ANTELOPE *from the ashes*

- PART TWO -

Last month **John Frederick Walker** took us on a breathless, first-hand account of the darting and collaring of a giant sable male, part of a daring and last-ditch effort to save Angola's *palanca negra gigante* from extinction. In this, the second (and final) instalment, Walker reports on the next phase of the Giant Sable Conservation Project – capturing all collared females and a bull, and relocating them to a sanctuary within Cangandala National Park. Here it is hoped they will breed, safe from poachers and the errant roan bulls that were spoiling the gene pool. He also asks the all-important question: does the project have any chance of success?

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN FREDERICK WALKER

The Republic of Angola is a chunk of the south-west African coast twice the size of Texas and blessed with vast petroleum reserves. It's a major supplier of oil to China, the US and other countries, earning billions a year. At the same time, it is saddled with staggering post-war social needs and, critics say, corrosive corruption and mismanagement. Wildlife conservation is, unsurprisingly, not a high priority. The country's parks and reserves, abandoned during its decades-long civil war, remain even now little more than names and shaded areas on the map.

For someone who'd much rather be in the field than stuck in a meeting, Angolan biologist Pedro Vaz Pinto has proved remarkably adept in the jungles of the country's stultifying bureaucracies. He's lined up critical governmental and provincial backing, and cajoled donations from corporations (mostly oil companies) for his Giant Sable Conservation Project at the Catholic University of Angola. He'll need all the help he can get to develop a captive breeding programme for these impressive antelopes at Cangandala National Park.

A string of surveys and expeditions has failed to find them, much less dart any. But Vaz Pinto knows that the only way to ensure the animals' future is to isolate the few females that have survived from the park's remaining roan bulls. They've been mating and producing hybrids – a biological dead end for the sables. What's more, he'll have to bring in a giant sable bull from the Luando Strict Nature Reserve to the south, where the greatest population of *palancas negras* has always been found – even though he has no direct evidence that there are any left there either. Wary of being the one-man glue holding together our make-or-break expedition, Vaz Pinto has pulled together 20 or so scientists, engineers, military commanders, fixers and friends to help him run the backstage machinery, from flight permissions to fuel deliveries and food supplies, which has to work smoothly if he's to succeed.

Squeezing all of us into the four stuccoed huts of the warden's camp at Cangandala isn't possible, and tents have sprouted like giant mushrooms under the trees. The camp is no safari lodge. Water has to be brought in petrol cans from the spring at Bola Cassaxi just outside the park boundary. We do our own cooking, but several women from the village have been recruited to pound laundry in the local papyrus-choked stream and spread it out to dry on bushes; one of them arrives each morning with a tiny baby no bigger than a money pouch slung behind her.

A fence defines the giant sable captive breeding sanctuary inside Cangandala National Park.

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The days fall into a pattern. The capture team helicopter takes off in the morning chill, but it's back by midday, when it's too hot to fly. The huts turn stifling in the baking sun and swirling winds whip up fine dust that coats camera equipment and adds grit to sandwiches. After lunch some of us huddle with Vaz Pinto over maps to discuss strategy. Botswana-based pilot Barney O'Hara often tinkers with his helicopter, monitoring fuel contamination or clearing tiny wasp nests from inside the air-speed indicator. A few of us try to read – veterinarian Pete Morkel has brought a well-thumbed paperback edition of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* – or attempt a fitful nap.

Tired of sweating on my cot one afternoon, I wander off to look at the termite mounds that erupt like boils all over a clearing at the edge of the ▶

WOLFRAM BROCK

O'Hara's chopper approaches slow and low, its precious cargo hanging 12 metres underneath and gently turning ... IT LOOKS RISKY, BUT IT'S A SIMPLE AND SAFE METHOD OF TRANSPORT

PEDRO VAZ PINTO

TOP A critical catch: a giant sable female is lowered to helping hands. Jeremy Anderson (right) rushes to assist.

ABOVE Grisly evidence of poaching: a rack of smoked duikers and bushbucks found in the Luando Strict Nature Reserve.

OPPOSITE A delighted Vaz Pinto with the first female giant sable to arrive safely in the sanctuary's holding boma. The tips of her horns have been sawn off to prevent her stabbing the other animals.

camp. Some look like knee-high stalagmites, others resemble brain coral. Kick them and most disintegrate into dust; others are as solid as a concrete curb.

Termites are actually the largest biomass in the park, which at first looks bereft of wildlife. In fact, we usually leave leftovers from dinner out overnight, something impossible to do in other parts of Africa where monkeys and other scavengers quickly make off with any unguarded edibles. Still, there are some critters around. We find civet tracks in camp, hear owls and spot a lone mongoose, hopefully on cobra patrol.

Despite its remoteness, the camp keeps swelling with non-essential visitors. To our dismay, the roster now includes police, local officials, ministerial representatives, Angolan media and colourful hangers-on who are somehow 'connected'. They come and go in their dusty cars, often timing their arrivals to coincide with meals. Some show up with their own tents and, alas, radios that blare *kizomba*, Angola's catchy dance music, or what sounds like evangelical sermons. Curious children from Bola Cassaxi drift in, as does its *soba*, or chief, who arrives wearing a suit jacket draped over his head like a pharaoh's headdress. He demands cigarettes and wine; instead, Morkel treats a suppurating sore on his neck. Fortunately, many of the uninvited fade away after the initial excitement over the arrival of O'Hara's helicopter and the darting of the first few giant sables.

