



By Titus Nakombe

They graze in groups of usually five to 10 in number. In unison, they bend their long necks to quickly pluck off the short grass, before raising their heads high, in full alert, to munch away the fodder. This activity makes the Uganda Kob a great sight in Kidepo Valley National Park in Karamoja.

In May, 110 Uganda Kob were translocated from Murchison Falls National Park to Kidepo to beef up the numbers that had fallen to just 15 in the sprawling 1,442 square kilometre national park.

Of the 110 animals relocated, only one has died, making it one of the most successful wildlife relocation exercises across the globe, according to Dr Margaret Driciru, a veterinary officer with the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA).

"On average, the expected loss is usually 10%. The fact that we have lost only one means it was a successful exercise," observed Driciru.

The area conservation manager, Johnson Masereka, said the kob that died sustained a dislocated shoulder during transit.

"On arrival, it was batting its eye lids, breathing normally, but was stressed and could not graze or flee from its predators in the wild," said Masereka.

Like it is with humans, Masereka said stress in animals usually involves situations of stimuli that are considered threatening, frustrating or out of its control.

"In the wild, when animals are scared, they respond by flight or fright," explained Masereka.

"The unfortunate kob could not protect itself with any vigorous activity. As the flight response could not work, the animal became distressed in the zoned off section of the park. To minimise its stress levels, shock from first travel by lorry and interaction with human beings, we had to humanely put it out of its pain. It was the best UWA could do," he added.

The kob is significant to Uganda because not only is it a tourist attraction, but also appears on the Uganda Court of Arms supporting a shield on the left and the crested crane on the right.

Both Masereka and Driciru disclosed that the rest of the translocated animals were coping well.

The process

In Murchison Falls, UWA trucks loaded with rangers, veterinary doctors and journalists set up a V-shaped curtain to trap the swift kob. On the first chase, which involved hooting, clapping and screaming, only six of them were caught.

"We got better by the day as the next day 26 were caught," said Driciru. "We took their blood samples before tranquillising them to reduce their awareness of being in a strange place while in transit. The blood samples are for keeping track of their health to monitor how they cope in the new location."

By day four of the translocation exercise, which lasted a week, the team caught 35 and the number finally rose to 60. But in the process, a one Oswald Tumeya's hand was bruised. Another

Of the 110 Uganda Kob which were relocated to Kidepo park in May, only one has died

How relocated Kob is coping in Kidepo Valley National Park



Kobs grazing in Kidepo National Park where they were recently relocated. Photos by Mpalanyi Ssentongo

ABOUT THE KOB

The brown animals are of significance to Uganda because they appear on the Uganda Court of Arms. The males, unlike the females, have horns. To win partners, the males are challenged to catwalk and posture for the females to appreciate their physique.

A female kob takes up to 20 times of copulation to conceive. Courtship takes two to five minutes and copulation lasts for only seconds.

The gestation, according to Dr Margaret Driciru, a veterinary officer with the Uganda Wildlife Authority, is eight months. For the first month, a young kob hides in thick vegetation from predators. The mothers and the young kobs identify each other by the shape of the nose. The females stay with their mothers as the males join the bachelor groups until they establish their territory.



Masereka

The Uganda Kob is significant to Ugandans because it appears on the Uganda Court of Arms

ranger's shoulder blades were used as a ladder by a frightened kob to jump over the six-foot curtain.

A veterinary doctor, Eric Enyeri, said like the old adage, a frightened animal will do anything to survive.

"The population of kobs in Murchison Falls had peaked 30,000," said Enyeri. "The relocation to Kidepo gives them



Lions in Kidepo. Some young Kob saw the lions for the first time

more space and reintroduces them to areas where they are almost extinct," he says.

Arrival

On arrival, the animals flew like bats from trucks into different directions. The next day, they were seen regrouping in five to 10 for security and marking territory. Some males in a cluster periodically locked horns in a battle to dominate.

"The good news is that three of the ones translocated have since reproduced," says Masereka.

"And the little ones are doing fine in the park. They love to graze in low grass to be able to see potential

predators and flee for dear life."

Talking about the new arrivals the UWA tourism manager, Steven Nyadru, was beaming with satisfaction, saying tourists destined there now have an addition of kob to the usual herds of buffaloes, elephants, giraffes, lions and zebras.

"They are a common site during the safari drive," said Nyadru.

"Stories are told of how the kob had lions staring at them instead of hunting them. The little kobs had never seen lions, so they did not run when they encountered them. And because a lion dines after a chase — they were hesitant when engaged in a staring contest," he said.

The kob transfer to Kidepo is an activity that has added to the park's variety of attractions that have made it one of the best destinations in the world.

In the field, the males were seen walking in an erect position to mark their territory with the most dominant in the centre. Competitors lock horns, crushing each other and shoving hard. Some hit the rear side when in combat mode.

Coping

Until the translocation to Kidepo, the Kob was common in western Uganda, but far less common now in other areas. They still range across sub-Saharan Africa. They prefer low-lying flat land or gently rolling country, free of seasonal extremes and close to permanent water sources.

While in northeastern Uganda, they are expected to compete for grazing land because they happen to prefer favourable conditions for farming and they find themselves in competition with humans who are using the land for agriculture and development.

In their new home, they are living in herds and are inactive when the day is hot. Summing up the necessity of translocation, the UWA executive director, Andrew Seguya, says it has been a successful exercise to balance the eco-system.

"Every animal has its role in the wilderness," Seguya says.

"For example, giraffes and elephants clear the thickets to enable grazers access the fresh and low grass. Lake Mburo National Park is overwhelmed by the acacia trees because there are no elephants to feed on them," Seguya explains.