

Once feared extinct, Angolan sable wins new hope for survival

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A male giant sable antelope, or palanca negra gigante, roaming free in July 2009 in the Luando Reserve in Malanje, Angola. Fewer than 100 specimen are believed to be still alive after the animals' numbers were decimated during the 27-year civil war that shattered Angola. The animal's horns have been painted red to facilitate identification from helicopters.

They are Angola's national symbol and the nickname for the country's football team -- yet fewer than 100 are believed still alive.

And while they are plastered on bank notes and company logos, only a handful of people have actually seen the giant sable antelope -- or palanca negra gigante as they are known in Portuguese, the official language -- in the flesh or beheld their majestic metre-and-a-half (more than five-foot) [horns](#).

The animals' numbers were decimated during the 27-year civil war that shattered this country on Africa's southwestern coast, before it ended in 2002. Among the survivors, many giant sables stopped breeding or started cross breeding with roan antelopes, creating a new hybrid species.

But the sable's future now looks brighter after a breakthrough by scientists from Angola's Catholic University, who worked with shepherds to track down the antelope 100 years after the animal was first discovered.

After six years of monitoring stealth cameras and tracking dung samples, the team has finally captured 10 pure-bred giant sables for a breeding programme and tagged dozens of others to monitor their progress.

"It was an outstanding success, it exceeded all our expectations," expedition leader Pedro Vaz Pinto told AFP.

"The timing could not have been better because now is the traditional mating time for giant sable and we hope that by May or June next year, we will have at least seven calves."

"I don't think the giant sable will ever be non-endangered because it's only found in such small areas, but I hope we can upgrade it from its critically endangered status," he said.

Vaz Pinto travelled in a helicopter alongside renowned South African veterinary expert Peter Morkel, scanning the Cangandala National Park in the northeastern province of Malanje.

Once they had located a herd, they hovered above the ground and fired a sedation dart at a hybrid female, in order to fit her with a collar with a GPS ([Global Positioning System](#)) tracker.

"We used this hybrid as a Judas and she did a great job. In no time we were able to find nine pure females whom we tagged and took to a sanctuary," Vaz Pinto said.

The sedated animals were blindfolded and transported hanging by ropes from the helicopter to a special two square kilometre (0.75 square miles) breeding area in the park.

Some of the antelopes, which weigh up to 250 kilogrammes (550 pounds), were also carried in a Russian M18 helicopter lent to the team by the Angolan Air Force.

No males were seen in Cangandala and the females recovered show no evidence of having mated in at least seven years, which confirmed the team's worst fears.

The search then turned to the more remote Luando Reserve, where the only lead was a positive DNA test on a dung sample collected on an earlier trip.

There they found two herds, in total around 40 giant sable, and chose one for the breeding area.

Even after several weeks back in the capital Luanda, Pedro is still ecstatic about his encounters with the giant sables.

"Getting close to that first male was just incredible," he said. "But for me the most emotional part was when we put the male into the area with the females and stood back to watch them interact.

"We only took one because if we put two in there they would kill each other, but this one we chose is at his prime so we hope will be good for breeding."

And he joked: "The females immediately surrounded him and followed him everywhere, I think he will find it hard to have his own space over the next few weeks. It couldn't be more promising."

A leading authority on the giant sable, Richard Estes of Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology who conducted research expeditions on the animal as early as 1968, returned to Angola this year to join Vaz Pinto's expedition.

The now 82-year-old scientist said he got his best view ever of the animals.

"We had such low expectations based on our earlier failures that it was just incredible," he said, speaking to AFP from his US home.

"I did not think we would find a single male, so to find as many as we did was amazing. This is an absolutely seminal step for the project."

Both Vaz Pinto and Estes are thrilled so far with the project, which is conducted in cooperation with Angola's environment ministry and funded by oil companies such as Songangol and ExxonMobile. But both say it will bring new challenges and require more money.

"This has been an amazing success but it also brings new responsibilities," Vaz Pinto said.

The giant sable has a place in the heart of all Angolans," added Estes, "and we're looking at a renaissance of conservation conscience in Angola."

But he added: "The government has a moral and ethical responsibility to preserve its natural ecosystems and tackle the poaching and destruction of its national parks."

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