

A COSTLY AFFAIR: Translocating giraffes is both technical and costly. Therefore, it requires expertise and sufficient manpower to effectively do it.

Expensive passengers of

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"Most of the animals are on the northern bank. It is not a good idea to have such one big population in one area."

ANDREW SEGUYA, UGANDA WILDLIFE AUTHORITY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR.

Murchison Falls National Park is known for its fast and furious thundering waterfalls amid a variety of wildlife. But at the moment, some expensive, tall and elegant creatures are stealing the show.

Time stops. The earth freezes its movement. Everybody looks on in awe when the six-metre-tall creatures are taken across River Nile from the northern bank to a new home on the southern side.

At Paraa, as the propellers from the ferry's twin engines cut through the deep waters under the mid-morning blue-sky, the sight of six-metre-tall giraffes, towering above trucks, cars and people aboard the ferry, is a sight to behold.

And it has been going on for some weeks now. Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) in collaboration with The Giraffe Conservation Foundation are relocating 20 giraffes from the northern bank to about 50km away in the southern bank across the River Nile where they once flourished. Two extra giraffes will find their way to Uganda Wildlife Education Centre in Entebbe.

The Giraffe Conservation Foundation is the only non-governmental organisation that concentrates solely on the management of giraffes in the world.

The Rothschild's giraffe population in the park has shot up to more than 1,000, a record increase from 250 in the early 1980s.

Most of the animals are on the northern bank. According to the UWA executive director, Andrew Seguya, it is not a good idea to have such a big population in one area.

An example is, the giraffe population on the southern bank that got

depleted during the dark days and has never recovered. Last year, the first batch of 10 giraffes was moved to the southern bank.

Murchison Falls National Park hosts about 75 per cent of the Rothschild's giraffes (now subsumed into Nubian giraffe) according to the UWA 2012 census report.

In 2010, Rothschild's giraffes were classified as endangered and of high conservation importance.

The current estimate of Nubian giraffe is 2,645 individuals, ranging across eastern South Sudan, western Ethiopia, northern Uganda and west-central Kenya.

"The translocation exercise seeks to give survival insurance to the giraffes by not having one big population in one place," Seguya said as he flagged off the translocation exercise.

Translocating giraffes is both technical and costly in terms of expertise, manpower and equipment.

The exercise is overseen by four Wildlife veterinary doctors.

UWA personnel, PhD students and volunteers.

A variety of specialised equipment is being used ranging from a \$37,000 (Shs133m) truck, pickup trucks to special crates to oxygen cylinders.

A special boma for holding the animals has also been constructed. On the medical supplies side, a variety of veterinary drugs worth about \$12,000 (Shs43m) is at hand.

Mathematics of translocation

According to the UWA veterinary manager, Patrick Atimedi, many considerations are made before the exercise takes place.

First, reconnaissance of the area where the animals are to be taken is made to ensure there is water, food and security in regard to poaching. If the terrain is bad, the exercise is called off.

The choice of equipment such as vehicles and helicopters is also determined by the terrain.

Before the exercise commences, the right personnel such as wildlife veterinary doctors, lab technicians, drivers, and capturers have to be assembled.

The lab technicians do targeted disease surveillance in one location checking for diseases to be treated.

A boma, which is a holding facility, has to be constructed. The right number of the animals to be moved is confined to the boma to get used to people feeding and watering them. The current boma holds up to 10 animals at a time while the truck can transport five animals.

After everything has been considered, the right animal is located and darted. When the medicine starts to take effect and the animal becomes disoriented, it is helped down with the use of a rope

WHY TRANSLOCATE?

The risks: It is risky to have all the animal population in one area because it can be affected by many factors such as disease, political turmoil, environmental pollution, oil drilling and construction of roads and dams.

Another reason the giraffe are being relocated is to promote tourism because there is less wildlife and tourist activities in the area.

Sex ratio and inbreeding: To have a viable translocated giraffe population there many hurdles to overcome. These include:

Viable number: You have to get the right number which according to Seguya is between 30 and 40 animals.

