

W. Africa's last giraffes make surprising comeback

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In this Aug. 1, 2009 photo, a giraffe from Africa's most endangered giraffe subspecies stands in the bush near Koure, Niger. By all accounts, they should be extinct. Instead, their numbers have quadrupled to 200 since 1996, an unlikely boon experts credit to the concurrence of an impoverished government keen for revenue that has enacted laws to protect them, a conservation program that encourages people to support them, and a rare harmony with humans who have accepted their presence. (AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell)

(AP) -- A crisp African dawn is breaking overhead, and Zibo Mounkaila is on the back of a pickup truck bounding across a sparse landscape of rocky orange soil.

The tallest animals on earth are here, the guide says, somewhere amid the scant green bush on one side, and the thatched dome villages on the other.

They're here, but by all accounts, they shouldn't be.

A hundred years ago, West Africa's last giraffes numbered in the thousands and their habitat stretched from Senegal's [Atlantic Ocean](#) coast to Chad, in the heart of the continent. By the dawn of the 21st century, their world had shrunk to a tiny zone southeast of the capital, Niamey, stretching barely 150 miles (240 kilometers) long.

Their numbers dwindled so low that in 1996, they numbered a mere 50.

Instead of disappearing as many feared, though, the giraffes have bounced miraculously back from the brink of extinction, swelling to more than 200 today.

It's an unlikely boon experts credit to a combination of concerned conservationists, a government keen for revenue, and a rare harmony with villagers who have accepted their presence - for now.

There are nine subspecies of giraffes in Africa, each distinguished by geographic location and the color, pattern and shape of their spotted coats.

The animals in Niger are known as *Giraffa camelopardalis peralta*, the most endangered subspecies in Africa. They have large orange-brown spots that fade into pale white legs.

Ten years ago, an estimated 140,000 giraffes inhabited Africa, according to Julian Fennessy, a Nairobi, Kenya-based conservation expert. Today, giraffes number less than 100,000, devastated by poaching, war, advancing deserts and exploding human populations that have destroyed and fragmented their habitats. Around half the giraffes live outside game

parks in the wild, where they are more difficult to monitor and protect, Fennessy said.

Giraffe hunting is prohibited in many countries. And some, like Kenya, have taken giraffe meat off the menu of tourist restaurants that once served them up on huge skewers. Even so, Fennessy said the plight of giraffes has largely been overlooked in conservation circles.

"We're trying to increase awareness, educate people, help governments put conservation practices in place," said Fennessy, who founded the Giraffe Conservation Foundation to draw attention to the animals' plight. "If we don't, giraffe numbers are going to continue to drop."

The first time the trucks came for them in Koure was more than a decade ago, during the reign of an army colonel who seized power in a 1996 coup.

Col. Ibrahim Bare Mainassara was adamant they would make a good gift for the president of neighboring Burkina Faso and he ordered several captured, said Omer Kodjo Dovi of the Niamey-based Association to Safeguard the Giraffes of Niger.

But "the giraffes went into a panic," Dovi said. "They couldn't outrun the trucks."

The animals weigh up to 2,200 pounds (1,000 kilograms) and can run at speeds up to 35 miles per hour (55 kilometers per hour). But if they fall, they can have difficulty getting up and die.

Dovi said five were captured. Three died on the spot; two were believed shipped to Burkina Faso. Nobody knows if they ever made it.

By 1998, Niger's government - pressed by conservation groups - began to realize the herds were about to disappear forever.

Authorities drafted new laws banning hunting and poaching. Killing a giraffe became punishable by five-year jail terms and fines amounting to hundreds of times the yearly income of farmers.

The changes had a startling effect: by 2004, the herds had nearly doubled in size.

The government "realized they had an invaluable biological and tourism resource: the last population left in West Africa," said Jean-Patrick Suraud, a French scientist with the Association to Safeguard the Giraffes of Niger.

In 2004, though, the trucks came again - this time on a mission for President Mamadou Tandja, who ordered a pair captured for the dictator of neighboring Togo.

Four vehicles barreled down the two-lane highway toward the giraffe zone. Inside them were Togolese soldiers, government forestry rangers and three local guides, according to the independent local newspaper *Le Republicain*, which reported the incident and published photographs.

"They did it like cowboys," said Suraud, who began working in Niger in 2005. "These are big animals, fragile. They can easily die of stress."

The giraffes were tied up, blindfolded, tranquilized and hauled onto the back of open-back trucks bound for the Togo border.

They died en route.

In [Africa](#), giraffe skin is used for drums, watertight bowls, even shoes. Their bones are employed as grinders and some believe they can help bring rain. Mounkaila, the guide, said some villagers believe the hair on giraffe coats can induce fertility.

