Local history of giraffe

Giraffe have ranged throughout the land that is now known as Namibia for many thousands of years. Evidence of this can be found in rock paintings and engravings of giraffes in the Erongo and Kunene Regions, suggesting that giraffes have been culturally and ceremonially important to these regions’ indigenous communities for a long time. Although the first written record of giraffe was logged by Captain Hendrik Hop in 1761, who ventured north of the Okavango River, giraffe distribution has been otherwise poorly documented. In recent history, Namibia’s giraffe population was at its lowest in the mid-1990s.

Since then, however, collaborative conservation efforts have successfully increased and expanded their range throughout the country.

Range and habitat

Giraffe occur throughout the dry savannah habitats of Namibia, including open grassland, woodland and scrubland, and along ephemeral rivers (rivers which are mostly dry and only flow for a short period of time after enough rain). They are browsers and feed on a wide variety of trees, including Busi, Combretum, Commiphora, Terminalia and Sclerocarya birrea (formerly Allophylus species).

Their range extends from west and south-west of the Etosha National Park, into the more arid habitats in the northern and central Namib Desert, where their movements are concentrated within and around the ephemeral rivers. Occasionally, giraffes will also move between these river systems. Giraffes also occur in the semi-arid Kalahari sandveld in north-eastern Namibia, as well as in the far eastern Combloc Region, where they have been translocated to communal conservancies.

Giraffes are largely absent from densely populated areas that have been cleared of most of their woody vegetation, in particular the central northern region, north of the Etosha National Park. However, throughout the rest of Namibia, giraffes co-exist with humans across both commercial and communal farmlands. Giraffes are absent from true desert areas, which are densest of trees.

Over the last few decades, Angolan giraffe have been reintroduced to several protected, private and communal areas throughout the country, with the support of the Namibian Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism and other conservation organisations. Through these valuable conservation actions, giraffe have expanded in number and range. Compared with other giraffe in Africa, Angolan giraffe have the largest recorded home ranges (up to 11,600 km²), which is most likely due to their ari-dunal environments. As a result, male giraffe have larger home ranges than females. Female giraffe tend to be more sedentary and often prefer particular areas, while some males may move far and wide between different groups.

Success story

Namibia is one of only a few countries in Africa with a steadily growing giraffe population, a success that can be attributed to the collaboration of many partners. As the first African country to incorporate the protection of the environment into its constitution, 40% of Namibian land is managed in protected areas, communal and freehold conservancies, community forests, and tourism concessions. Namibia focuses on individual species, as well as on the larger picture of biodiversity conservation, sustainability, ecosystem health and human wellbeing. Communal conservancies are one of Namibia’s biggest success stories. To date, 86 communal conservancies have been established, covering more than 30% of Namibia’s land. One out of every four rural Namibian lives within these areas.

Commercial conservancies rely on tourism and the sustainable utilisation of wildlife to simultaneously ensure the improvement of livelihoods and the protection of the environment. Giraffe have been successfully translocated and reintroduced into many communal conservancies from private and public land. The achievements of the Namibian government and communal conservancies signify the return of the environment to a healthier state for both the people and the wildlife living in the country. Private landowners have also contributed significantly to the conservation successes of the country. Both photographic and sustainable use tourism have been identified as key drivers for the significant increase of wildlife throughout different land management systems in Namibia. As wildlife contributes to local Namibian livelihoods, it continues to be utilised in balance with agricultural land uses through effective management.

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