Sex ratio: In order for the giraffe to reproduce in a viable manner the sex ratio must be at least 3:1, meaning that for every three females, there must be one male.

Inbreeding: The right numbers and sex ratio may not do much if you have related animals mating amongst themselves. According to Atimedi, inbreeding among translocated giraffes is mitigated by picking animals from different groups.

Age matters: You can do all things right but lose the game if you translocate animals of the wrong age. In this case, the objective is to multiply the numbers. For that reason, only sub-adults aged between two to four years are targeted.

Murchison Falls National Park



If I had to be somewhere in Uganda right now, it would definitely be...



MOUNTAIN ELDON: I love the weather at the peak and the surrounding vegetation which is amazing to look at when the sun sets. The mountain also bears several hills that make it look beautiful.
PAUL KATUMBA, REAL ESTATE DEALER



NYAKASURA CAVES: The caves are endowed with the beautiful Amabere Nyinamwiri that dip with fresh water there, are crater lakes and fresh veg that make the whole experience of it through the dark caves amazing.
GRACE KIRABO, SOCIAL WORKER



KYANINGA LODGE IN FC: The place has huts that are lit during the night. It is so beautiful water from the river which makes the atmosphere in. The vegetation in the green making the entire visit.
JASPER OKOT, ENGINEER



BAHAI TEMPLE: beautifully designed thick vegetation has been in existence in a beautiful strata worth a visit.
JULIET MIR

Compiled by

A giraffe in a chariot. They are blindfolded to calm them down.
PHOTOS BY MATTHIAS MUGISHA



around its neck. This is done to make sure it does not fall and get hurt.
An antiseptic is later administered and the animal manually contained as a medical team carries out tests in the needed call team carries out tests in the needed parameters. The tests can range from x-rays. The animal is taken into a specially designed tractor-pulled carriage to the boma.

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THE NUMBER OF GIRAFFES THAT WERE MOVED IN THE FIRST BATCH OF THE TRANSLOCATION.

Giraffe company

One single giraffe cannot be kept alone in a boma as it becomes restless and starts taking around. To avoid the possibility of taking around kicking, it has to have a companion to calm down. Consequently, no single animal is kept alone. Once in the boma, the giraffes are handled and watered as they get used to people.

The right number for relocation is kept in the boma as it does not make any economic sense to translocate one animal at a time. Since the giraffes have long necks, the boma is fitted with a special holding crate lined with a cushion on top to avoid injuries.

Road hazards: Transporting giraffes is a delicate and expensive undertaking. The long convoy escorting giraffes moves with doctors equipped with different types of medications, including oxygen cylinders.

Five giraffes are loaded on a truck at a time. Remember these animals own 5,630 square kilometres of Murchison National Park and do not like being squeezed into a truck. As a protest, some start kicking the vehicle as it snakes along at snail speed. In the process, some get direct hits. It is common for giraffes to start fighting-necking one another along the way.

Others collapse and are helped back to their feet with the use of ropes. In some cases, some become unconscious and are removed and given medical attention before being released.

On the first day, one giraffe could not make it after it became unconscious. It was removed, put on oxygen, treated and set free.

On another day, one male was captured but proved to be too aggressive. It was blindfolded, transported alone in a tractor-pulled chariot to the release site.



Being tall, giraffes also face another hazard along the way. They are the tallest mammals in the world reaching 5.8 metres in height and weighing up to 1.2 tonnes.

Because of their height, they constantly get hit by high hanging branches from tree along the road. There is a team from UWA that specialises in cutting down such branches.

Giraffes riding in a truck and necking one another is breath taking. But more breathtaking is the spectacle of towering giraffe passengers sharing limited space with people and cars aboard a ferry crossing the Nile.

After crossing the river, the giraffes are released into their new home about 50km away along the Honeymoon Trail.

As soon as the rear door of the truck is opened, the elegant giraffes make a dash for the lush vegetation and sprint into oblivion to honeymoon with the sun.

"Welcome home," Seguya said of them.

A giraffe being translocated by crew members across River Nile aboard a ferry.

Giraffes rush out of chariots after they are released into their new territory.