

# Recent Milestones in the Efforts to Save the Giant Sable in Angola

Jeremy Anderson, Richard Estes, Joe Holmes, Peter Morkel, John Frederick Walker and Pierre van Heerden

Peter Flack's article in the July/August 2009 issue of African Indaba presents an interesting account of the discovery of the Giant Sable and makes a strong case for greater inputs by the Angolan Government. The vital role played by Pedro vaz Pinto was however very understated, presumably because of a lack of information. We chronicle the recent milestones in the efforts to first find and then conserve the Giant Sable, so as to inform readers on the progress so far and to illustrate why we believe that what has been achieved over the last six years has been largely due to the efforts of Pedro vaz Pinto.

1. Richard and Runi Estes undertook research on Giant Sable behaviour and ecology between 1969 and 1970, being based in Luanda. He estimated then that there were then between 1000 and 2000 in Luando Special Reserve and at least 100 in Cangandala National Park.
2. With the April 1974 coup in Portugal and the increased involvement of South Africa in the civil war in Angola, UNITA gained control of the area encompassing Luando Special reserve and the main population of sable. Any formal protection came to an end.
3. Estes made a return visit to Cangandala NP in 1982 and there were still at least 100 animals in the park and it was still being managed by a competent warden. By this time Luando Reserve was inaccessible to outsiders, due to the civil war, and the status of the sable population there was unknown.
4. Pictures of a herd of bachelor males that that Estes took in that 1982 visit were the last published photos of the Giant Sable until 2005.
5. Despite assurances by UNITA that they were not targeting the Giant Sable, it would be naive to assume that animals were not being hunted for meat. The sable populations in both areas crashed over this period of civil war and there is no doubt that the reason was over-hunting for meat.
6. In 2001 Professor Wouter van Hoven of the University of Pretoria made a trip to Angola in the course of stocking animals into Quiçama National Park (Kissama). He attempted to make a search of the Giant Sable, but, as the civil war was still in progress, all that could be accomplished at that time was a short helicopter tour over Cangandala and Malanje region. No signs of Giant Sable were seen. (Pierre van Heerden accompanied this trip as cameraman.)
7. Vaz Pinto was then the ecologist of the Kissama Foundation and should have been on the helicopter but was obliged to remain behind due to lack of space.
8. Shortly after this trip, the war ended, and in 2002 the Kissama Foundation organized a more ambitious visit to the area. This included several flights with a military MI-8 transport helicopter over Luando reserve. This was followed by a short ground visit to Cangandala using two Unimog for transport. Present in this expedition, led by Prof van Hoven, were Richard Estes, John Walker, Brendan O'Keefe and again Pierre van Heerden. By then, Pedro vaz Pinto was the deputy managing director of the Kissama Foundation, and although he was involved in organizing some of the logistics, he did not participate in the field visit. In this visit to Cangandala, sable spoor and dung were found and a sighting was made of what was claimed to be a sable. Several members of the party have expressed strong doubts that the animal "sighted" was a sable. The sighting was made by someone who had never been in the bush in Africa. It was of a single "red antelope" (bushbuck are more numerous and the duiker in Malanje region have a reddish hue – both occur singly and are more common than sable). Surprisingly, the spoor at the sighting was not checked.
9. By this time vaz Pinto had concerns about the approaches that had been made to determine the presence of sable. He also worried that there was no clear strategy for the conservation of the species. He concluded that concrete proof that some Giant Sable had survived the civil war was still needed and this could only be provided by photographic evidence. He decided on a survey in Cangandala to be done on foot by a small team of observers. This would have to be done outside his normal work responsibilities.
10. In 2003 vaz Pinto became affiliated to the Research Centre of the Catholic University of Angola as researcher. In the same year the University launched the Palanca Project (The Giant Sable Project, renamed in 2005 as The Giant Sable Conservation Project). Pedro was then appointed the project coordinator, and the project created a specific bank account within the University. This account is still in use today. The first sponsors for the project were Angola LNG (Natural Gas Project) and the UNDP country office. It wasn't easy to fundraise in Angola at the time, but the Project under Pedro's leadership proved to be reliable, trustworthy and effective. This has been the foundation for the consistent growth of the project and the increased support received ever since.

