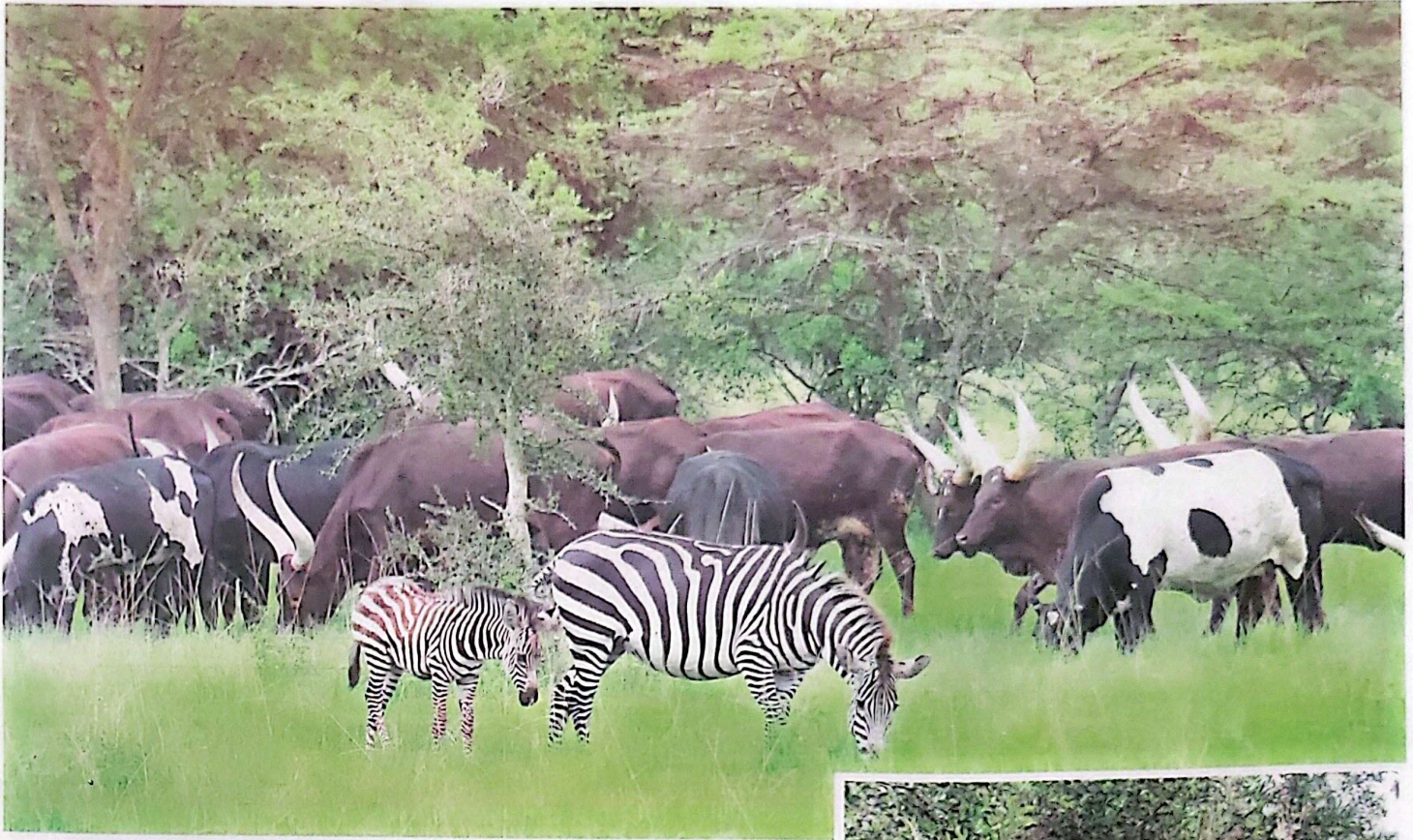


The costly and potentially lethal exer



Wildlife graze among cattle in Lake Mburo National Park. To reduce conflict, wild animals may be translocated. PHOTOS BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA

WILDLIFE TRANSFER: The process of moving wildlife from one conservation area to another is a complicated affair which requires expertise and expensive drugs for chemical capture.

BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA
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The morning sun emerges high in the sky, casting its warmth over the savannah woodlands that teem with an odd mixture of livestock and wildlife.

