

# Quarterly Update On Giant Sable

(The report has been edited for length)

Between July and August we carried out an ambitious aerial census and capture operation in Luando and Cangandala which was integrated into the Action Plan for the Giant Sable Conservation, developed in collaboration between the Kissama Foundation and the Ministry of Environment. This operation was only possible with specific international funding received from Fundación Segré and ExxonMobil Foundation, adding to the local funds of which the two main contributors are currently Sonangol and Angola LNG. Instrumental for the success of this operation, and similarly to the exercises we carried out in 2009, 2011 and 2013, was the reliable support received from FAN (Angolan Air Force) who supplied the Jet A1 fuel drums, and the Angolan Army in Malanje who provided additional crucial logistics.

Dr Peter Morkel provided the veterinary services and Frans Henning, Namibia, piloted the Hughes 500 chopper. The objective for the 2016 capture operation was to make an updated sable population census in Luando Reserve and place up to 16 GPS collars and 5 VHF collars on giant sable, both in Cangandala and Luando as well as a survey of previously identified (from satellite imagery) sable hotspots in Luando, including water holes, critical anharas, while assessing and acting against poaching whenever justified.

The poaching situation in Cangandala NP is fairly under control. With a couple exceptions all giant sables there are contained inside the fenced sanctuary. In Cangandala were done mainly with the purpose of capturing two young males and attach VHF collars. On a control flight outside the sanctuary and old bull not seen since 2011; he was captured and released with a GPS collar! The rangers also recovered dozens of snares built with the steel wire stolen from the border fence.

In Luando NP we knew of three confirmed herds and added two more during our operation. One of the newly discovered herds proved to be the largest with 31 animals. The number may even increase when all cows finished calving and re-join the herd. The other herds totalled 26, 21, 19 and 18 animals excluding the territorial bulls. All herds included between 8 and 10 breeding females and 4 to 6 calves (almost half of the cows were still pregnant), but what seems determinant to explain the difference among herds is the number of yearlings and immatures (2-year olds).

The largest herd had many and the two smaller herds had few yearlings and immatures. Young animals are the most vulnerable to snare-poaching and this is reflected in the age structure of different groups according to the poaching pressure they suffer. In each herd we collared two cows. In total we collared eight females with GPS and two with VHF collars. Nine bulls were darted and seven were also collared with GPS devices. Among these bulls a few were outstanding, including one animal carrying over 59 inch horns.

One of the first animals darted in Luando this year was poor a young female (born in 2011) which

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carried a nasty wound in her right front foot. Dr Morkel improvised a surgical intervention to remove a steel cable. This female was lactating, meaning that she had had a calf recently. Three bulls also had serious foot injuries caused by snares, and in two of them it was again necessary to carefully remove the cables constraining their feet. The rate of animals injured by snares has remained above 20% of all animals darted. Two bulls collared in 2009 and 2013 were found alive and well. Several collars that should still be active in bulls could not be located, except for one that was found dead. The collar led us to the skeleton of a 10 year old male collared back in 2013, and the conditions suggested it may have died several months earlier. Inspecting the bones the cause of death became evident when we found a fractured femur, showing some minor signs of post-growth. Another important aspect of this operation involved some preventive anti-poaching measures, as a joint effort between our team, the Ministry of Environment, the local political Administrations and the Army from the Northern Military Region. An awareness campaign was carried out and the military, made it clear that the giant sable antelope is a national symbol that deserves full protection and they are prepared to endorse the efforts and enforce the law if necessary. As result and over the period of a few weeks it was possible for the local administration to collect dozens of shotguns that were being used for poaching inside the reserve.

Pedro vaz Pinto's very interesting photo series can be accessed via the following link:  
<https://goo.gl/photos/3qaGGscEVEJcD4XX7>