11. This new "approach" was mainly an Angolan initiative, but was done in close consultation with Richard Estes, Brian Huntley and Jeremy Anderson, who shared their experience and provided ideas for the best strategy to follow.
12. In this first year, vaz Pinto accomplished less than he had hoped for, adding little to the previous trips to Cangandala and Luando. On a 2-week expedition to Cangandala, he and his team walked several hundred kilometres but saw little game: mostly duiker and bushbuck, roan only once and no sable. To make matters worse, they found lots of signs of poaching in the park. He sent some dung samples to Cape Town University for DNA analyses, but the results were disappointing: one roan, one waterbuck and a few other undetermined samples. By then, it was considered doubtful whether the dung samples would give a reliable result. The sable population – if there was one - was obviously much smaller than had been hoped for, and the surviving animals were under enormous pressure from poaching. The conditions on the ground were difficult, with no roads or access during the rains, armed poachers camped in the park and no park staff. It seemed unlikely that vaz Pinto or the team would actually see any sable, let alone obtain a photograph as evidence. Another approach was clearly needed and the possibility of carrying out a dedicated aerial survey of Luando was considered to be the next option. As there is no AVGAS in Angola, this meant using a turbine powered aircraft, which the project could not afford, or to use a microlite with a rotax engine and ran on petrol (gasoline).
13. At the end of 2003 Anderson made contact with the Bateleurs, a Johannesburg based NGO whose members volunteered the use of their aircraft for conservation work. His proposal was to bring a couple of pilots and their respective microlites to Luando Reserve, and over a two week period carry out an intensive survey of the most promising areas in the Luando reserve.
14. The mission request to the Bateleurs was made in February 2004 and was immediately approved. Joe Holmes who ran their microlite squadron and Pedro began planning the survey for the coming dry season. Apart from the logistics of getting the microlites and fuel to Luando, the most critical aspect was getting approval from the authorities to be able to fly over the area and between the town of Malanje and Luando. With no road access to Luando the logistics were a serious headache.
15. In Angola vaz Pinto sorting out the logistics required to make this expedition possible. He also got the Governmental support and endorsement and then approached the Angolan army, whose participation was decisive. The Air Force joined the project, donating drums of gasoline and making available an Antonov transport plane to move the microlites, the camp gear and the team from Luanda to Malanje airport. They then provided a MI-8 chopper to make the necessary trips to take the team and equipment down to Luando Reserve. In April vaz Pinto made a quick survey over the reserve on a MI-8, but as in previous visits he drew a blank. It was the wrong season and the MI-8, the only chopper available, is unsuitable for spotting wildlife. This recce was however useful to establish contacts with local authorities and to choose the Capunda village as a base. Capunda had an old abandoned airfield and Pedro had to make sure that it was cleared of scrub and grass before the survey took place. In planning the survey, vaz was in regular discussion and decision making with the Angolan civil authorities, the Angolan army, the Bateleurs and Anderson. The initial team for the survey was Pedro van Pinto, Jeremy Andersen, Joe Holmes and Peter Vosloo from Bateleurs. This was then joined by Michael Eustace from the African Parks who were then offering to become involved in conservation efforts in Angola and in Cangandala and Luando in particular. In June Brendan O'Keefe and Pierre van Heerden, then joined the project. Brendan had secured grants from The Shikar Club and the Dallas Safari Club. These covered the costs of food and some of the camping gear and related expenses. He also brought four TrailMaster cameras donated by Dallas Safari Club and made the contact with Angolan Casa Militar in SA who arranged the transportation of the South African members of the party and the microlites from Johannesburg to Luanda in the hold of a cargo Ilyushin-76. This survey had an early setback as Joe Holmes's microlite had engine failure at low level about 40 Km from Capunda. With a combination of flying skill, and luck in finding a 30 meter wide clearing in the woodland, Holmes and vaz Pinto were shaken not stirred. The microlite was a total write-off in the Kamikaze attack on a termite mound. The survey produced mixed results. No sable were seen, but it did obtain than indirect evidence of sable such as spoor, dung and anecdotal witness accounts or recent sightings. Dung samples were collected which Brendan took back to SA. These would be later sent for analysis in Germany.
16. The next month (October) vaz Pinto initiated what he termed the "Shepherds Programme" in Cangandala. He hired 12 men from local communities and the fund provided them with a basic wage. Estes then transferred the



Transport of the microlites, camp equipment and Pierre van Heerden and Peter Vosloo in the cargo hold of an Ilyushin-76. The Johannesburg to Luanda return flights were donated by Casar Militar

donor funds that he was controlling to the Wildlife & Environment Society of Southern Africa and the Society set up an account specifically for them. Until these funds were exhausted, WESSA made monthly payments for the Shepherds' wages.