The villagers living around Koure, though, think giraffes are mostly useless, Suraud said. They aren't domesticated, and they can't be hunted for food. So the Association to Safeguard the Giraffes of Niger tries to teach people it's in their interest to keep them around.

"We tell them, 'if you are pro-giraffe, we can support you, give you loans,'" Suraud said. "But there is a quid pro quo. 'We also want you to stop chopping down their bushes and plant trees.'"

With 10 staff and help from private European zoos and the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation, the Giraffe Association has built wells, planted trees and educated guides like Mounkaila who make a living escorting visitors through "the giraffe zone" - the fenceless region the animals trek through.

Niger's herds bring in a modest amount of tourist money for the government, too, paid in small sums through \$10 fees distributed partly to the local district.

The Giraffe Association has focused especially on loans.

One of the beneficiaries, a 55-year-old Adiza Yamba, bought a small lamb for \$50. The mother of eight fed it, then sold it for twice the price after it grew, paying back the money and pocketing the profit - a huge amount in one of the world's poorest countries.

"We don't mind them," Yamba said, echoing the stated view of most farmers. "Sometimes they try to eat the beans or mangos from our fields,

but they never bother us."

Truer sentiments, perhaps, were evident last year when a pair of giraffes was killed by a truck as they crossed the highway: villagers swiftly moved in and divvied up huge chunks of red meat from the roadkill.

Since 1996, Niger's giraffe population has expanded by 12 percent per year - three times their average growth rate on the rest of the continent, Suraud said.

One reason: they face no natural predators. Poachers around Koure long ago wiped out the region's lions and leopards - which can claim 50 to 70 percent of young giraffes before they reach their first year.

The giraffes had also stumbled upon a peaceful region with enough food to sustain them, and a population that mostly left them alone. Today, they crisscross the land in harmony with turbaned nomads in worn flip-flops shepherding camels and sheep.

Drawn to freshly growing vegetation that sprouts during the rainy season, the giraffes can be seen in herds of 10 or 15, wrapping 18-inch black tongues (45-centimeter black tongues) around thorny acacia trees and combretum bush.

They graze within eyesight of farmers living in thatched dome huts, sometimes crossing through their bean and millet fields.

They are so used to humans, tourists can walk virtually right up to them.

"It's quite special in Niger how habituated they've become," Fennessy said. "You don't normally find giraffes living so close to villagers."

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As the herds grow, some question how much the land can support.

The animals have been exploring new zones close to the border with Mali. In 2007, two crossed into Nigeria, and never returned.

"When they go away from this zone, it's a big risk, they can be hunted easily," said Suraud. "The population may be growing, but they're still very threatened."

The biggest hazard: habitat loss.

On a recent day, Salifou Mamoudou, an Environment Ministry official, spotted a turbaned man raking away vegetation from a dirt field. He told the man he was breaking the law; the man said he was only plowing a family plot - legally.

Mamoudou shrugged, and moved on.

Villagers relentlessly cut down dead wood to sell, he said. And, in an effort to make way for crops, they cut down vegetation the giraffes feed on. That's technically illegal, but there is almost no authority around to stop them.

"If we let them, they'll cut trees all the way up to the road," Mamadou said, waving a hand toward the highway, several miles (kilometers) away. "If there is no habitat, there will be no giraffes."

In the early morning dusk, a family of five giraffes is feeding on bubbles of vegetation freshened by recent rain.

It is a peaceful, primordial scene.

Mounkaila, the guide, takes a drag off a cigarette and walks casually toward them. He is just a few yards (meters) away, dwarfed by animals nearly three times his height.

Mounkaila rattles off some facts, not bothering to keep his voice down. The gentle creatures eye him, but don't seem to mind. A step closer, and they will slowly walk away.

They can grow up 20 feet tall (six meters tall), he says. They can eat 65 to 85 pounds (30 to 40 kilograms) per day, live an average of 25 years, and are able to go without water for weeks, needing less than camels.

Amid a clutch of treetops in the opposite direction, the heads of another pair poke out.

Mounkaila sweeps his shriveled hand across the landscape, toward a red and white cell phone tower rising not far away above the greenery.

"It wasn't always like this," the 50-year-old says, digging his flip flops into the orange soil. "When I was a boy, the giraffes were far more numerous, but they were harder to see."

There used to be enough vegetation to conceal them, he said, but the bush and forests are disappearing. And with nowhere to hide, the animals are forced to come out in search of food.

"They're easier to spot," Mounkaila said. "But that's good for us, not them."

On the Net: [Giraffe Conservation](http://www.giraffeconservation.org) Foundation:
<http://www.giraffeconservation.org>

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