

**Ecology of desert-dwelling giraffe *Giraffa
camelopardalis angolensis* in northwestern Namibia**



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A thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney,
Sydney, N.S.W., Australia.

STATEMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY

This thesis is my original work, except where specifically acknowledged.

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NOVEMBER 2004

“There is perhaps no animal living more graceful in form, more beautiful in colour, and more stately and majestic in appearance, than the camelopard...measuring eighteen feet from hoof of the fore-leg to the crest of its crown, it stands, as an American would express it, ‘the tallest animal in creation’...a creature so strangely shaped, and possessing so much speed and strength, was certainly designed by the Creator for some other use than browsing upon the leaves of mimosa trees: but that use man has not yet discovered...”

Captain Reid, *The Giraffe Hunters*. vol. 1., London 1867

Abstract

The population size and range of giraffe *Giraffa camelopardalis* have been greatly reduced in Africa in the past century, resulting in geographical isolation of local populations and some herds surviving at the edge of the species' preferred range. Numerous factors have contributed to these declines, but historical analysis indicates that habitat loss and fragmentation, human encroachment, disease and poaching are the main threatening processes. These processes can be expected to continue to impact on giraffe populations, particularly as human populations grow and needs for land and resources increase.

This study used field data and laboratory analyses to investigate the taxonomy, behaviour and ecology of desert-dwelling giraffe *Giraffa camelopardalis angolensis* in the northern Namib Desert. This population resides at the extreme of the giraffe's range. My research also complements the community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) program of the Namibian government, and provides baseline data on the current population status and structure of giraffe in the Kunene Region.

The field data, genetic, habitat and forage samples used in this study were collected by myself and a number of research assistants over a period of two years (2001 to 2003), following preliminary research that I undertook between 1999 and 2001. Laboratory analysis of genetic samples was conducted by Dr R. Brenneman and his team at Henry Doorly Zoo, Omaha, NB., as well as by Mr D. Brown at UCLA, CA. Mr W. Gawa!nab and his team at the agricultural laboratory, Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Rural Affairs, Namibia, conducted chemical analyses on plant samples that form part of the giraffe's diet.

The genetic architecture of Namibian giraffe was investigated, including the samples from the desert-dwelling giraffe of the northern Namib Desert and giraffe from Etosha National Park. The results were compared with genetic profiles of giraffe subspecies throughout Africa, but in particular with *G. c. giraffa* which is the currently-accepted nomenclature of the Namibian giraffe. Results indicated that the Namibian giraffe has five unique haplotypes and is genetically distinct from *G. c. giraffa* or any other extant subspecies; it is considered here, tentatively, to represent *G. c. angolensis*. Furthermore, the Namibian

giraffe has been separated from other populations for an extended period. Some gene flow has occurred between the desert-dwelling and Etosha NP giraffe population, and can be attributed to recent translocations between these regions. Within the study region, a sharing of haplotypes between three studied subpopulations indicated gene flow among giraffe throughout the northern Namib Desert, and this was confirmed by field-based monitoring. Taken together, these findings suggest that Namibian giraffe should be viewed as important for the conservation of overall genetic variation within *Giraffa camelopardalis*, although further investigation into the taxonomy of the Namibian form is warranted.

Following these findings, I then investigated the behaviour and ecology of the desert-dwelling giraffe. As no previous study has been published on the ecology of *G. c. angolensis*, there is an information gap in our knowledge of this subspecies. One hundred and fifty six giraffe were identified individually using field-based identification methods and digital imagery. An assessment of the population structure and dynamics indicated marked variation in numbers, sex and age structure, herd structure and densities between three study areas. These variations possibly arose from differences in study area size, aridity, availability of forage and human impacts. I also investigated levels of associations between giraffe within the population using a simple ratio technique, and observed that increased association occurred in smaller populations; there appeared to be a matrilineal social structure. In one bull-biased population, a higher degree of association between bulls was observed compared to bulls in the other two populations.

To gain further insight into the distribution and range of giraffe, I collected GPS locations from a combination of field-based monitoring and GPS satellite collars. The GPS satellite collars were the first trial of this technology on giraffe in Africa. Using Range Manager, a MapInfo animal location analysis extension program, I estimated 100% and 95% minimum convex polygon for daily, monthly and annual home range sizes of giraffe in the northern Namib Desert. Giraffe were observed to have large home ranges, with the largest individual range for a bull, Africa-wide, being recorded in this study. Large home ranges correlated with low population density, reduced diversity of forage and, in bulls, increased search areas for receptive cows. Giraffe movements occurred predominantly along riparian woodlands, although seasonal use of other habitats was recorded. Observations

and data from four GPS satellite-collared giraffe provided high-resolution data on daily movements, and indicated a pattern of highly biphasic movement behaviour that correlated with ambient temperatures.

