

by Pedro vaz Pinto

The Latest on Angola's Giant Sable



*Since 2003, Pedro vaz Pinto has worked to conserve the giant or royal sable (*Hippotragus niger variandi*, better known in Angola as *Palanca Negra*). This is his latest report from the Cangandala and Luando reserves, where, thanks to his relentless efforts, this enigmatic antelope still thrives.*

Rain came to Angola late in the last quarter of 2018 and ended early, by mid-March 2019 in most areas; although there was plenty of local variation, it became apparent that we were in for a drought later in the year. The December 2018 poaching incident in the Luando Reserve—three men were arrested with the remains of a freshly and illegally killed giant sable female—ended with the culprits set free by the local prosecutor, who apparently negotiated a deal with the poachers' families. We are still hopeful that higher authorities will bring justice and punishment to these poachers and thereby set an example.

With some effort, we managed to maintain a permanent ranger presence at the advanced anti-poaching post throughout the rainy season, although reaching the post with supplies and to rotate rangers proved to be difficult as the wet progressed. Our presence was crucial, since the effective security reach took in three of the five local giant sable herds. We expect to strengthen the post with better equipment before

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end of this year and plan to open new service roads and establish an even more distant post next year.

Four GPS collars—two on territorial bulls and two on females—are about to complete three years of tracking research. These collars allow us to better understand the whereabouts and behavior of giant sable, and they also contribute to better surveillance and security. As it happens, though, poaching activity appeared to be markedly lower in this area now.

Most significant, however, was the unexpected return of big predators. Lions have finally come back. In early June, our three rangers in the advanced post spent a sleepless night listening to the mighty roaring of a male. A lion roar can be frightening and may trigger visceral fear, especially when heard for the first time. To our rangers, lions were creatures of tales, never before seen, heard or smelled. The men were totally unprepared and, unsurprisingly, they panicked, even firing random shots into the forest. One of the “survivors” said that “the ground trembled beneath our feet when the lion roared” and “the roaring was so loud that leaves were falling from the trees all around us.”

A couple of weeks later, another team had an even more memorable experience: Two rangers stumbled onto a small pride of lions—a male, a female and four cubs—chasing bushpigs. This is the first evidence of a resident lion pride in the Luando Reserve in many decades, and they are breeding successfully. Both rangers got the scare of their lives. They beat a hasty retreat, setting the grass on fire to guard their rear.

The return of lions will certainly pose risks to some individual giant sable in our herds, but their presence reflects the recovery of the ecosystem and an increase in game populations. This unexpected development brings a new set of challenges, but also opportunities, which we will tackle in the future.

In July, our fifth aerial game-capture operation in 10 years took place in the Luando Reserve. The specialized team was led by Dr. Pete Morkel, one of our most experienced wildlife veterinarians, and Namibia-based Frans Henning piloted the Bell Jet Ranger helicopter. The operation was sponsored by (in alphabetic order) Angola LNG, the ExxonMobil Foundation, the Segré Foundation, the Tusk Trust and the Whitley Fund. The Angolan military, both Air Force and Army, assisted with fuel, logistics and organization.



The largest giant sable bull observed during fly-overs. Pedro vaz Pinto photo

The capture operation had these main objectives: 1) to update the census data on giant sable populations, including the location of the five known herds and detailed photo records to evaluate sex ratios and ages; 2) to dart as many as 20 giant sable and deploy as many as 15 new GPS/Iridium collars and, if necessary, a few additional VHF collars; 3) to assess threats, especially poaching, by visiting most of the water holes and, where appropriate, taking action against poachers. With the unexpected appearance of the small pride, we hoped for the opportunity to collar a lion, too.

The operation went exceptionally well and almost all results matched expectations. Unfortunately, the lions didn't come to the party; we spotted none during our flights. In total, we darted 17 giant sable and deployed 15 GPS collars on nine females and six bulls. We concluded the survey as planned, including the detailed demographic data and threat assessment.

We collared four mature bulls, all presumed territorial; one of them accompanied a herd. The territorial bulls were chosen randomly. Their estimated ages were six, seven, eight and 12 years. The 12-year-old bull had been darted, but not collared, in 2016. These mature bulls were very nice, healthy specimens, with horn lengths between 52 and 56 inches (132 - 142 cm). Twice we managed to photograph the

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largest bull we saw but were unable to dart and collar him.

We also came across several bachelor groups—young sable males who aggregate in small groups before eventually becoming solitary and establishing their own territories. These bachelor groups were comprised of two to seven males, three and four years old. We collared two four-year-old bulls from different bachelor groups; both were healthy, powerful young specimens with horns measuring 46 to 48 inches (117 - 122 cm).

