



Operation Twiga IV

Giraffe Return to Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve

October 2019

After an absence of almost 25 years, Nubian giraffe recently returned to Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve in Uganda!

Lead by the Uganda Wildlife Authority and supported by GCF and other partners, the team brought giraffe back to Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve (WR) recently. The area had formerly been home to the largest giraffe population in the Uganda, but giraffe had gone locally extinct over 20 years ago. In three arduous journeys of 480km each, made more difficult with unseasonal heavy rains that turned dirt roads into veritable mud slides, a total of fifteen 'Critically Endangered' Nubian giraffe were released into their new home.



Operation Twiga IV is the fifth conservation translocation of giraffe that has been performed in Uganda. Previous years have seen giraffe re-introduced to Lake Mburo National Park and the southern bank of Murchison Falls National Park as well as supplemented the small population of Nubian giraffe in Kidepo Valley National Park in northern Uganda. All translocated populations of giraffe are thriving in their new environments with numerous calves documented over the subsequent years. These translocations are a key conservation tool that is employed by UWA to secure the future of Nubian giraffe in Uganda, as emphasised in the Draft National Giraffe Conservation Strategy and Action Plan. The largest wild population of Nubian giraffe, listed as 'Critically Endangered' on the IUCN Red List,

occurs in Murchison Falls National Park – a premier park threatened by impending oil exploration and drilling, intense infrastructure development, as well as poaching for bushmeat. It is therefore crucial to disperse giraffe back to their former historic ranges throughout Uganda in order to conserve the integrity of this iconic species.

Pian Upe WR is the second largest protected area and the largest wildlife reserve in Uganda. Established in 1965, it was home to the largest population of Nubian giraffe in Uganda until years of civil unrest and armed conflict resulted in the decimation of giraffe and other wildlife species from this area. By the mid 1990s, giraffe were considered locally extinct from the reserve.



Wildlife populations within the reserve have slowly recovered since civil unrest ceased in the country, and conditions were assessed as favourable for reintroduction of giraffe. To further evaluate the possibility, UWA together with GCF and partners performed a translocation assessment of the area, determining the habitat was indeed suitable for giraffe. In preparation of the re-introduction, UWA representatives held numerous meetings with communities living around the reserve to gauge the interest in the return of giraffe. All local feedback was extremely positive and armed with this knowledge the plan to reintroduce giraffe to Pian Upe WR commenced. Operation Twiga IV was completed over the course of two and a half weeks with the amazing UWA team, together with staff from the Ugandan Wildlife Education Centre (UWEC), GCF, Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, Colorado State University, and individuals from around the world.

The initial ten subadult giraffe (seven females and three males) were captured over the course of four days and transported a short distance from the field to a boma (corral) built by UWA rangers at Tangi Gate, Murchison Falls National Park. The giraffe were kept in the boma to allow them to calm down and become accustomed to the transport lorry as well as (minimal) human activity prior to their long journey, minimising their stress and resulting in a smooth transition to their new home. While in the boma, their behaviour was closely monitored by UWA staff and assisted by trained individuals from



zoos to give the giraffe the best care while temporarily in a more captive environment. After acclimating, the first five giraffe were loaded into the transport lorry where it was as yet unknown to the team as a whole that heavy rain fall would be the troublesome adversary. The end of October/early November is usually the beginning of the dry season in Pian Upe, but fate had other plans. Luckily the translocation team is highly experienced and took on the challenging drive undaunted to safely deliver the first group of giraffe to Pian Upe WR after over 16 hours on the road.



However, the thought of repeating the drive knowing full well what obstacles lay ahead gave the entire team a pause. After re-evaluating the possible options, they were able to adapt on the fly and overcome Mother Nature. A little bedraggled but even more determined, the team went back to the field to capture the third group of giraffe, opting to postpone moving the second group of giraffe with the hope of catching a prophesised window of no rain a few days later. Field immobilisations continued well, giraffe adjusted to the boma with one female even noted to comfortably lay down, and the team held their breath as they watched the weather forecast updates. In an additional attempt to avoid the afternoon rains, the decision was made to perform the next long drive overnight, aiming to arrive in Pian Upe as the sun rose over the plains on a hopefully dry dirt road.

Thus, with determination and supplied with many bottles of Coca-Cola, the second group of giraffe were loaded into the transportation lorry and the team set off into the night. After a seemingly endless 12-hour drive, sunrise heralded five more giraffe released into Pian Upe WR. The team celebrated with a well-deserved sleep, then the overnight drive was repeated 48 hours later again resulting in giraffe galloping out over the hills as the African sun was ascending. No sooner had the last giraffe disappeared into the bush then the sounds of singing and laughter floated over the morning air as members from the surrounding Karamojong people came dancing up the lane with faces painted in brown and white spots and holding their hands aloft over their heads imitating the newest residents of Pian Upe and joyfully welcoming them home. The ecstatic but albeit sleep deprived team wasted little time joining in on the celebrations well into the afternoon. This translocation is not only a resounding success for



re-introducing giraffe to an area where they were locally extinct but also increasing the giraffe's range in Uganda by over 500,000 acres!

To assist with post-translocation monitoring as well as elucidate more on how the giraffe will utilise their new space, two individuals were fitted with solar powered GPS satellite tracking units (ossi-units). The data gathered from these units will not only help UWA officials monitor giraffe movements within the reserve as they become accustomed to their environment, but they will contribute to ongoing spatial ecology studies performed both in Uganda as well as across the whole of Africa. Over the next year these giraffe will be closely followed to ensure they are doing well within the reserve as well as evaluate for the potential of follow up translocations to further supplement this initial population.



As with translocations in years past, these efforts would not be possible without the effective collaboration of multiple international institutions. The team was joined again by the legendary Dr Pete Morkel and his expertise in megaherbivore capture and transport. Veterinary staff from Cheyenne Mountain Zoo and Colorado State University returned to continue ongoing collaborative studies on both giraffe skin disease (GSD) and monitoring the effects of field immobilisation on giraffe. During immobilisations serial blood samples were obtained for on site blood gas analysis, skin biopsies from lesions consistent with GSD were collected along with flies observed to land in/around the lesions to hopefully aid in identifying how this disease may be spread, tail hair samples collected for isotope analysis, and an array of ectoparasites such as ticks were taken off the giraffe for evaluation of overall giraffe health and disease surveillance. Passionate individuals from Namibia, South Africa, and the United States rounded out the team brought together by GCF to support UWA in this undertaking.

Operation Twiga IV stands testament to what can be achieved when passionate people come together not only with the team on the ground but also the supporters of giraffe conservation from around the world. Without the funding support from partners and individuals across the globe, none of these amazing efforts would be a reality. We would like to use this opportunity to thank all our supporters



for their generous funding and for helping us educate a wider audience both on the plight of giraffe and on these conservation success stories. A truly incredible conservation effort all around for the entire team lead by UWA, and especially for veterinarians Drs Robert Aruho, Patrick Atimnedi, Margaret Driciru, and Eric Enyel.



We are proud to be part of this amazing conservation effort! Let's work together to continue the Ugandan giraffe conservation success story!

Photo credit: Rayno Egner & Todd Maki

