust and sand all around us. Visibility became harder but our patience paid off – and ‘home’ we ventured, sandy and all, and giraffe all recorded.

During our time in the Hoanib River, navigating our way up and down the dry and cracked riverbeds and sand dunes, we counted almost 60 giraffe. Males and females, different herd compositions, fat and skinny alike. Many females had calves while others looked very pregnant, indicating a healthy giraffe population. Following four days in the Hoanib River, we packed up camp and headed north for the next stage of our adventure in the Hoarusib River in the Puros Conservancy.

The road less traveled to Puros changed constantly throughout the drive. Although we were eager to spot some elusive black rhino on route (and stopped by the smoothest of rhino rubbing rocks), we were rewarded with giraffe sightings in the harshest of environments – Julian was stoked. Amazing where they can survive! However, this is true Himba country and we were both excited to meet and chat with the locals who live semi-nomadic lifestyle in one of the world’s harshest environments. As we pull into Puros, we decide to stop at the local ‘bar’ and got our first glimpse of these beautiful people. We were greeted with smiles and again Julian chatted to many of the locals – this man knows everyone, even this far north in Namibia! With Puros, we were also making a shift from bush camping to ‘city life’ with the local community campsite having running water and a shower – this was one pleasant surprise Julian had not mentioned before.

Our time in the Hoarusib River area was spectacular. On the first day out, we literally spotted our first giraffe two minutes from camp, followed by a herd of elephant after another five minutes, then a herd of seven giraffe... and on it went. We got close enough for close-up shots of a bull elephant when we realise he was in full musth, so we chose to keep our distance – clever in the thick sand.

GCF was keen on increasing the DNA database in the Hoarusib River and to my surprise when we pull up close to the next huge bull giraffe, Julian casually says “Jimmy, I want you to dart this one!”. My heart started racing, as I never held a gun in my life, let alone shot one. With the DNA dart loaded, Julian positioned the car and bang – hit. A little over 30 metres away the dart dropped with a sample – my first ‘green hunting’ experience. Awesome! Interestingly, the giraffe didn’t seem to mind too much, after flinching a little he only moved 10 meters and continued to chew his cud. What a rush – that was probably the best thing I’ve ever done in my life, and knowing we were helping to make a real difference for wild giraffe made it an even better experience. It wasn’t long till we spotted another giraffe bull and this time it was Amy’s turn. She also hit and adrenaline was running high in the vehicle. As the sun set we returned back to camp for the night riding on the roof of the 4x4 – an awesome feeling of freedom in this huge environment and the knowledge that we were doing our small bit to help giraffe.

On the final field day we drove for hours spotting giraffe, bumping into local Himba in the most amazing places and lunching under the shade (very little) of an *Acacia* tree – which we shared with a beautiful coloured agama lizard, babbling babbler birds and a herd of cows! After the long day we were all getting a little tired, and out of nowhere spotted two helicopters in the sky! This is an odd sight for northwest Namibia and in this day of increased rhino and elephant



Namibia’s desert-dwelling elephant

poaching, often means trouble. Fortunately, none of this, just one of the world's richest man and his entourage on safari!

Back in camp, Julian prepared another field dinner delight and we cracked a beer (or two). Casually sitting around the fire chatting about life and the universe, Amy startled and pointed at the bull elephant in musth with a few cows and calves walking through our campsite – literally right through the middle of it! Even Julian got up from his chair, and we moved back to keep an eye on them at a safe distance whilst continuing our conversation – they definitely knew we were there! So...it begs the question, what is a safe distance from wild elephant when on foot? All our adrenalin was pumping and apparently so was that other people in the campsite: four wide-eyed South African couples quickly joined us at our fire to be close to someone who knows what they're doing (Julian), especially with the knowledge that sadly a Spanish tourist was killed here by an elephant a few years back.



Namibia's desert-dwelling giraffe

On the return journey, and to Julian's surprise, we spotted several more giraffe, amazing to know the population is on the increase in northwest Namibia. Our final stop of the field trip was Twyfelfontein, Namibia's first World Heritage Site. The rocks are covered in carvings, especially giraffe. The local people believed that giraffe's height allowed them to communicate with the clouds, hence these carvings symbolised rain. As you can imagine, rain is very important in the desert and as a result giraffe were considered sacred animals.

Throughout the trip we discussed at length the issues that giraffe face in the wild, the important and valuable work GCF does and the many future projects ideas. Collecting giraffe ID's was more difficult than one would think, especially when the herds were large and spread out. It takes a great amount of patience, teamwork, communication and skill, maneuvering the vehicle to correctly photograph the individuals from both sides. But we got there in the end. To my surprise the forgotten giants of the desert were often well camouflaged amongst the *Acacia* trees and they look tiny, even through binoculars, when surrounded by rolling hills and giant trees in dry riverbeds. During the whole the trip we sighted approximately 130 giraffe in total, with herd sizes ranging from singles to up to eight individuals.

A big thank you to both Julian and Steph for this unique opportunity and the chance to help make a real difference for giraffe. It has been infectious, and we are both looking forward to working closely with GCF moving forward and sticking our necks out for giraffe!

Stay tuned for the next update and please contact GCF for 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:



