

2015
PiCA
Recipient

Amy Toman

Trails of Africa-West / Animal Care Professional

PASSION INTO
[CONSERVATION] ACTION
GRANT



Conserving Namibia's Desert-Dwelling Giraffe



It is estimated that less than 80,000 total giraffes remain in the wild. Giraffe Conservation Foundation is currently on the front lines in several countries throughout Africa aiding in conservation research. GCF plays a vital role in many conservation aspects to ensure a sustainable future where all giraffe populations and subspecies are protected and secure in the wild.

Benefit to Conservation

This study will be the first ever giraffe conservation status assessment in Namibia, which is projected to form the baseline data for scientific research to help develop the first National Giraffe Conservancy Strategy for Namibia.

Benefit to the Birmingham Zoo

- Will allow us to continue to build ties with this conservation organization, such as we did on World Giraffe Day
- Strengthen ties and collaborate with our zoo colleagues that also support this research.
- Sharing my direct experience in the field studying giraffes with guests to inspire them to take action to conserve giraffe populations in the wild.

Benefit to Career

Opportunity to work alongside highly esteemed professionals in giraffe conservation in the field will not only offer tremendous learning opportunities for me as an animal care professional but will also allow for personal growth as well.

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Taking in the scenic view while heading out into the field



Jimmy and I visiting the Himba tribe in the Hoarusib River

PiCA Grant Summary Amy Toman

The “Passion into Conservation Action” grant provided me the opportunity to follow a lifelong dream to visit Africa. With this grant I was able to travel 7,920 miles to Northwest Namibia, Africa to assist in the first ever long-term ecological population study on Angolan giraffe. I had the privilege to work alongside Dr. Julian Fennessy, the executive director & conservation scientist of Giraffe Conservation Foundation.

In late May, my journey began as I ventured out of the United States for the first time. After nearly thirty hours of flying, driving and rushing through layovers, I had made it to Windhoek, Namibia. It was hard to believe I had finally made it. For nearly a year, I had been coordinating efforts with Steph Fennessy, the program director of Giraffe Conservation Foundation, to assist in the research that focuses on the Angolan (sub) species of giraffe and now I was finally here to meet her and Dr. Fennessy. On my adventure was Jimmy Sanders, a fellow giraffe keeper that had also traveled a long distance. He traveled all the way from Taronga Conservation Society in Sydney, Australia.

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After everything was prepped and packed for the field to bush camp, Dr. Fennessy, Jimmy, and I headed north in search of giraffe. The first day's drive flew by as if time had been standing still. To my shock and awe, we had already traveled nearly ten hours before deciding to make our stop for the night. To our surprise, Dr. Fennessy told Jimmy and me that we wouldn't be unpacking the 4x4 to get our equipment out; the first night we would sleep under the stars with only our sleeping bags listening to the sounds of the geckos.

After another day of travel we had finally reached our first destination of the Hoanib River in the Kunene region of Namibia. We had traveled nearly two full days to reach this area and as we drove I tracked all the different forms of wildlife in my journal. We were able to see healthy populations of wildlife from Oryx to Mountain Zebra that my pages were quickly overflowing with numbers of Springbok and more.

When we saw our first giraffe I could hardly believe my eyes. The giraffe appeared so small next to the massive Acacia trees and hidden in the shrubbery. It was hard to concentrate on the data collection at first as I was in constant awe of my surroundings. I was sitting in Africa with wild giraffe less than twenty feet away from me.



Setting up our camp for the evening



It was truly amazing how the world's tallest land mammal could look so small next to the landscape



A young bull enjoying his breakfast

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It was surprising to see giraffe in the Skeleton Coast with all the large sand dunes so close.

Throughout the week data collection required considerable patience, just as working with any animal would, whether in a captive or natural setting. We photographed each and every giraffe (right and left side), collected data on herd numbers and composition, GPS locations, etc., as well as collected tissue samples from giraffe by using a specialized remote biopsy dart gun to help better understand the genetic lineage of these desert dwelling giants. Our data collection was part of a larger ongoing program, which future researchers will use for identifying giraffe in the field and unravel the mystery of these animals. (GCF Field Report)

The time came to pack up camp and head further north towards Purros Conservancy in the Hoarusib River. It was another day's drive that led us through the open arid desert where we passed the fairy circles that decorated the landscape. We had arrived in Purros and were heading to our campsite when we ran into two bull giraffes. I couldn't believe right off the bat we had spotted giraffe so close to the community. We had observed Dr. Fennessy dart giraffe in Hoanib River but this time in the Hoarusib, he said it was our turn! Jimmy and I both couldn't believe we were getting the opportunity to actually dart giraffe in the wild.

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When it was my turn to dart, I instantly became nervous because I had only ever shot target practice before, never a live animal, let alone a giraffe! I loaded the modified gun with the biopsy dart and took aim. A few deep breaths and I was ready... I squeezed the trigger anxiously anticipating the hit. Success! I had done it! Following the shot the giraffe took a few large steps in a short gallop then stopped to look back, unharmed, about thirty yards from where we had darted him. I climbed out of the 4x4 and walked out to retrieve the dart to see if I had gotten the DNA sample.

When I found the dart I had measured nearly fifty yards for my shot, it was the best shot that I had ever taken. I picked it up and unscrewed the cap to find the tissue sample neatly inside. We stopped for a few glory photographs with my giraffe in the background. Overall, the journey led to us spotting nearly 130 different individual giraffes. Prior to the making this trip, I could never have envisioned that I would see this many wild individuals whether we spotted them alone or in herds of up to eight.

The memories and lessons taken from this trip, I am sure to never forget. The opportunity that was provided by the Birmingham Zoo will continue to drive my passion for conservation and assist with shaping my vision for continued conservation success.



Sometimes the giraffe were very hard to spot. Just kidding!
While recording data on the two behind us,
we spotted more giraffe moving in to join the group.



Out spotting giraffe in the Hoanib River.



A large bull that I was able to DNA dart! My trophy picture as the bull calmly walked away unharmed after darting.

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The Angolan giraffe were very light in color to blend amount the sandy covered hills

In the future I plan to continue to assist in furthering the Giraffe Conservation Foundation's mission of providing hope for these forgotten megafauna. I would like to extend a thank you to Steph and Julian Fennessy, and the Birmingham Zoo for allowing me to follow my dream and stick my neck out for giraffe conservation. If you would like to read more about my trip, you can follow this link to the Giraffe Conservation Foundations website. A field report is available for download under the 'Our Projects' area in the Namibia section on the website.



<http://giraffeconservation.org/>



The most amazing sunset I have ever seen in my life. This scenic view was truly breath taking

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