These young males often roam aimlessly and can easily get in trouble—they are more vulnerable to poaching or to being maimed or killed in fights with older bulls. (In order to better understand herd dynamics, we hope to establish and document the moment when these young bulls settle down and become territorial.)

A big surprise was finding a bull alive and well that had been collared in 2013. We'd estimated him then to be around 12 years old, so now he was 18. We have never before found a bull older than 15 years. We darted the old boy and relieved him of his battered, worn-out tracking collar. He was in poor physical condition, with most of his teeth worn down to the gums. He probably doesn't have more than a few more months to live.

As female giant sables are the crucial component of our conservation work, we were eager to tackle the herds. The first four breeding herds were fairly easy to locate and by the end of the seventh day of flying we had collared two cows in each of these herds plus a couple of territorial bulls. The fifth herd, with a home range farthest from our base of operations and from the other groups, proved much harder to find. Our data on this herd are scarce. This is one of our two largest groups and, although in a region of extensive *anharas* (natural clearings) and relatively open woodland, for some reason we always struggle to locate this group. (In 2009 and 2013, we didn't find them at all, in 2011 we found only a very small subgroup that had temporarily split off, and in 2016 we got to them only on the very last day of flying.)



The 18-year-old veteran after his collar was removed. Pedro vaz Pinto photo

The two GPS collars we had managed to put on individuals from this group in the past lasted just a few months before one collar failed and the female carrying the other one died. A VHF collar put on 2016 is missing in action; that cow was probably poached. The last remote data from this herd is now more than two years old, so our knowledge of the routines of this herd is relatively poor. During this year's exercise, we kept finding bulls of this group, but not females. After several days and many hours of relentless searching, we finally found the herd on, again, the very last day of flying. We had only one GPS and one VHF collar left, and these were put on two cows.

Comparing the 2016 and 2019 demographic data for these five Luando Reserve herds gave us an estimated population increase of roughly 15%. This is what a well-protected healthy population could probably achieve (the Cangandala herd performs at this level); however, with the insecurity in Luando and the ongoing poaching, we had feared that their performance would be much worse.

The comparison of demographic parameters (age structure and sex ratios) shows much better results for every herd than recorded in the past 10 years. The number of cows remained stable or even went down slightly, but the average age of the females has dropped, and the number of yearlings and

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immatures has increased significantly, all of which suggests a much healthier population overall. The age of darted females averaged seven years, and only one cow was estimated to be older than 10 years. The potential for growth in the short term is now higher.

The pressure from snaring over the past three years appears to have gone down considerably. In years past, we'd determined that snares affect primarily young animals, and fatalities through snares are responsible for a skewed age structure and an unbalanced population.

The impact of traps and snares can be inferred from scars carried by survivors. In previous operations, the proportion of injured individuals among darted animals stood between 20% and 25%. The injuries were often extremely nasty leg wounds with signs of necrosis or even missing legs. Dr. Morkel had to perform several emergency surgeries to remove rope and steel-cable snares. Three animals we handled bore healed leg injuries; two of them, a bull and a cow, were around 12 years old, and the third was an eight-year-old female. The fact that the general population is now on average younger, while the older animals carry a much larger proportion of injuries when we know for a fact that young animals are the most vulnerable, is a very encouraging sign because it is consistent with the recent reduction in poaching.

We also found fewer other signs of poaching than in previous surveys. Not surprisingly, the herds closest to our new ranger post showed the fewest signs of poaching, although we did find some poachers' camps. (It appears that they now hunt at night with spotlights and shotguns.) However, the herd farthest from our post still suffers from rampant poaching; we found plenty of traps around water holes. Some of these traps—large poles with steel cables or very large iron gin traps attached—were within a few hundred metres of where we found the herd and were clearly targeted at the sable. A joint anti-poaching incursion with the military will be carried out in coming weeks.

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A nasty gin trap. Pedro vaz Pinto photo

We recorded two other antelope species, roan and reedbuck, daily; they appeared to be much more common than in any previous survey, likely because of the increased security in the reserve. The increased availability of these prey species probably also helps explain the reappearance of lions.

Pedro vaz Pinto, an Angolan researcher, is the man behind the Giant Sable Conservation Project. He began to look for the giant sable in 2003, and in 2005 camera traps finally proved its continued existence. In 2006, he was awarded the prestigious Whitley Award and in 2013 the international Terras Sem Sombra prize for biodiversity, in recognition of his giant sable efforts. Pedro's published work on giant sable may be found [here](#). See also more photos as well as this 8-minute video from the 2019 expedition.

Banner Photo: A dominant giant sable bull leads his herd. Pedro vaz Pinto photo.