17. By the end of 2004, vaz Pinto had secured the much broader support that was needed, otherwise it would have been impossible to implement all the activities that were happening. This included travelling in the bush under extremely difficult conditions, 4x4 running costs, maintenance, consumables, etc.
18. The project was by then managing grants from PAPS (People & Parks) and the UNDP country office to cover the salaries of the shepherds. It also had contributions from Angola LNG Project for general expenses, plus a lot of support "in kind" from several organizations (foreign and national) based in Luanda. Also, and on his request, a few new trap cameras (TM-1550) had been donated by Pedro's friends and supplemented the ones originally provided by O'Keefe.
19. In December 2004 there was a first breakthrough, when Brendan O'Keefe announced that Prof. Pitra in Germany had obtained results from the dung samples from Luando (added by some samples vaz Pinto had sent from Cangandala). Seven of the samples were of *Hippotragus niger*. This was great news, Prof. Pitra, identified also some samples from Luando from roan (no surprise here), BUT, what rang a warning bell was that he also identified two samples as being from wildebeest and one from buffalo! This was a worry as obviously the wildebeest and buffalo identifications were incorrect. So how certain could one be of the others? Wildebeest don't occur anywhere within 500km of Luando, and a buffalo pat could never be mistaken for *Hippotragus* pellets! This led to a few tense e-mails between vaz Pinto and Prof. Pitra. Prof. Pitra insisted the results were correct and it was impossible for his lab to be responsible for contamination, but he later accepted that they had possibly been contaminated on the way. This raised some awkward questions, and vaz Pinto wasn't happy about announcing the survival of the Giant Sable until these had been properly answered.
20. Pedro then installed the new cameras at natural licks, or *Salinas*, in Cangandala. This was not a simple process and he first had to find *salinas* on foot in flat country with limited visibility. Each month, generally over weekends, he made the long return trip from Luanda to Cangandala to check with the "Shepherds", service and change the film in the cameras and to look for new *salinas*. This at last brought success, one of the cameras obtained the first photo records of sable in Cangandala. These shots showed part of a breeding herd, with adult cows and juveniles were clearly identifiable. After each month's visit, he was gradually able to compile a dossier of photos of individuals and what soon became apparent was that there was no mature bull with the herd. Then he sent around photographs of a sable cow and asked what some of us thought of her. It was apparent to some of us that she looked a like a roan – sable hybrid. This presented a serious problem and few of the consultative group recommended shooting the roan bull on the "precautionary principle". For several reasons, this could not be done. Careful examination showed that there was more than one hybrid and the age classification of the group showed that the first Roan x Sable hybrid calves were born in 2002 and that in 2004, the entire calf crop were hybrids. Since 2006, only Roan X Sable hybrids calves were born in Cangandala. The results are shown the in Table 1. The last pure sable calves had been born in 2005, indicating that the last adult bull had disappeared after the 2004 breeding season. What was a relief was that none of the hybrid cows showed any signs of having produced calves. This suggests that they are infertile.

Table 1: The Sable and Roan x Sable hybrids calves less than one year old recorded between 2002 and 2008 in Cangandala National Park							
Year of birth	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Sable calves	1	4	0	5	0	0	0
Hybrid calves	2	0	4	1	2	2	1
Total	5	3	4	3	2	2	1

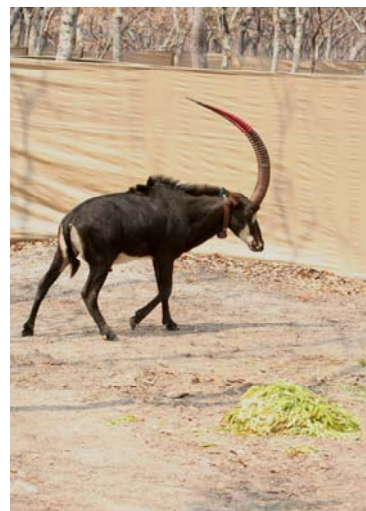
21. The level of monitoring was increased in 2006 with the acquisition of digital video cameras. With the "Shepherds" receiving basic Field Ranger training, the level of poaching decreased and although no weapons could be supplied to them, they were able to retain weapons (AK 47) captured from poachers. During the course of the year the MoU was signed between the Government and the Giant Sable Conservation Project. Three young bulls were photographed for the first time. In recognition of his efforts to save the Giant sable, Pedro received the Whitley Award in the UK.
22. By early 2007 the four young bulls were down to three. It was logically hoped that one of these would save the day and take over the breeding herd. On 25 Dec 2007, two of these bulls were photographed for the last time by a camera trap at a *salina*. They had obviously all left Cangandala, or had been killed. However, as visits by these bulls to the *salinas* were very infrequent, their certain loss could only be concluded some months later.
23. Pedro planned a capture operation in the 2008 dry season to catch and radio collar members of the herd so that it would later be easy to locate the animals. He raised the funds for the operation and contracted a well known Namibian capture operator to bring in his helicopter and capture crew. Two days before the capture was scheduled to start, Estes and Walker had arrived in Angola and Morkel and Anderson were *en route* to Angola

when the Namibian capture operator phoned vaz Pinto and told him that, after entering Angola, he had changed his mind and turned around and returned to Namibia. *Expletives deleted!!!* This was a major setback as it had wasted a lot of money and effort and more importantly set the programme back another year. Pete Morkel tried hard to dart an animal on foot, but was unable to get close enough.

