



Wildlife Veterinary Capacity Building Course

July 2023

The Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) is the only organisation in the world that concentrates solely on the conservation and management of giraffe in the wild throughout Africa. GCF is dedicated to securing a future for all giraffe populations in the wild. We envision a world where all giraffe live wild and free within their historical range or habitat in Africa and are protected by the people around them. GCF works closely with governments, NGOs and academic partners throughout Africa to secure a sustainable future for all giraffe populations in the wild. The main threats to giraffe are human-induced, particularly habitat loss, habitat destruction and fragmentation, as well as poaching and disease. These threats are exacerbated by increasing mining and oil exploration pressure in some areas of Africa, alongside an increasing number of infrastructure development projects.

From our headquarters in Windhoek, GCF works on, manages and supports giraffe conservation initiatives that concern all four species of giraffe in 19 African countries. Our work has an impact on over 100 million acres of giraffe habitat, and we have supported the successful translocation of over 250 giraffe in seven countries, which has effectively increased giraffe habitat in Africa by over 11 million acres. In Namibia, we run a comprehensive and multi-faceted giraffe conservation programme in the country with a focus on giraffe conservation research and environmental education.

Raising environmental awareness and capacity enhancement are important parts of our work as we firmly believe that African wildlife can ultimately only be conserved by African people.

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Wildlife veterinarians require very specialized skills and their roles become increasingly important in wildlife conservation in Africa. However, veterinary training at most universities offers limited opportunities for specializing in this field.

While all veterinarians receive a broad general education during their schooling, there is often a significant dearth of knowledge in handling the dangerous drugs, darting equipment, and appropriate protocols for working with African wildlife. In addition, key species such as giraffe, elephant and rhino are challenging due to their unique anatomy and physiology, and many veterinarians do not have the experience, skill, networks or confidence to handle these species safely. For numerous African government wildlife departments and conservation organisations, this results in regular contracting of foreign wildlife veterinarians to help with wildlife immobilisations rather than developing and/or enhancing their own local wildlife veterinary capacity.

Luckily for Namibia, the situation is a little different here. We boast a network of highly experienced wildlife veterinary professionals in the country, as well as the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Namibia (UNAM), which offers a solid introduction to wildlife medicine. As a result, Namibia is well placed to support local capacity and build that of wildlife vets from other parts of Africa.

GCF has therefore partnered with UNAM's Veterinary School and the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) to offer a dynamic, practical wildlife veterinary immobilisation course specifically targeting the training of young African wildlife veterinarians. In June 2023, this course was held for the second consecutive year each time hosting eight participants from various African countries. So far, our 16 participants in total have come from Namibia (4), Central African Republic (1), Democratic Republic of Congo (2), Ethiopia (1), Malawi (1), Mozambique (2), Nigeria (1), Tanzania (2), Uganda (1) and Zambia (1).

During the 10-day intensive course each participating African vet was given the opportunity to lead the planning and immobilisation of at least one animal under the guidance of an expert vet mentor. Open debriefing discussions after each immobilisation offered ample opportunity for a peer-to-peer skills exchange, analysis of what worked well and what did not, including the effects of different drug regimens used for comparison. Each of the participants brought a host of real-life experiences from their respective workplace and country to the discussions, creating a conducive and productive training environment. Furthermore, the participants received extensive practice in dart gun handling and safety, lectures on species specific protocols, human safety protocols, and practiced darting from the ground, vehicle, and helicopter. The aim was to provide participants with a unique opportunity to develop wildlife veterinary and leadership skills through inclusive mentorship provided by experienced wildlife veterinarians, biologists, conservationists, and game capture experts.

It is essential that wildlife veterinarians have a solid foundation in wildlife medicine, but also are equipped with the soft skills and valuable networks of professionals to enable them to be leaders in the conservation world. Through this course, we will provide the essential skills and opportunity for professional growth. It is our goal to build the capacity of African wildlife veterinarians and enable them to effectively undertake veterinary work on the local to national scale, leading to overall better conservation of wildlife throughout the continent. Ultimately, by enhancing the capacity of young African wildlife veterinarians we are building Africa's future conservation leaders.

The course was hosted at Etosha Heights Private Reserve adjacent to Etosha National Park and all immobilisations for the course were undertaken as part of planned reserve management activities and landscape-level long-term conservation research programmes, spearheaded by the NUST Biodiversity Research Centre and GCF. This allowed for a variety of experience on multiple species including gemsbok, Hartmann's Mountain zebra, greater kudu, common eland, African savanna elephant, rhino, African lion, and of course Angolan giraffe.

As an additional activity during this year's course, in collaboration with Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) and the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT) Game Capture Unit, four Angolan giraffe, which were donated by the Etosha Heights Private Reserve, were moved to the Ogongo and Otjiu-West communal conservancies in northwestern Namibia. The capture and loading of the giraffe offered unique training opportunities for the African wildlife veterinarians who were also involved in sample collection, monitoring of giraffe vitals and GPS satellite tagging of these animals. Being part of a real-life conservation intervention offered additional unique insights for all participants.



