

Rescue and Relocation
Efforts to Save the Critically Endangered Sable Antelope

By Richard D. Estes, Ph.D.



Found only in central Angola, the giant sable (*Hippotragus niger varians*) is one of the most impressive but also one of the most critically endangered African antelopes. It was unprotected during the civil war that began in 1975 and only ended in 2002. Government and rebel armies alternately occupied the 8,280 sq km Luando Integral Reserve of the Giant Sable and the 630 sq km Cangandala National Park, 50 km from Malange, the provincial capital.

When my wife Runi and I spent a year studying the giant sable in 1969-1970, there were at least a hundred of them in Cangandala and 1000-2000 (a rough estimate) living in the wooded savanna between the Luando and Quanza rivers. On a return visit I made in 1982, there were still up to 100 in Cangandala and the park was still being protected by a Portuguese Angolan warden. Such was not the case in the Luando Reserve, which was inaccessible.

Pictures of a herd of bachelor males that I took in 1982 were the last published photos of the giant sable until 2005. On a 2002 expedition we saw no giant sable and hardly any other wildlife during three flights over the two reserves in a giant Russian military helicopter of the Angolan Airforce. On the last day, we walked in a large party to a site in Cangandala where local villagers reported sable had been feeding. We saw tracks, droppings and grazed grass that I felt sure were signs of a sable herd. However, only two people caught glimpses of what might have been sable and the accompanying film crew drew a blank. Reaction to published accounts of the expedition included speculation that the giant sable was extinct.

But then Pedro Vaz Pinto, a Portuguese Angolan naturalist attached to the Catholic University of Angola, undertook to prove the giant sable had survived, and once confirmed, to protect them. He hired local villagers as game guards ("shepherds") to patrol Cangandala NP, keep track of and protect from poachers any surviving sable.

Pedro began making the 15-hour-drive from Luanda to the park once a month, supported in part by a \$14,000 Giant Sable Conservation Fund in my care. In 2004 he installed camera traps at salt licks visited by sable and other game -- and finally! -- giant sable females and young took their own pictures. An article published in the November 2005 edition of Africa Geographic aroused international interest. But one observant reader wrote to say that a yearling in one photo looked a lot like the related roan antelope. Sure enough, the camera traps recorded the presence of additional roan x sable hybrids, and from time to time a big roan bull. Purebred sable were still being produced, however, 2 females in 2003, 1 female and

3-4 males in 2005. Presumably they were sired by a subadult male who triggered a camera from time to time. He then disappeared and no purebred offspring were born after 2005. The 3 surviving males born in 2005 were photographed at midnight on Christmas Eve, 2007 for the last time, aged 2.5 years. They had almost certainly vacated the park, maybe driven off by the roan bull. As no other roan bull was recorded, this one likely sired all 12 known hybrids in eight years. The appearance around this time of a few female roan may then have refocused his attention on his own kind

Without a giant sable bull, the sable in Cangandala were doomed to extinction, hybrids or no hybrids.

From 2004 onward, Pedro engaged in efforts to locate sable in the Luando Reserve, both on the ground and in the air, usually in an Angolan Airforce helicopter.. In September, 2004, an aerial reconnaissance was organized using microlight airplanes piloted by members of the Batelleurs aeroclub (RSA) and the Airforce helicopter, funded mainly by the Shikar Club of South Africa along with several affiliated hunting organizations Unfortunately a crash on the first day put the microlight out of commission and no sable were spotted from the ground.

But spoor and reports of local villagers kept hope alive, and a dung sample collected by Mr. Brendan O'Keefe proved upon DNA analysis to be giant sable. To travel overland in the Reserve, it was necessary to cross the Luando River on a makeshift raft and use quad bikes (ATVs), as the hundreds of log bridges on the roads had long since disintegrated.

