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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

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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 picks 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, shyly 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 *anbara*—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 tracker ran back to alert us. We would rush to the scene, take tissue and blood samples and some rapid physical measurements. I was already anticipating what it would be like to touch the twitching, glossy flanks of this rare and regal creature and run a hand down its backward-sweeping ribbed horns. Then Morkel would inject the tranquilizer antidote, and the antelope would kick and lurch back to life, thunder off, and start sending back a pulsing signal that would at last link the surviving sables to their would-be saviors.

There were a lot of ifs.

"Look, if we get one, we'll celebrate," Vaz Pinto says.

It was the second day of a week-long effort to locate and collar Angola's *palanca negra*, a sable subspecies with coal-black bulls that carry horns reaching five feet in length. Unknown to the outside world before 1916, *Hippotragus niger variiani* received a measure of protection under Portuguese colonial authorities prior to Angola's independence in 1975. The giant sable became an icon, its proud profile gracing currency and postage stamps and the tailfins of the national airline's planes.

During the civil war, when most of the country's large mammals ended up in soldiers' cookpots or were shot for target practice, the antelope's symbolic importance to both warring sides helped it stay alive—even when its central highland habitat turned into a battleground and most of the rural populace fled, seeking refuge in surrounding cities.

Giant sables were never numerous. It's unlikely that more than a couple of thousand existed before the war, split between the 231-square-mile Cangandala National Park and the much larger Luando Strict Nature Reserve to the south. Now fewer than 100 may be left. But no one really knows.

Three biologists, the warden, two trackers, and I wait for Morkel to return. We huddle in the trucks in the morning chill. As the shapes of gnarled and spreading trees emerge from the cottony fog and birds twitter tentatively, I get out of my vehicle to look around.

Richard Estes joins me. For him, giant sable habitat is

familiar territory. Estes conducted a year-long study of the sub-species in 1969–'70 during the waning days of colonial rule. At 81, the white-bearded American biologist remains a vigorous field researcher. As if to prove it, he walks off and casually climbs a tree to peer farther into the forest.

On my last visit in 2002, Estes and I were on the first post-war foray into Angola seeking signs of giant sable. Curiously, we ended up a short hike from where we stand. Then, as now, it was August, when the miombo forest is foliage-thin and desperately dry before the expected rains. Fire-blackened clearings created by the annual man-made burning of the grasslands still smolder in spots. The new growth that sprouts from the sooty earth draws the sables from the woods.

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.

Enter 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 expedition, complete with microlight aircraft, to the Luando Reserve. That effort also failed to produce film evidence of the mysterious quadruped.

Switching tactics, he went back to basics. Vaz Pinto recognized 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 territory and revere the animal. They are its traditional guardians, having kept its existence a secret from the colonial authorities 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 parts of the park, 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-

Field biologist Richard Estes conducted a year-long study of the giant sable in 1969–'70, before the outbreak of Angola's civil war. "Patriarch," named for his impressive horns and ability to intimidate rival males (opposite), was one of the herd bulls he observed.

forts—just a few shots of duikers and other small antelopes. In early 2005, he retrieved rolls of mostly damaged film. Discouraged, he almost didn't bother to develop the one roll left intact. This 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 antelope 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 absence 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.

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RICHARD D. ESTES





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.

“After everything that the giant sable has survived,” Vaz Pinto laments, “now some of them could actually be bred out of existence.”

The giant sables in Cangandala may be a lost cause. Should Vaz Pinto give up on them and refocus his efforts on the herds in Luando Reserve? It’s unclear whether that remote region still harbors a healthy population, and a proper survey could be years away. Knowing that Angola can’t afford to lose any of its giant sables, Vaz Pinto says he can’t possibly write off the struggling herd in Cangandala.

And so he began raising money to collar the Cangandala sables and remove the roan bulls and their hybrid offspring.

At least we had Pete Morkel. Lanky and bush-tough, Morkel works on projects in East Africa for the Frankfurt Zoo and has doted, among other creatures, countless rhinos. He was the hired gun, and he practiced like one. He spent a hot afternoon the day we arrived methodically firing darts at targets in the bush, stoically ignoring the maddening gnat-size sweat bees that forced the rest of us to flail ourselves with branches and drape shirts around our heads in desperation. Morkel’s stalking methods are indistinguishable from a hunt, but there’s a difference: He’ll be shooting sables to save them, not slay them.

Morkel returns mid-morning. “Didn’t see anything,” he says wearily.

We pay a visit to Salina 7, one of 13 salt licks Vaz Pinto has identified in the park. The scuffed-out, gnawed-looking mineral outcroppings serve as a source of sodium and other nutrients for wildlife. At a half-dozen of these sites, Vaz Pinto has strapped upgraded, motion-detecting digital cameras to nearby trees. He monitors them regularly, replacing batteries and changing the memory cards. There’s little evidence of sable activity at this lick, so he’ll return with more shepherds and remove the camera.

For the next several days, a fruitless morning stalk, followed by a patrol of the salinas, became our routine. With their wrap-around eyesight, fine-tuned hearing, and keen sense of smell, the sables have every natural advantage. What’s more, these escape artists seemed to be grazing at odd hours and shifting their location frequently. If this were

a game, we’d be losing. Each day the score is the same: Sables 1, Humans 0. But it’s not a game, and the sables are the ones that are losing. The wariness that once saved these palancas could easily doom them if Vaz Pinto can’t locate, collar, and track the survivors.

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 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.

As he clicks on folders of sable and hybrid images, I think about his pitifully small population estimate of the park’s large antelopes: 14 giant sables (10 adult females, 4 young males), 2 roans (a dominant bull and a lonely female), and 10 hybrids (5 adult females, 2 young females, and 2 young males—and a dominant bull). The two dominant bulls rule different territories. The female giant sables drift between and are sporadically fertilized by the lone roan.

Vaz Pinto zips through several of the latest salt lick images, which normally feature smaller antelopes (“It’s bushbucks by night, duikers by day,” he explains). He clicks on Salina 7, which is only about six miles southeast of camp. The camera has captured Vaz Pinto and Morkel standing over the pawed mound at precisely 11:16 A.M. on the day of the first stalk. When he clicks the next jpeg, we’re stunned to see that four and a half hours later, the antelopes are there—

three young hybrids and a giant sable female.

We all groan. Estes and the shepherds gather around the glowing computer screen, shaking their heads in dismay. “The sables really are playing games with us,” Vaz Pinto says, sinking into an understandable funk.

Morkel joins us and points out how sleek and well-fed the female giant sable looks. In fact, she looks too good. “If she were pregnant or lactating, she’d be a lot scrawnier,” he says. Like most of the other giant sable females, she’s fully adult. They can breed as long as they live. But given a typical lifespan of 12 to 15 years, there may only be a 5-year window of opportunity for these largely barren females to repopulate the dwindling giant sable herd.

The next morning, we load the trucks to leave the park. Vaz Pinto has snapped out of his dark mood. He is already thinking a few months ahead to when the first rains will damp down the dust and the sables will leave clear prints in the dark earth, making them easier to track—and hopefully dart.

“We can’t give up on the giant sable in Cangandala,” he says. “Not now.”

A journalist, conservationist, and artist, John Frederick Walker wrote the highly praised A Certain Curve of Horn: The Hundred-Year Quest for the Giant Sable Antelope of Angola (Grove Press paperback, 2004). His latest book is Ivory’s Ghosts: The White Gold of History and the Fate of Elephants (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2009).