

## CSI Namibia

Peter Fraser, Auckland Zoo

Auckland Zoo recently joined an expedition to help collect genetic samples from giraffe in Bwabwata National Park, northeast Namibia. The tissue sampling is part of a Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) project funded by the Auckland Zoo Conservation Fund. Results could help reveal the 'missing link' to understanding giraffe genetics and in turn, assist in the conservation management of these majestic animals.

Auckland Zoo Conservation Fund programmes coordinator Peter Fraser was happy to cope with intense heat, drive thousands of kilometres, clock up 12-hour days and come face to face with some of Africa's most spectacular wildlife, to help get the job done. This is his story...

### The journey

Windhoek, Namibia is the starting point of my adventure. I meet up with Dr Julian Fennessy, the world's foremost giraffe researcher, and his wife Stephanie. Stephanie is a member of the GCF board, and responsible for the logistics of our expedition. Others in our core team are GCF board member Andy Tutchings, and GCF researcher Andri Marais.

We load up two four-wheel drive vehicles with supplies for our two-week expedition and drive 1,000km north to the Zambezi Region (formerly Caprivi Region) on roads that lead to the Angolan border and along the mighty Kavango River.

It's here we reach the small strip of Namibia bordering Angola, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe. This is the Zambezi Region, which is part of a five-country agreement called KAZA (Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area) that aims to protect and allow movement of migratory wildlife freely across borders.

It takes two days to reach our destination, and it's only at sunrise the next morning that I get to see the full beauty of our campsite on the banks of the Kwando River. This explains the sound of hippos browsing right next to my tent during the night!



### Getting the job done

Our mission is to collect tissue samples from as many giraffe as we can. To do this, we're equipped with modified guns that shoot out darts. A dart fired at a giraffe takes a small bite of tissue, does no long-term harm and is probably no more painful than an insect bite.

After being fired, the dart falls out. It's then our job to retrieve the small tissue sample from the dart, transfer it to a vial, label it, and record all relevant data.

All 12 days of our expedition begin at 6am and finish at 6pm (dusk). I discover giraffe are surprisingly hard to spot in the African bush, and at times on seeing us they scarpers – even when we're up to 300m away.

### Illegal hunting

It is unusual behaviour say our giraffe experts, but this is an isolated area that also sees illegal hunting take place, which could explain why these giraffe so quickly take fright and flight.

Our excitement builds whenever we sight a giraffe. We get as close as possible in our vehicles, but more often than not, we need to go cross-country to get within the required 50m range of the dart gun. I'm aware we're on foot in lion country, but I take solace in knowing I'm not the slowest runner in our team. When successful, the bang of the dart gun is followed by the thwack of the dart hitting the giraffe's rump.

Then we must find the dart – designed to fall out immediately after impact. Sometimes it's straight forward, other times we have to search through thorny bushes and deep sandy soil. Fortunately, we recover all our darts, and most importantly, the accompanying tissue samples. In all, we come across just 35 giraffe, many of which exhibit extreme flight behaviour. But through a mix of luck and skill, we manage to get close enough to nine giraffe to obtain samples, and this is a good number for the study.

### Road rules and wildlife

To avoid the hazard of encountering elephant at night, we aim to be at our campsite by dusk. Large numbers of elephant migrate through this five-country KAZA area, and this year's particularly dry summer has seen many stay near the perennial waters of the Kwando River.

If there's one rule in Africa to know, it's that elephant have right-of-way. One night, we had to remain in our vehicles while an elephant herd wandered through our camp. They brushed against our tents, and I held my breath as one of these giant creatures knocked the side