On one trip to Luando Pedro camped at the site of our little house outside Quimbango and met with a ranger who had worked for us as a cook's helper in 1970 as a teenager. Incredibly, he and other surviving rangers continued to keep track of the palancas without pay or direction all through the civil war and up to the present

The first effort to capture sable (and deal with the roan bull!) in Cangandala was undertaken in August 2008. Esso Angola was the corporate sponsor and largest contributor. GTZ (German donor agency) and Unitel provided in-kind support. Oil Block 15 (Esso Angola, Sonangol and partners), and the Tusk Trust, provided funds to hire a helicopter and pilot from Namibia, and Peter Morkel, a veterinarian expert on animal capture and translocation, who headed the operation. But upon arriving in Luanda, John Frederick Walker, author of a book on the giant sable (*A Certain Curve of Horn*) and I were informed by Pedro that the helicopter pilot had decided at the last minute to return home. Without a copter the chances of getting within darting distance of our quarry were virtually nil. And so it proved. Although Pete Morkel elected to come anyway, and our large party stayed a whole week in the old acampamento Pedro had secured funds to restore, the herd was glimpsed only a few times and never within range. Ironically, four hours after we had visited a salt lick the sable regularly use, the camera trap Pedro had installed at the site recorded a series of pictures of the herd.

Unwilling to accept defeat, Pete, Pedro, and Jeremy Anderson returned in November, but again with no luck. Clearly this strategy wouldn't work. To address the critical situation that had evolved, they needed to develop a comprehensive plan. They agreed that captive breeding inside the park offered the best hope of preventing further hybridization and of mating the remaining sable cows with a sable bull - if only one could be captured in the Luando Reserve. So, in 2009 the objective was to capture all the surviving giant sable cows in Cangandala and confine them in a fenced enclosure inside the park, to find a giant sable bull in the Luando Reserve and airlift him to join the females. Funds left over from the 2008 operation, added to another major donation from Block 15 made it possible to hire an ace helicopter pilot from Zimbabwe, Barney O'Hara, and his Hughes 500 helicopter, together with Pete Morkel for the three-week exercise (July 24-August 17). The fence, which cost over \$100,000, was donated by Government.

Because of the string of failures, our expectations were low. There was considerable doubt whether even one bull would be sighted in Luando despite recent reports of sable herds in the northern part of the reserve by Luando rangers. Pedro was afraid the spoor was of roan instead of sable, as this species, formerly a distant second to sable, appeared to be on the increase.

 But *presto change-oh*, on the first flight to Luando, the capture team of Barney, Pete and Pedro spotted and darted a giant sable bull and a cow. Flying to Luando and over Cangandala on alternate days, the crew darted 8 bulls, one of which was in a bachelor herd of 7 males. The other 6 were territorial males on individual territories. Five of the eight captured bulls were fitted with gps collars. The cow, who proved to have a small calf, was seen again, accompanied by another female with an older calf, and two yearlings. The scarcity of cows was a concern, but signs of sizeable herds seen on previous visits indicate there are many more females in Luando, hidden away under the woodland canopy.

On alternate days the team captured Cangandala cows. By the end of the operation, all 9 had been transported one by one suspended upside down below Barney's helicopter to the 4 sq km fenced enclosure. After the first two cows had been deposited in the cloth-draped holding boma, one of the five collared bulls was recaptured and brought to the enclosure. Because it was more than 100km away, he was transported inside the big Russian chopper. The cows, seemingly mesmerized by his presence, followed him like sheep.

So, this exercise exceeded all expectations. The 9 purebred cows are now together in a herd with a stud bull. Next May some, maybe even all nine will produce purebred calves

The video-filmed capture operation, shown on Angola television, created great excitement in-country and was widely reported internationally. Although the Palanca Preta Gigante is the national emblem whose image is painted on the tails of Angola's airliners, very few people have ever seen one in the wild and there are none in zoos anywhere. None to our knowledge had ever been captured alive before. Such was the impact of the news that the national football team, the Palancas Negras (Portuguese for the giant sable), announced they would come to Cangandala to meet the captive animals

One of the first fruits of the operation is a \$50,000 grant from the ExxonMobil Foundation to the Giant Sable Fund, followed by a \$26,000 grant from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In addition, USFWS are funding a return visit by Pete Morkel in coming months to check up on the captives. More support and Government involvement are now very probable. The American Ambassador, Dan Mozena, is one of our staunchest allies.

Public interest in the ongoing efforts to safeguard the future of the giant sable could help reawaken the Government's concern for Angola's other protected areas, all but one of which have been left unprotected since the outbreak of civil war. That one man's efforts could have such a catalytic effect is inspirational. Pedro received the Whitley Award for Conservation Excellence in 2006. Now he's been nominated for the Buffet Award for Leadership in African Conservation.

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