Diurnal activity budgets varied between the sexes, with cows spending more time feeding and resting, while bulls walked and ruminated more frequently. Juveniles rested more often than other giraffe. Seasonal variation in activity budgets was evident, perhaps reflecting use of an energy maximiser strategy for cows and an energy minimiser strategy for bulls. The establishment of artificial water points in the Hoanib River during the study period appeared to alter the seeming independence of giraffe on water in the northern Namib Desert, and also resulted in small-scale shifts in use of the riparian woodland by elephant.

To investigate the diet of giraffe, I observed animals feeding in the field and also carried out laboratory analyses of the chemical content of preferred plant species. Seasonal changes in the abundance, moisture and protein content of available food plants correlated with shifts in the diet of giraffe. Giraffe impacted on their preferred forage source, *Faidherbia albida*, causing distinct structural changes in the individual plants and the *F. albida* population. This impact, combined with elephant damage and seasonal flood events, has resulted in a shift in the age structure and dynamics of the *F. albida* population over the past two decades.

Finally, I present a brief overview on the history of conservation and management in the Kunene Region. The established CBNRM program provides a baseline for future wildlife conservation and management, of which the desert-dwelling giraffe could be an integral component for non-consumptive tourism. Long-term research on the population's status, range, behaviour, social structure, habitat requirements, and ecology would help to provide a better understanding of the giraffe's adaptation to the arid environment, while focussed legislation would enable increased control of communal lands and continue to benefit community-based conservancies.

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Acknowledgements

Namibia, the land God created in anger. The old wife's tale that Africa gets underneath your skin and never leaves has proven as true since my first visit to the Dark Continent. In that one year I experienced what part of life is about—entering adulthood and the loss of my old man. To say Africa has played a pivotal influence on my life would be an understatement! The ability to sit back and watch giraffe walk majestically across the dune field is but one of the memories which I have been afforded. True, this thesis focuses on the life and times of the 'Spotted ship of the Namib', but it is more than that—it was a desire, a bet with myself and proof to others that anyone can do it, if they just believe.

Over a decade after I first left the African continent I finally left again, this time with my best friend and wife. We have experienced so much together but there is still so much more to do and see. To dedicate this 'small mammal killer' to you is something small, but you mean more to me than I could ever afford you. Your encouragement, support and love was unwavering during the good, the bad and the ugly of it all. From the field trials to the constant stories of, 'remember when the giraffe ...', to the endless giraffe gifts. I would never have started or completed this without you and hope that with it being brought to rest, it will enable us to start the next chapter in our life together. I love you Steph!

My family, both the Fennessy and Schneider clan, have been unwavering in their support. The love and support my mum and dad gave me to follow my dream and believe in myself has finally shown dividends. My mum had a tough time of it and I thank her for her love and support during my last year at the big school and subsequent uni days. All my brothers and their 'wives' have been great for a chat, a beer or a place to crash over the years, from Australia to Europe. I now realise I should have gone into the corporate world and made some real money! In particular, Paul and Deb, whose generosity exceeds all limits. From the tireless hours of editing my thesis, to Europe and my uni registration – thanks a million. I hope the time we 'all' spent together in Africa can somehow say thanks, but I am sure the knowledge that 'our' Amara comes from the land of the San is blessing enough. And of course to Hans Paul and Luise—for their daughter and a lifetime of happiness and shared memories still to come.

Me good mates, the Davidsons—Ma & Pa, Sambo, Eliza and Molly. A huge part of my (our) experience I owe to you, not least the leisurely 18 at the Royal Windhoek! I will take a lot from our friendship and hopefully when the time comes, impart much of love and knowledge you have shown on to some of my own. Forever friends I wait in hope for the chance to share our lives together more regularly again. Of course, maybe even to share the infamous 10 out of 10 Currywust and Pommes!

Leggett, my co-supervisor and mate. From boss to partner, we experienced all the highs and lows, and somehow came through at the other end. Thanks for your encouragement, advice, friendship, support and showing me that a PhD is not what it's all cracked up to be. Many years, many thoughts, and many a sports event—cheers mate.

Chris, thanks for taking the risk. Some unknown from the depths of Namibia with an idea was somehow able to convince you that it might just work—at least until it came to writing up! Thanks for the lack of pressure and of course, the tireless hours of editing (no red

pen—fantastic!) and ideas which have culminated in this thesis. I have learnt a lot about what is required to finalise such a beast, particularly through your subtle guidance. You are the consummate professional. Thanks also to Mathew, my surrogate assistant supervisor. I am unsure how you got yourself into it, but I appreciate all your effort and advise.

A big thanks to Earthwatch, such a great organisation to work with. The staff were extremely helpful in the project's realisation, while the financial contribution from the volunteers went a long way. I cannot thank the volunteers from Earthwatch Institute and Raleigh International enough for their extensive effort and hours of monotony counting tree after tree, and giraffe activity after giraffe activity—feeding, feeding, feeding ... And of course there were those who were just suckers for punishment and did both. Maybe Gilly needed an excuse to get away from the big smoke but the visits were very appreciative, the work definitely of substandard quality and the constant shouting of drinks and food in all corners of the globe cannot be thanked for enough! At least I helped out with his longest 'detox' since he was minor.

