

# giraffe WHYS



KELLY LANDEN

When an aerial survey carried out in northern Botswana revealed a 65 per cent drop in giraffe numbers, alarm bells sounded at the Giraffe Conservation Foundation. Andy Tutchings details how he and his colleagues have pooled resources with Elephants Without Borders and an Australian university in a bid to reverse this dire situation.

## HERBIVORE AND GIRAFFE

‘Herbivore and giraffe’ research – what’s all that about then?’ asked a distinguished-looking man, approaching me and two young Australian researchers in the ‘Kalahari Kofi’ as we tried desperately to upload our expedition blog before we lost the connection again. He’d seen the logo emblazoned on the side of our vehicle, which was parked outside one of Maun’s popular Internet cafés. Nodding and smiling as we explained the aim and importance of the project, he asked a raft of informed questions before departing with a concluding ‘About time too. If there’s anything I can do to help...’.

Representing the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF), I was in Botswana to assist in the implementation of the next stage in an ambitious and extremely important new initiative. Research conducted by Mike Chase and his team at the Kasane-based NGO Elephants Without Borders (EWB) indicates that there has been a significant decline in the populations of some key wildlife species in northern Botswana over the past decade and a half (see *Africa Geographic*, August 2011). In

response to the EWB report, the president of Botswana, Ian Khama, stated that he wishes to ‘effectively stop and ultimately reverse this undesirable trend’.

So what can be done? Well, before we can answer the ‘what’, we need to know the ‘why’.

There are several theories about why populations are decreasing and they include human-wildlife conflict and a slew of land-use issues. Climatic variations are likely to have had an impact too. But the bottom line is that we simply can’t be sure – and until there is an agreed cause there can never be consensus on a solution.

With this in mind EWB, with the continued endorsement and support of Botswana’s Department of Wildlife and National Parks, has established the Large Herbivore Ecology Programme (LHEP). The aim is to move away from ‘species-specific’ data collection and, by broadening the scope of surveys, to determine the reasons for the population declines. Once that has been accomplished, it should be possible to establish methodologies and management strategies that will resolve this potentially disastrous situation as soon as possible.

In response to reports of a huge drop in giraffe numbers in Botswana, a long-term study of the species has been initiated. Having darted a subject, a helicopter-borne research team waits for the immobilising drug to take effect.

Contrary to popular perception, giraffe populations across Africa have decreased by at least 40 per cent over the past decade; fewer than 80 000 make up the nine subspecies that occur between Niger and South Africa. To put this into perspective, 550 000 elephants cover a not dissimilar distribution. What’s more, some 75 per cent of the meagre giraffe total is made up of just two subspecies: East Africa’s Masai giraffe *Giraffa camelopardalis tippelskirchi*, estimated at 40 000 individuals, and the Angolan giraffe *G. c. angolensis*, reckoned to number 20 000. The remainder survive in often isolated pockets – some in war zones – that may comprise no more than a few hundred animals. Two of the subspecies have recently been categorised as Endangered and ‘of high conservation importance’ on the IUCN Red List: fewer than 300 West African giraffes ▶



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ABOVE Tempe Adams (left) and Kylie McQualter track a recently collared giraffe in the NG26 concession.

BELOW While on the recce trip, we were twice mesmerised by the sight of 1000-strong buffalo herds. With numbers that are almost constant, this species bucks the trend of declining populations in Botswana.

*G. c. peralta* survive in Niger and less than 700 Rothschild’s giraffes *G. c. rothschildi* are dispersed between Uganda and Kenya.

In Botswana, news that giraffe numbers are reportedly down by roughly 65 per cent in some areas is of serious concern. It was agreed that a dedicated giraffe researcher was needed and, in a graphic demonstration of what can be gained from pooling resources, expertise, ideas, experience and even funding, the LHEP brought together a triumvirate of international organisations. While EWB continues to act as the facilitator and in-country host of the project, it has gone into collaboration with Australia’s University of New South Wales (UNSW) and the UK/Namibia-based GCF. Having ironed out the fine details, Mike Chase, Julian Fennessy (giraffe expert and GCF’s conservation scientist) and Keith Leggett (PhD supervisor at UNSW) were able to set in motion the first long-term study of giraffes in Botswana.

Enter my two companions from Kalahari Kofi. Kylie McQualter, a UNSW PhD student and GCF associate researcher, will focus her work between the Chobe riverfront and the Okavango Delta’s NG26 concession, where over the next three years she aims to understand the ecological requirements and

conservation status of the region’s giraffes. Astonishingly, this is one of only a handful of such projects to be conducted on the species in the wild, so McQualter’s findings will feed directly into Botswana’s inaugural wildlife status report and the development of a framework document for the continent-wide management of giraffes. She is joined by fellow UNSW PhD student Tempe Adams, who will work directly with EWB. Her research will focus on human-elephant conflict and contribute to the LHEP.

It was agreed that the most efficient way to ensure that the two researchers hit the ground running would be to take them on a three-week reconnaissance expedition that would allow them to get acquainted with their subjects and potential research areas.

From Kasane, the recce trip took us through some of Botswana’s most breathtaking country where the birds and wild animals were spectacular: fish-eagles swooped on their prey, giraffes necked and the lions looked well fed. The country remains an iconic tourism

## WHO’S WHO IN THE GIRAFFE ZOO?

The nine recognisably different forms of giraffe in Africa have long been considered subspecies of *Giraffa camelopardalis* – but are they? Perhaps they are individual species in their own right, as some experts contend. To answer this question, GCF is conducting genetic sampling and analysis of all key populations across the continent. Initial results from northern Botswana indicate that the area may host a melting pot of (sub)species, and additional samples collected here and in Namibia’s Caprivi Strip in the coming months will help to unravel this mystery.

destination, its wildlife still relatively abundant. But the fact remains that the reaction of our friend from the café was far from isolated. Everyone we spoke to welcomed the project and agreed that something must be done to prevent what is undeniably becoming a precarious situation. But there was less agreement on the causes or solutions.

This is where the project comes in. Now on their own, and with their feet often quite literally not touching ground, McQualter and Adams are immersed in conducting aerial game surveys, fitting GPS tracking collars and collecting and processing hours of data. It is early days, but we are on the right track and working with some great people. I know I’m not alone in looking forward very much to observing how the LHEP develops and provides some much-needed answers over the coming months and years.

Read the expedition blog and follow regular updates from the bush at [www.giraffeconservation.org](http://www.giraffeconservation.org) and [www.elephantswithoutborders.org](http://www.elephantswithoutborders.org)



ANDY TUTCHINGS