



Operation Kadyamsonga: Introduction of giraffe into Majete Wildlife Reserve, Malawi

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Giraffe Conservation Foundation & African Parks Network

Background – Majete Wildlife Reserve and African Parks in Malawi

Situated in the Lower Shire Valley at the southernmost section of Africa's Great Rift Valley, the 700km² Majete Wildlife Reserve was proclaimed as a protected area in 1955. Extensive poaching of large and medium sized mammals during the late 1980s and 1990s had rendered most species locally extinct by 2000. In addition, the Reserve was subject to widespread logging, human encroachment and intensive fishing.



In 2003, African Parks Network (AP) concluded an agreement with the Malawi Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) to take on responsibility for the rehabilitation, development and management of Majete Wildlife Reserve. Between 2003 and 2017 over 2,900 animals of 13 different animal species from Malawi, Zambia and South Africa were re-introduced, restoring it to Malawi's only Big Five Game Reserve. Majete is a prime wildlife destination in Malawi attracting around 8,500 visitors a year.

The success story of restoring the reserve into a thriving wildlife area led to the expansion of the AP mandate in Malawi to take on management of both Liwonde National Park and Nkhotakota Wildlife Reserve in 2015. This long-term mandate further strengthened the direct partnership with the Government of Malawi through DNPW to secure the long-term conservation of these protected areas.

African Parks draws on an established track record of successful animal translocations and population restoration in these three parks in Malawi, where between 2016 and 2017 over 1,500 antelope and 520 elephant were successfully relocated. Additionally, with the expertise and support of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF), the only giraffe organisation working throughout Africa, and the endorsement of DNPW, the project brought together the best partners to ensure successful implementation.

Status of giraffe in Malawi

Giraffe currently exist on three private ranches in Malawi making up a total population of approximately 28 animals. These giraffe are South African giraffe (*Giraffa giraffa giraffa*),

introduced from the same source population in Zimbabwe in 1993 (confirmed by genetic testing by GCF partner Senckenberg BiK-F, Germany).

Although recent occurrence and distribution of giraffe in Malawi remains unclear from the lack of any known written records, AP in collaboration with GCF has determined the likelihood of the historical occurrence in Malawi to be significant. The natural presence of giraffe in closely neighbouring Zambia's South Luangwa National Park and surrounding Game Management Areas, the occurrence of suitable habitat at Majete for giraffe, as well as the existence of a local vernacular name for giraffe "*kadyamsonga*" in Chichewa, all indicate the strong likelihood that there were at the very least transitory or marginal populations of giraffe in Malawi in the past, linking populations across Southern and Eastern Africa. As such, the proposed introduction of giraffe by AP to Majete is justified as an ecological introduction under the IUCN Guidelines for Reintroductions and Other Conservation Translocations. In 2016 the Malawi DNPW approved the application.

The addition of giraffe into the suite of species at Majete will increase its tourist attraction in Malawi. Giraffe are one of Africa's most iconic and charismatic species, highly sought after by tourists on an African safari. The importance of sustainability and income development is a key cornerstone of the AP model, and giraffe at Majete will provide an additional unique selling point which would help differentiate the product from other wildlife destinations in Malawi. We hope that this will contribute to tourism growth in the reserve and subsequent sustainability. The existing small populations of giraffe in Malawi are at risk of inbreeding, and the introduction of giraffe to Majete and supplementing those at close-by Nyala Park (currently the largest holder of giraffe in the country) will enable opportunities for meta-population management of giraffe in Malawi. The creation of a viable new giraffe population in the already highly successful conservation story of Majete Wildlife Reserve will be positive for conservation and the country.



South African giraffe in the boma before being loaded and trucked to Majete Wildlife Reserve, Malawi – a trek of over 2,500km – probably the longest road transport ever!

Activities

As a first step in the project, it was important to verify the genetic status of the existing giraffe in Malawi to ascertain which (sub)species of giraffe should be further introduced into the country to avoid potential hybridisation. AP worked with GCF to verify the genetic status of the small existing giraffe in Malawi and ascertained that they are South African giraffe, a subspecies of the southern giraffe (*Giraffa giraffa*). This assessment was done through tissue biopsy samples collected by Lilongwe Wildlife Trust, and then analysed by Senckenberg BiK-F in Frankfurt, Germany. Following this, we identified the most appropriate and genetically diverse South African giraffe which turned out to be in South Africa, and AP with Conservation Solutions obtained all relevant permits for export, transport and import.

In total, ten giraffe (4 males and 6 females) were translocated by road to Malawi from South Africa through Mozambique – an almost three day mission covering more than 2,500 km. This road translocation is probably the longest ever for giraffe, and an amazing achievement by Conservation Solutions working collaboratively with Tracy & Du Plessis Game Capture.

Nine of the giraffe (3 males and 6 females) were released into a holding boma at Majete early on 5 October and allowed to settle, feed and drink after the long drive. After a number of hours they were released. The other male giraffe was further transported to the local Nyala Park, approximately 40km south, to help with increasing genetic diversity there, and in return offered a number of giraffe to Majete to capture and introduce along with those from South Africa.



