

U.S. Zoos Airlift Rare Antelopes to Africa

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After a 44-hour journey from the United States, 18 rare mountain bongo antelopes emerged from their shipping crates and set foot on their ancestral homeland of Kenya. It may have been one small step for the bongo antelopes, but a giant leap toward the survival of their species.

The January 30 homecoming was four decades in the making.

In the 1960s a group of conservationists, including actor William Holden, became concerned about shrinking wildlife populations in Kenya. They captured 30 bongos from the slopes of Mount Kenya and shipped them to U.S. zoos for breeding.

With their rich red coat, prominent white stripes, and lyre-shaped horns, the bongos became a big hit with zoo goers. Thriving in captivity, their U.S. population now exceeds 400.

In Kenya, meanwhile, the bongo antelopes, victims of deforestation and poaching, are teetering on the brink of extinction. Less than a hundred remain in the Aberdares Conservation Area, and experts believe the last of the bongos in the Mount Kenya region vanished ten years ago.

To help save the bongos from extinction conservationists recently persuaded 13 zoos across the U.S. to donate 18 bongos (descendants of the animals shipped from Kenya decades ago) for repatriation to the Mount Kenya Game Ranch. There, the animals will form the stock for a breeding and management program that will enable bongos to eventually be released into the wild.

The program has the potential not only to save the Kenyan bongos, but also to revive the fragile ecosystem of Mount Kenya National Park, which is now a UN World Heritage site. The bongos are well-recognized ambassadors for East Africa's mountain forests. Some experts hope their reintroduction could become a model for biodiversity-conservation efforts.

"Quite often when you see critically endangered species dwindling in the wild, there's a last gasp and they're gone forever," said Paul Reillo, director of the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation in Loxahatchee, Florida, which organized the repatriation. "This is a rare and unprecedented example of giving these species a second chance."

Almost six feet (two meters) high, the mountain bongos (*Boocercus eurycerus isaaci*) are the largest of all forest antelopes. Although they are notoriously shy, they sometimes freeze in place when in distress, making them easier to catch.

The mountain bongos' stock has plummeted in the past 50 years, mainly because of unrestricted hunting, poaching, and lion predation.

Deforestation has also taken an enormous toll on the bongos' natural habitat, with farmland encroaching on the wild forest. Wildlife corridors that once connected Mount Kenya and the Aberdare Mountains—where small bongo populations are believed to have survived—have long been severed.

Fourty-Four Hours Later

After three months spent in quarantine at the White Oak Conservation Center in Yulee, Florida, the 4 male and 14 female bongos were sedated, loaded onto a DC-8 cargo airplane, and flown to Nairobi, the Kenyan capital. From there, they traveled by truck to the ranch in Nanyuki, at the foothills of the Mount Kenya UN World Heritage site.

At sunrise on January 30, 44 hours after their journey began, the bongos were finally released into fenced enclosures similar to their captive environments in the U.S. zoos. The animals, looking surprisingly refreshed, jumped out of the crates and headed for a quick meal at some thick bushes, an encouraging sign to the conservationists.

Six days after their arrival, one female even gave birth to a baby bongo, which was named Kenya.

The zoo animals will spend the rest of their lives in a 100-acre (40-hectare) breeding enclosure because they are too tame to run free. But if all goes according to plan, they will give birth to new generations of bongos that are more wary of humans.

It could be a decade, however, before the animals are returned to the wild, Reillo said. "At least three to five generations are necessary to remove humans from the equation."

Scientists would like to bring over two dozen bongos every year, but funding such a repatriation program is a major challenge. The airplane charter alone cost U.S. \$240,000. "Reintroduction of species is extremely expensive," Reillo said. "It is far cheaper to save an animal while it still exists in the wild."

Economic Benefits

The return of the bongos was partly funded by the United Nations, and it's part of a broader conservation initiative by the UN around Mount Kenya. The UN program has so far reduced illegal logging by 99 percent and forest fuelwood consumption by 50 percent.

"It's not about moving bongos from the United States and plunking them into a World Heritage site," said Seema Paul, the senior program officer for biodiversity at the United Nations Foundation in Washington, D.C. "A lot of effort has gone into creating conditions in which local communities would welcome these animals back and make sure they survive, that they thrive, and that they do not become extinct again."

She says the bongos can provide economic benefits.

"We're concerned with poverty alleviation, and one of the ways we can contribute to that effort is by promoting sustainable tourism," Paul said. "The expectation is that this reintroduction will attract more tourism to the area, which we hope will translate into better revenues for local communities."

The Rare Species Conservation Foundation used a similar conservation model for preserving a flagship species several years ago on the Caribbean island of Dominica. There, a national park was set up around the rare sisserou parrot, Dominica's national bird. The foundation's Paul Reillo sees a similar opportunity for the mountain bongo.

"Mount Kenya is one of the highest-priority biodiversity sites on Earth, and certainly one of the richest forest ecosystems in Africa," Reillo said. "On top of that, we have this very famously rare creature that has all but disappeared from the ecosystem."