



BOHARA

# ANGOLA'S GIANT SABLE MAKES A TRIUMPHANT COMEBACK

BY JOHN FREDERICK WALKER

**T**he huge, green Angolan Air Force MI-8 transport helicopter thunders over our heads as it circles the forest clearing in Cangandala National Park. As it descends, its powerful downwash flattens the field of straw-yellow grass. Game guards, police, villagers, biologists and a camera crew

start moving, then sprint toward the helicopter, even before the huge rotors stop turning.

On board is the national animal of Angola, a splendid, black bull of a subspecies thought by many to be extinct: *H. niger variani*, the Giant sable antelope. Drugged, blindfolded, kneeling on a

stretcher and held steady by game guards gripping his knurled sweeps of horn, he twitches and works his jaws. The crowd of handlers, alternately arguing and hushing each other, stumble and shuffle as they move the 500-pound antelope from the cargo bay to the back of a pickup for the brief ride to the holding boma



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Opposite page: A Giant sable bull darted, tagged and collared in Luando Reserve.  
 Top: Pedro Vaz Pinto, head of the Giant Sable Conservation Project, readies a radio collar.

of the newly fenced breeding sanctuary. He'll join the copper-coloured female sables previously darted and transported there. By the time the capture operation is over, his instant harem will number nine. This is the climax of a dramatic

effort to save a critically endangered antelope. The rescue of this iconic animal, organised by Angolan biologist Pedro Vaz Pinto, came just in time: he estimates there might be less than 100 of these magnificent creatures left.

**TANTALISING PHOTOGRAPHS OF BULLS TAKEN IN THE 1920S REVEALED FOR THE FIRST TIME THEIR BREATHTAKING HORNS (REACHING 60 INCHES IN LENGTH) AND SCULPTURAL PROPORTIONS.**

To understand what this all means for Angola, you have to go back a century. In 1909, Frank Varian, a British engineer in charge of constructing a railway across Angola, reported that sable antelopes with record-length horns had been shot some 300 miles inland. It was the first published mention of the last great African quadruped to become known to the outside world, recognised as a sub-species in 1916. Tantalising photographs of bulls taken in the 1920s revealed for the first time their breathtaking horns (reaching 60 inches in length) and sculptural proportions. Overnight, the Giant sable was transformed into the ultimate trophy, and it was relentlessly pursued by big-game hunters and museum collectors before being given a measure of protection by the Portuguese colonial authorities.

Two parks — Cangandala National Park and the larger Luando Strict Nature Reserve just to its south — make up the sable's known range. But by the mid-1970s, it had nearly vanished, swept up in the horrific civil war that followed Angola's independence and finally ended in 2002. With its habitat turned into a war zone, the country's parks unstaffed and poaching rife, many Angolans feared that their *palanca negra gigante* lived on only in its majestic profile shown on the country's postage stamps, currency, the tail fins of the country's airline, and the jerseys of its soccer team.

Still, some biologists, like Pedro Vaz Pinto, refused to give up. The Lisbon-trained researcher is environmental adviser to the Catholic University of Angola's Centre for Scientific Research and Studies and head of its Giant Sable Conservation Project. Recognising that one of the reasons for the failure of several high-profile but abortive postwar attempts to capture the animal on film was insufficient field research, he began a "shepherds" programme with the Songo people at the edge of Cangandala park.

The Songo share the sable's habitat and have a traditional respect for it, making them ideal game guards for the neglected park. In 2004, with their help, Vaz Pinto set up remote cameras with



Top: Vaz Pinto and the giant sable "shepherds" hold a tranquilized female in the boma.  
Bottom: The capture team discusses darting strategy.

infrared triggers near natural salt licks. In early 2005, he was rewarded with the first images of Giant sables taken in over two decades. One, a photo of a herd that included a pregnant female, was hailed

as proof of the sub-species' survival. But careful study of the images from his growing bank of remote cameras soon revealed a grim sub-story: the formerly viable populations of Giant sable and roan in the park were reduced to remnants — and were interbreeding.

"After everything that the Giant sable has endured," Vaz Pinto lamented to me in 2008, "now some of them could actually be bred out of existence." The only way to ensure a future for Cangandala's Giant sables, Vaz Pinto realised, would be a captive breeding programme in their natural habitat. That meant isolating surviving Giant sable females from

opportunistic roan bulls as well as the hybrids. And he'd have to bring in a Giant sable bull from the Luando Reserve, where the greatest population of *palancas negras* had always been found — even though, at that point, he had no direct evidence there were any left there.

With the biological clock ticking away for the Giant sable females, Vaz Pinto raised funds and organised an expedition in August, 2008 to collar at least part of Cangandala's mixed herd. But the helicopter crew failed to show up and the mission was doomed. Nobody had to point out to him that if the next expedition failed, there might not be enough Giant sables left to make another attempt worthwhile.

But Vaz Pinto's luck — and with it the Giant sable's — changed.

A year later, with critical funding from Angolan energy companies and the aid of the Ministry of the Environment





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Top Left: A Giant sable bull is brought to the breeding sanctuary.

Top Right: Vaz Pinto confers with the capture team; a military transport helicopter waits for the arrival of the bull.

Bottom: A stark reminder of the dangers the giant sable still faces: Vaz Pinto shows game guards poaching snares.

**THE ONLY WAY TO ENSURE A FUTURE FOR CANGANDALA'S GIANT SABLES, VAZ PINTO REALISED, WOULD BE A CAPTIVE BREEDING PROGRAMME IN THEIR NATURAL HABITAT.**

and Angolan military, he was able to put together the full-scale expedition needed. He recruited a crack wildlife capture team (including veterinarian Pete Morkel),

veteran field biologists Richard Estes (who conducted a year-long study of the Giant sable in 1969-70) and Jeremy Anderson, a dozen-strong support group and twice as many shepherds — and pulled off a conservation triumph.

Vaz Pinto later described his feelings after touching a living (but tranquilized) Giant sable. "It was a very special moment to grab and feel those massive and spectacular horns for the first time. It was no longer a creature of myth – it was there, bones, flesh and horns."

In fact, locating, darting, tagging and sometimes collaring these sables became almost routine on the expedition. The shepherds gathered around our camp's thatched dining-hut in the early evenings as we reviewed photos and video footage on our laptops, hoping to glimpse their animal. They cheered and laughed at a sequence showing Vaz Pinto leaping back as one darted *palanca negra gigante* bull lurched to its feet with unexpected speed after the antidote was administered. At

the end of the operation, when the bull and the females had been released into the sanctuary, hopefully to produce calves by the following year, we had time to reflect on the antelope's future.

That the Giant sable deserves protection, and not just because of its cultural importance, is beyond doubt. The questions raised by some about the antelope's sub-species status have been laid to rest by recent genetic research confirming its distinctiveness and silencing those who claim there's little difference between it and the typical sable found in neighboring Zambia. Still, Vaz Pinto was careful to collect DNA samples (in the form of ear snips) to supplement the teeth and skins that are still being studied in museums.

The Giant sable's return seems assured, as long as habitat loss and poaching, the twin scourges of African wildlife conservation, are kept firmly under control. ●

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