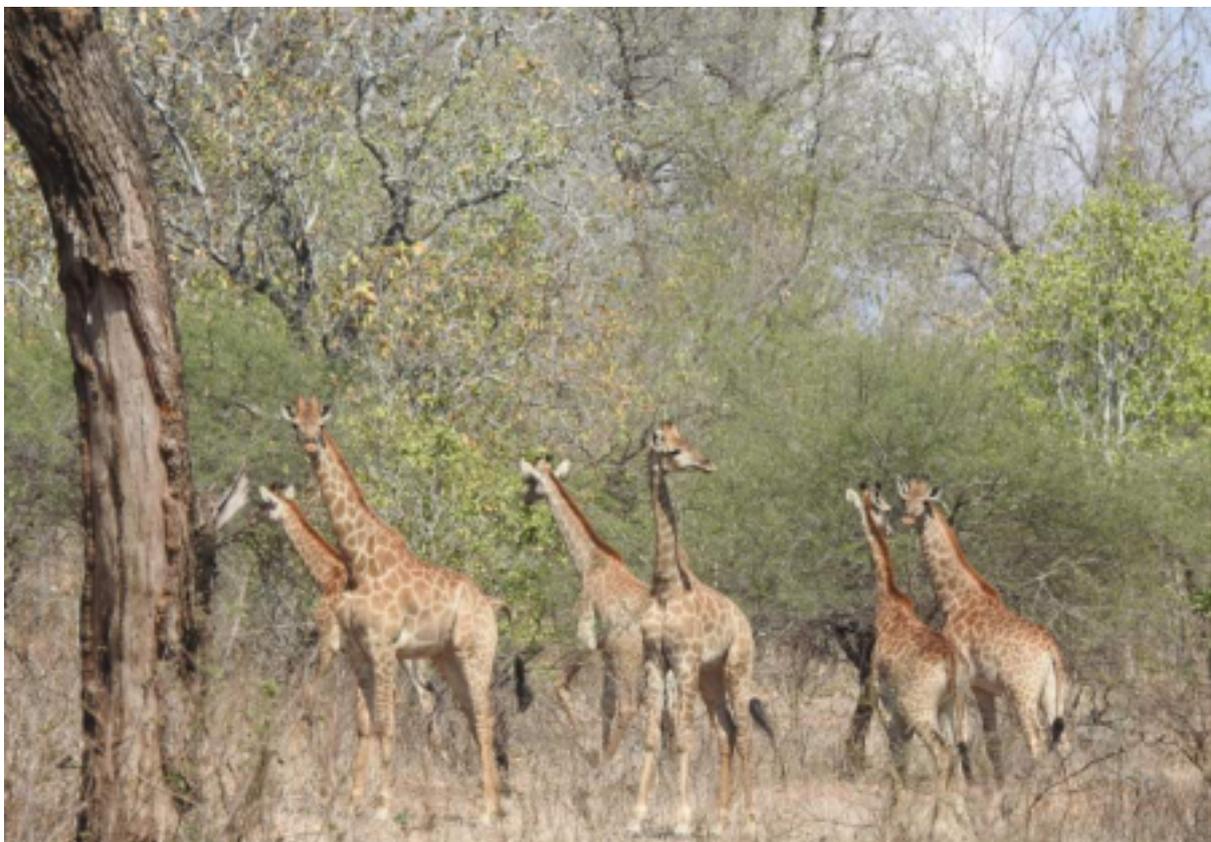
Giraffe captured and being loaded into a transport truck in Nyala Park before being transported to Majete Wildlife Reserve, Malawi

On the 7 October, with the support of a professional capture team from South Africa – Conservation Solutions and Tracy & du Plessis Game Capture, staff from Nyala Park and the AP helicopter, we darted and captured four giraffe (2 males and 2 females). All giraffe were darted

from the ground and from the back of a motorcycle and the followed up using vehicles and a helicopter in the air as the vegetation was thick in the small property. All four giraffe were successfully captured, loaded into a recovery vehicle (chariot) and delivered to a game capture truck waiting centrally on the property. One of the giraffe was fitted with a small VHF tracking unit to one of its ossicones and will aid monitoring. After all four were loaded, they were trucked to Majete in the early afternoon and released safely following a short boma period.

In total thirteen giraffe were introduced to Majete (5 males and 8 females) and this founder population will provide a solid base for their growth in Majete for the years to come..

It was appropriate that in the days following their release as part of ongoing post-translocation monitoring programme coordinated by AP, the first observation of the giraffe in Majete was on “Hall-Martin Drive”. This was very befitting considering the late Dr Anthony Hall-Martin was a pioneer in giraffe conservation and science, and spent the last decade of his career guiding the conservation efforts for African Parks across the continent – and a critical player in securing Majete.



First images of South African giraffe introduced to their new home in Majete Wildlife Reserve, Malawi

Intended impact

It is expected that these introductions will help to establish the first viable population of giraffe in Majete in more than a century. Success can be measured in various ways ranging from short- to long-term efforts, and include the safe translocation of individuals into the Park (completed), length of survival of the introduced animals (ongoing monitoring), no mortalities due to stress

and disease (none observed to date), and the subsequent production of offspring (medium-term goal). Limited predation, particularly of younger animals may be inevitable over time, however predation should not outweigh the growth of the population which would be expected at around 5-8% per annum. The addition of new giraffe genetic stock into Malawi will support the increased health of the giraffe population at Nyala Park and promote long-term meta-population management of this species with monitored exchanges/introductions of animals between/into locations being possible in future. Further founder introductions to Majete may also be a possibility to bolster this first introduction and help provide a solid base for their future survival.

Importantly, and if the Malawi government is interested, GCF will assist AP and stakeholders with the development of a National Giraffe Conservation Strategy and Action Plan for Malawi in support of this project. The benefit of the giraffe introduction for tourism into Malawi, and the relative impact this additional species will have on the prominence and popularity of Majete as a wildlife destination, will also be an important indicator of the success of the introduction.

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