Angola’s giant sable antelope

In the pre-dawn darkness our two trucks rumble slowly over rutted picadas, dirt roads that lead out from the warden’s camp at the edge of Cangandala National Park and twist deep into the dry miombo forest. We roll to a stop, kill our engines and lights, and are instantly swallowed by silence and thick fog.

We’re about a mile from the point where Songo trackers from the nearby village, Bola Caxixi, had last spotted the small, elusive herd of majestic and critically endangered giant sable antelope.

By John Frederick Walker
Pedro Vaz Pinto, the 41-year-old, Lisbon-trained Angolan biologist who single-handedly spearheads the effort to save his country’s national animal, switches on his flashlight to illuminate the scene. Veterinarian Pete Morkel loads his darts with immobilizing drugs precisely calibrated to subdue a 500-pound ungulate. He packs up his tranquilizer rifle, and accompanied by a single villager, slips into the dark woods.

The day before, trackers brought into camp a leaf twisted into a cone and filled with dark, glistening sable dung pellets, slitly presenting it for inspection. “The trackers say the sables were near here yesterday,” Vaz Pinto whispers.

With any luck, the herd is still grazing in the anhara—a termite mound-dotted, grassy clearing—as the sun rises. With a bit more luck, Morkel may be able to get close enough to one to fire a dart.

We worked it out in advance: if the animal went down, the veterinarian would strap a leather GPS collar with a small transmitter around the antelope’s neck while the track-er ran back to alert us. We would rush to the scene, take tissue and blood samples and some rapid physical measure-
tments. I was already anticipating what it would be like to touch the twitching, glossy flanks of this rare and regal crea-
ture and run a hand down its backward-sweeping ribs.

Back then we discovered fresh, heart-shaped prints in the bare patches of ground. Those sable tracks, along with some piles of dung and reports of fleeting sightings, convinced Estes the species had literally dodged a bullet and miraculously escaped becoming another casualty of the conflict. But skeptics remained unconvinced, because no photos existed to confirm the claim.

Estes Pedro Vaz Pinto. He organized a 2003 expedition into Cangandala with the Catholic University of Angola and found the wildlife unusually skittish and difficult to observe. Meat-hunting intruders from outside the district had been shooting inside the unstaffed park. A year later, with South African involvement, Vaz Pinto led a more ambitious expe-
dition, complete with microlight aircraft, to the Luando Re-
serve. That effort also failed to produce film evidence of the mysterious quadruped.

Switching tactics, he went back to basics. Vaz Pinto recog-
nized that in a country with enormous humanitarian needs and a war-battered infrastructure, government resources for restoring national parks would be hard to come by. Instead, he mustered contributions from oil companies and modest private donations and returned to Cangandala. Supported by the provincial governor, he started working with the local Songo people, who have long shared the giant sable’s territo-
ry and revere the animal. They are its traditional guardians, having kept its existence a secret from the colonial authori-
ties for 400 years. For decades afterward, they purposely misled trophy hunters who pursued the sable.

Vaz Pinto initiated a “shepherds” program, hiring dozens of Songo to patrol parks of the part, to track giant sable herds and to monitor poaching. He set up his first remote cameras near natural salt licks in October 2004. Over the next two months, the cameras were knocked out of alignment and ants invaded the casings, which Vaz Pinto resealed with chewing gum. He had little to show for his ef-
forts—just a few shots of duikers and other small antelopes. In early 2005, he retrieved rolls of mostly damaged film. Discour-
aged, he almost didn’t bother to develop the one roll left intact. That roll turned out to have 16 images of giant sables—the first in 23 years.

There were no portraits of great bulls, but one photo showed a herd with a pregnant copper-colored female with the giant sable’s lack of a cheek stripe in its dark face mask. Published to great acclaim, it was hailed as proof that the giant sable had survived. But questions were raised about an odd-looking ante-
lope in the background. It had strangely long ears, like those of a roan. Roan antelopes, a stocky, short-horned species, live in Angola—and Cangandala.

Two years ago, Vaz Pinto, assisted by Estes, began analyzing the growing number of still photographs and some video footage he’d obtained. Once again, he was struck by the ab-

sence of mature males. He was sure that somewhere in the park there had to be at least one thick-necked black bull with sweeping horns, if only because three giant sable males were born in 2005. “He’s out there somewhere,” Vaz Pinto told me.
Left: Biologist Pedro Vaz Pinto (on right) secures a remote camera near a natural salt lick in Cangandala National Park with the assistance of park warden Cardoso Bebeca. Opposite: An image taken by one of the remote cameras captures an antelope herd with hybrids and a female giant sable (in the foreground).

“We can’t take a chance that these hybrids are fertile,” he explains, and isolating the giant sables would buy time for the juvenile males of the species to reach breeding age.

The capture operation was set for August. The leaves would be off the trees then, making the animals easier to spot from the air. But just before our trip, the effort suffered a major setback: The truck bringing a helicopter from Namibia was held up at the border for two days while cautious officials double-checked paperwork and permissions. Fearing their equipment could be impounded, the helicopter crew abandoned the project despite receiving customs clearance and drove back to Namibia, greatly diminishing our chances for success.

By now, the reason for the absence of mature males seemed clear—they simply weren’t there. At one point in 2006, sable shepherds patrolling the park had been shot at by bushmeat hunters. Had those magnificent walking emblems been poached?

That alarming possibility is one of the likely elements in the bleak story that Vaz Pinto has pieced together. The remnant populations of giant sable and roan in the park—neither large enough to be viable—were crashing. A roan bull, unable to find available females of his own species, had come to dominate and breed with giant sable females that lacked the usual protection of a mature sable bull. The result? Hybrid offspring with the long ears and full face mask of a roan. The situation would be a fascinating case study of interspecies antelope behavior except for the grim fact that one of the species may well be on the brink of extinction. Morel’s stalking methods are indistinguishable from a hunt, but there’s a difference: He’ll be shooting sables to save them, not slay them.

While the camp’s generator clatters on our last evening, Vaz Pinto flips open his laptop to review the information he’s downloaded from the remote cameras. I stare over his shoulder, fascinated by the highlights of the Cangandala image bank he’s amassed: exotic-looking frogs, flowers,裔 at the screen, fascinated by the highlights of the Cangandala image bank he’s amassed: exotic-looking frogs, flowers, and birds (he’s identified 230 species so far), as well as glimpses of African hunting dogs and a huge-tusked warthog.