24. In November 2008, when conditions were better for tracking and the flush of leaves had improved conditions for stalking, Pete Morkel again tried to dart an animal from the Cangandala herd on foot. Despite getting four good sightings, this was unsuccessful. At the same time, the German aid agency GTZ funded a report on Cangandala by Anderson and Morkel. Their report emphasised the dire situation for the survival of Cangandala's herd and recommended that the best course of action was to resort to an *in situ* intensive breeding operation. It was recommended that a large sable and roan-proof breeding enclosure be built, and that all the Cangandala sable cows be captured and put into this enclosure and an adult bull is brought in from Luando. This proposal was accepted and vaz Pinto and his colleagues raised funds to purchase game fence materials from Namibia and to pay for another capture operation.
25. As soon as it was dry enough to get a vehicle into the site selected for the enclosure, the 400ha breeding enclosure was constructed. When this was completed a smaller plastic holding boma was constructed in the enclosure. At the same time a ground search for the presence of sable in Luando started. An area of fresh spoor and reported recent sightings was located, but no actual sightings were made. DNA from dung samples however showed that the animals were sable. The 2009 capture operation was led by vaz Pinto and the keys to success were the active collaboration of the Angolan Army and Air Force and the roles played by Pete Morkel and Barney O'Hara and his Hughes-500 chopper.
26. The operation started in the last week of July and the breeding herd in Cangandala was located within the first hour. One of the hybrid cows was immobilized, fitting with a radio-transmitter collar and released. She would act as a "Judas goat" and enable the capture team to rapidly locate the breeding herd and catch the sable cows one by one. The following day, the capture team flew down to Luando, more than 100 km away, and managed to locate and collar an adult bull. This meant that when the transport Mi-8 Helicopter arrived, he could be located rapidly and re-captured early in the day while it was relatively cool. Over the next few days several more bulls were seen, and eight were caught, marked and released. The smallest horns measured were 49 inches long, all the rest were over 50 inches.
27. Because of the logistic problems of getting a vehicle to the darting sites, it was decided to fly the animals directly from the field, suspended from the helicopter. This technique had been successfully used by Morkel and O'Hara on a number of species. On the 3rd August the first two cows were caught and flown to the boma site. The following day two more cows were caught and flown to site 3 km from the boma where they were then taken by pickup to the boma. Most animals were in the boma within half an hour of being darted.
28. The breeding bull was captured in Luando Reserve on the 5<sup>th</sup> August, flown to the nearest village and then airlifted the 100 km to Cangandala in an Angola Air Force Mi-8 Transport chopper. He was then moved into the boma and rapidly settled down with the cows which were immediately submissive towards him.



One of the cows arrives from the field to be transferred to the boma



The adult bull from Luando reserve, shortly after his release into the holding boma in Cangandala

29. The entire operation went like clockwork and no sable was lost. Once all the animals had been caught. The minister of Environment visited Cangandala and saw them prior to their release. When the crowds had left and things had quietened down, the boma was then opened and the animals left to find their way out in their own time. Within 20 minutes the bull, followed by the cows, had quietly walked out of the boma. That evening, Pedro vaz Pinto brought out a bottle of Madeira wine dated 1905, four years before Varian discovered the Giant Sable. John Walker, who is also a wine writer, was for once lost for words. Today, seven months later, all the animals are still alive and well. By now the bull should have done his duty and the long wait for the first calves has begun.
30. The threats to the survival of the Giant sable have not gone away. The two threats of greatest concern are poaching in Luando and the possibility of theft of sable for sale elsewhere. The first concern is obvious, but the second is also a possibility. When a 46 inch Zambian sable bull in South African can be sold on auction for around \$500,000 – what is the value of a Giant Sable bull? Already there have been approaches by South Africans to try and obtain a breeding bull from Angola. Should that ever happen, it is inevitable that it would be used to breed with cows from western Zambia that have similar facial markings to Giant sable. There have been recent articles suggesting that the western Zambian sable that have similar facial markings are Giant sable and that they are in fact outlying Giant sable. Sadly too, western Zambian sable have already been sold by dishonest dealers as being Giant Sable to gullible buyers in the USA and Middle East. There still is a long way to go before the status of the Giant sable is secure. The first priorities are that the breeding enclosure must be increased in size, and the Government must come to the party and provide resources to increase the level of protection in Luando. Cangandala must also be fenced and this will allow extra bulls to be brought in.

In our view, had it not been for Pedro vaz Pinto, we doubt that the progress in conserving this iconic antelope would be where it is today.



Dr Pete Morkel with a typical Roan x Sable hybrid cow in Cangandala National Park



Pedro vaz Pinto with the first Giant sable bull to be caught – ever. (Early mornings were cold and capture was done with a chopper door removed).



One of the bulls, captured, collared and then released.