As the last cold mist evaporates, the grazers of Mburo - zebras, impalas, topis, warthogs and elands start munching on the still wet, coarse grass. They are unaware that for some of the topis, it is the last meal in Lake Mburo National Park. They are being watched by dart gun totting trigger - happy mortals.

Nearby, Dr Robert Aruho, aims through the telescopic lens of his dart gun. He pulls the trigger. A topi falls. It wakes up three hours later in Katonga Game Reserve.

Today is the last day of translocating topis from Lake Mburo National

to Katonga. Today, as in the past few days, the attention is on topis outside the park boundaries.

According to Simplicious Gessa, the UWA Public Relations Officer, the reason for transferring animals to Katonga is to boost the biodiversity of the reserve and promote tourism.

"We want to bolster tourism in Katonga by increasing the biodiversity of wildlife species and elevate the reserve to National Park status. This will become an engine for generat-

ing revenue so that communities can benefit from tourism," Gessa explains.

Dr Patrick Atimnedi, the head of the translocation exercise explains that Lake Mburo National Park has about 33,000 zebras with half of the population outside the park boundaries, thus the need for translocation.

Costly exercise

However, unlike moving cows on a truck, translocating wild animals, is an expensive undertaking that requires expert knowledge to ensure the safety of both animals and personnel.

The exercise starts with a wake up bell at 5am. The five-man team of veterinary doctors start preparing the drugs. The narcotic drugs are imported, expensive and potentially lethal. Depending on the species, each animal needs an average of Shs450,000 worth of drugs to be put to sleep. Thus, UWA veterinary doctors are trained not to miss. Each miss costs close to Shs0.5m. The drugs are handled by trained personnel. "Accidentally piercing your skin with a loaded syringe is the quick-



A member of the wildlife translocation team takes aim to dart an animal.

QUICK FACTS ON KATONGA GAME RESERVE

Katonga Game Reserve, measuring 210 sq km was part of the same wildlife range from Northern Tanzania through Isingiro and Lake Mburo to Katonga. Due to human settlements, both Katonga Game Reserve and Lake Mburo National Park became isolated wildlife clusters. Katonga suffered a lot of poaching that decimated most of the wildlife over the years. People

helps determine the animals available, access to the area where they are and ensuring that there is no thick bush around so that once an animal is darted, it does not disappear into thickets.

As teams comb the area, Dr Margaret Driciru, a principal warden and head of Group 4 spots a Topi candidate. Looking through the gun's telescopic lens, her finger tightens on the trigger but instantly loosens without firing. "It is pregnant," she says. Not all animals are translocation mate-

derly. "These animals are avoided as they may negatively react to drugs," she goes on.

But a short distance away, Dr Robert Aruho spots a healthy topi and pulls the trigger. A popping sound is heard. The darted topi staggers and collapses. Surprised, the resident monkeys kiss their loved ones good bye and rush to hide their babies.

After the animal goes down, team members rush to position it in the manner in which it usually rests. Its eyes are covered with a net to

Exercise of translocating wildlife

suffocate. Visible ticks are removed and some spray applied before the doctors come in. The sleeping animal is injected with antibiotics and drugs to aid breathing. Blood samples are taken to check for any diseases. Dr Driciru says this helps to determine health history of the animal should a disease break out in their new location.

Getting animals into transportation

The horns are capped with plastic tubes to prevent the topi from fighting with others and injuring itself during transportation.

Many animals are transported at a go in a truck fitted with a special crate while a single animal is moved in a small crate. Zebras have a special crate that is small enough to prevent them from kicking. They react violently to confinement and may kill or injure themselves in an attempt to gain freedom.

Once in the truck or crate, each animal is injected again to wake it up and the transfer journey begins. All this, as Dr Atimmedi says, has to be finished by 9am to avoid the heat.

History of translocation in parks

Uganda Wildlife Authority has over the years built its veterinary capacity in translocating animals. The first translocations in Uganda were done by foreign experts from Kenya in 1997 when giraffes were translocated to Kidepo and in 2000, when elephants were moved from Luwero to Karuma.

"I am proud and glad to see that over the years, UWA has built its veterinary capacity to undertake translocations. We can now move elephants," says Charles Tumwesigye, UWA's Deputy Chief of Field Operations.

Today, Lake Mburo National Park is referred to as the Wild Donor for its capacity to restock other parks with wildlife.