I am indebted to Rebecca and her generous financial contribution, which not only enabled the first ever trial of giraffe GPS satellite collars, but supported the chemical composition study of the thesis. A big part of Africa is in your heart and I hope the experiences we have shown you can somehow say thanks for your support. I look forward to a quiet one, talking over a roaring African fire with you and your little one in years to come!

Funding for the thesis, although part of a larger ongoing research project, came thick as well as thin. I would like to thank the following people and organisations for seed funding and support: Monica Wrobel and Wildlife Conservation Society; Dale Leeds, Rich Reading and Denver Zoo; Beth Armstrong and Brevard Zoo; and, H.O and African Wildlife Services Trust.

Thanks also to Dr Mary Seely and the staff of the Desert Research Foundation of Namibia (DRFN) for their support, friendship and the Hoanib experience. Thanks for the support and for advice. Marina Coetzee and Werner Gawa!nab of the MAWRD were vital in establishing a collaborative effort between the project and Ministry of Agriculture for the analysis of the forage samples.

Toddy, mate, what can I say? Much of this research may not have been done without your unwavering ignorance and lack of respect for the dangers of the Namib Desert! We had a great year mate. You had an experience of a lifetime, if not more, and hopefully it has helped you choose the path which you want to travel. Thanks for all your effort, support and belief in what I was doing. In reading this you will understand the hows and whys of the field research; some of which never really made sense at the time. Let's do warthog soon, if not beer and gear at Ombinda. I would also like to thank Sprina for her effort to raise funds and come and help with the research. It may have been brief, but I am sure with your desire and dedication you will make it in whatever area you chose.

John and Barbara, thanks firstly for your friendship, secondly for your knowledge and thirdly, access to run around (within limits) the last Wilderness. Dave and Jen, Wilderness Safaris Namibia, and the crew at the Skeleton Coast Safari Camp, Khumib River – thanks!

A great ‘holiday’ research camp and cheers for the support. Dave and Jen you are great mates and hopefully our paths will cross again soon and both our theses buried.

Thanks to Steve and Louise, as well as Russell and Anita, for the run of Hobatere GP, your knowledge, bar and satellite TV. Down the road in the Oasis of Kamanjab I would like to thank the Berger family for their generous hospitality, warm hearts and of course—rugby day! Even if I am a ‘voetsak blixem’!

Thanks to a host of people at the MET for their time, effort, ear and where necessary, a couple of quite ones, as well as chatter about Australia versus the rest of the world: Rob Simmons, Holger Kolberg, Jo Tagg, Rudi Loutit, Mike Griffin, Colin Craig, Fanual Demas, Pauline Lindeque, Elias Amunime, Betsy Fox, and Nigel Berriman, oh, and I suppose Werner Kilian.

A big Texan cheer to Rick and his team at the Centre for Research and Conservation at Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo, in particular the scientific collaboration we formed which assisted the project. Thanks for the work, the reviews and most of all a lasting friendship. Thanks also to the nearly Dr David at UCLA, who helped decipher the genetics of the Namibian giraffe—maybe one day there will be a giraffe or subspecies called *G. c. brownemann*.

During the collaring I cannot thank H.O, Mike and Rich enough for their support, experience and advice—none of the giraffe were hurt in the making of this thesis, not as much can be said for the people. Also I must thank the ‘National Geographic’ boys in red and all those on the collaring trip for their help. To Martin, Sophie and Diets of African Wildlife Tracking, thanks for the first giraffe GPS satellite collar—cross fingers for next time!

An array of friends and colleagues from all walks of life have been helpful, supportive or just there, even if you did not realise it, and to them I am grateful: T, Di, Paul & Riccardo, Naomi (tracker girl), Wolfgang & Barbara, Duncan ‘the-not-so-drunkin’, Odette & Gerard, Ed & Aino, Nils & Danica, Aussie Pete, Colin & Anna, Dave & Pam, Dave W., Craig & Mary, Judy & Ian, Joh & Inge, Mike H., Garth O-S, Blythe, Alvain, Aubrey, Dickmand lab crew, Dave & Alexis, Sarah & Mitch, and Mike & Tamsin.

Thanks also to Alex, for his support, advice and assistance in the statistical analysis of much of the data. Much was learnt about the importance of independence of which field-based ecological research is not an ideal proponent!

And finally, but not least, the people of the north-west. From the western edge of Etosha NP to the village of Purros, my years spent working with you and around your beautiful part of the world have culminated in something small in size but hopefully big in potential. The area you live in is harsh, rugged and fortunately, mostly untouched. I hope that I have been able to impart as much knowledge onto you, as you have afforded to me. Ek het n’ biae biae lekker tyd gehad!