"I am proud and happy because Lake Mburo is a great donor. This means we have done a great job in conserva-

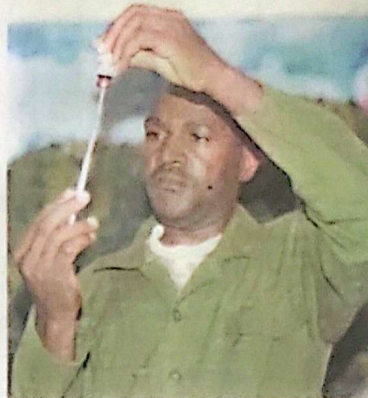
TECHNIQUES OF CAPTURE

Darting and capture

The translocation exercise starts with a wake up bell at 5am. The five-man team of veterinary doctors start preparing the drugs. The narcotic drugs are imported, expensive and potentially lethal.

According to Dr Atimmedi, depending on the species, each animal needs an average of Shs450,000 worth of drugs to be put to sleep. So UWA veterinary doctors are trained not to miss. Each miss costs close to Shs0.5m. The drugs can only be handled by trained personnel. "Accidentally piercing your skin with a loaded syringe is the quickest way to meet your creator," Dr Patrick Atimmedi warns.

Team Translocation is composed of four groups riding atop four pickup trucks. Each team has a doctor in the driver's cabin armed with a loaded dart gun. Behind each truck are several rangers. Different teams go to different animal groups to avoid darting animals that are related. This decreases the chances of inbreeding and also reduces chances of darting one another. Once the target animal is identified, the drug is delivered through a dart gun.



Dr Robert Aruho mixes drugs for darting wild animals to enable their capture.

tion. Two years ago, 68 impalas were moved to Katonga and their numbers have since doubled," boasts Arthur Musinguzi Kule, the Chief Warden of Lake Mburo National Park.

More translocations from Lake Mburo National Park are planned in the near future. Impalas are to be moved to Pian Upe Game Reserve in Karamoja.

The first translocation in the park took place in 2004 when 17 elands were moved from there to Kidepo Valley National Park. In 2013, UWA translocated 68 impalas and five zebra from Lake Mburo to Katonga Game Reserve.

In 2015, giraffes were moved from Murchison Falls to Lake Mburo. In the fourth translocation exercise, 46 zebra and 31 topis were transferred from Lake Mburo to Katonga Game Reserve.

Logistics for translocation

To manage these transfer exercises,

UWA staff have undergone continuous training. The training has been done by Kenya Wildlife Services and the Southern African Wildlife veterinarians. According to Dr Patrick Atimmedi, UWA veterinary staff are currently training their counterparts in Ghana. UWA now has four veterinary doctors.

The wildlife body has acquired land cruisers and a transportation truck with several crates for transporting animals. In addition, they have darting equipment but still lack a light helicopter which would ease animal herding for mass translocation exercises. Also still lacking is a crane to handle bigger animals such as rhinos and elephants.

Objectives achieved

In moving the animals, Dr Atimmedi, says, "We are solving a conflict." The conflict started in the mid-1980s when about 60 per cent of the park was degazetted and given to com-

munities for livestock ranching. The wildlife remained in the ranches. Today, Lake Mburo National Park, measuring only 370 sq km has become the "Wild Donor" with the capacity to re-stock other parks with animals from the ranches.

"About 50 per cent of the wildlife is outside the park in livestock ranches. This has caused human-wildlife conflict over the years because animals such as zebra, impala and topis break fences and compete with livestock for water and pasture. We are solving the conflict and at the same time restocking Katonga Game Reserve with a view of upgrading it to national park status," says Tumwesigye.

By the time the last topi was released into the Katonga wilderness on January 30, 2018, UWA had spent close to Shs200m to translocate 77 animals of which 46 were zebras and the rest topis.

"It has been a success. Our target was 80 and we have moved 77 animals," said Dr Atimmedi.

WILDLIFE FACTS ON LAKE MBURO NATIONAL PARK

Lake Mburo National Park, located 210km from Kampala, is home to the biggest and most shy antelope - the eland. Uganda Wildlife Authority gave up efforts of using chemical capture to translocate eland from Lake Mburo to Katonga Game Reserve when they proved to be too shy and too fast to be darted.

Other animals in the park include: buffalo, waterbucks, hippos, and curious monkeys.

The park offers tourist activities such as game drives, boat cruises, nature walks, sport fishing and birding.



Uganda Wildlife Authority capture team loads a saddled Topi on a pickup truck. PHOTO BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA

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