But word of the apparent rescue of the national animal has made it back to the country's capital. We're told we can expect a visit from the Minister of the Environment. Vaz Pinto scowls at the news. The visit is likely to be woefully premature. There's an awful lot left to do.

'Another day, another sable,' Vaz Pinto says, shaking his head as if he can't believe the luck we're having – giant sables in Luando have been spotted and tagged, and a few collared, for four days now. The mood in camp is distinctly upbeat. We couldn't care less about the 'Cangandala cough' that's going around, ankle sprains or lizards in the laundry. We've been celebrating by making nightly inroads into a dwindling supply of beer and Portuguese wine. Vaz Pinto even admits he'd like to dart, tag and take a photograph of a really impressive bull – say, a *grande macho* with 60-inch horns – to release to the media.

'That would shut them up,' he says, referring to those who claim there's no real difference between giant sable and the typical sable found across southern Africa. It's an assertion that blithely ignores the genetic evidence justifying the giant sable's status as a distinct subspecies and the incontrovertible fact that giant sable horns average a foot longer than those of any other race of sable.

Right now, though, we have more immediate concerns. On their flight over Luando this morning, Vaz Pinto, O'Hara and Morkel spotted a poacher's camp. When they landed, they found it abandoned, the campfire still smouldering next to racks of bushmeat. No sign of sable, but poachers' snares aren't selective. Meting out vigilante justice to poachers is almost reflexive on the part of wildlife conservationists working in remote regions where there is little or no official enforcement. The trio torched the camp, tossing logs into burning lean-tos before flying off with a couple of axes and spent shotgun shells as evidence to be shared with provincial police.

American biologist Richard Estes and Jeremy Anderson, a South Africa-based consulting ecologist who's also been working closely with Vaz Pinto, arrive the following day. At 82, Estes walks a bit stiffly but otherwise the white-bearded giant sable guru shows little sign of slowing down. The stocky, 68-year-old Anderson has known Estes for decades and the two tease each other good-naturedly. Both are just in time to add their expertise on how to prepare the sanctuary for the animals' arrival.

The fencing is finished, but has to be visibly marked with strips of tape so the antelopes don't run into it and break a leg. The brush around the perimeter needs to be carefully burned off, as it's dangerously dry. The tarp-wrapped boma in its centre, to be used as a recovery room for the translocated *palancas*, needs a supply of water and feed.

It's a long list but Anderson says we'll be ready to start capturing the females as planned. He's ebullient about how well things have gone. 'Without Pedro,' he says of Vaz Pinto several times, 'we'd never have got to this point.' Estes, who's seen numerous efforts to save the giant sable falter, keeps his enthusiasm on hold. 'I'm waiting for the sables to be put into the boma. Then,' he assures me, 'I'll be ecstatic.'

Vaz Pinto wavers between bouts of euphoria and moody silence, burdened by thoughts of all that could go wrong.

On the morning of 4 August 2009, Cangandala's 'shepherds' (game guards), the warden, villagers, local media, military and police cluster around the edges of the sandy opening in the bush that's been cleared for the chopper to land. It's right next to the sanctuary's boma, whose opening has been roped off like the entrance to a movie premiere, only with long stretches of landmine warning tape.

At 08h00 O'Hara's chopper approaches slow and low, its precious cargo hanging 12 metres underneath and gently turning: a giant sable female, trussed up by her legs, her head and horns pointing down. It looks risky, but it's a simple and safe method of transport, at least for short trips. Anderson and the shepherds position themselves under the animal in the billowing cloud of dust and sand that's stirred up as people stumble over each other to snap photos. The crowd is remarkably quiet, awed at seeing their first giant sable close up. The shepherds whisper as they struggle to hold the horns and legs, and control the sharp hooves once the duct tape has been cut away.

'Just roll her on the stretcher,' Estes urges. A dozen hands slide the blindfolded, shuddering animal and push her upright to rest on her folded legs. It's a critical move – sables are ruminants, and can easily regurgitate what they've been digesting and suck it into their lungs if put on their sides. She's a mature, dark brown adult – her horns show some wear – but she's in good condition with a few years of breeding left. There's a growing hubbub and cameras are thrust in the air as eight shuffling shepherds carry her on a stretcher into the boma.

Anderson, who has been working on giant sable conservation off and on for 30 years yet had never seen one, grins. 'I thought my first sighting of a giant sable would be in some clearing, not twirling upside down,' he says, 'but it's worth it anyway.'

The mood in camp is distinctly upbeat. We couldn't care less about the 'CANGANDALA COUGH' THAT'S GOING AROUND, ANKLE SPRAINS OR LIZARDS IN THE LAUNDRY

On the initial helicopter flight of the operation the previous week, an adult female sable-roan hybrid with an old scar on one leg from a wire snare was collared in Cangandala and released. She's turned out to be 'a perfect Judas', as Morkel later puts it, her collar signals betraying the location of the mixed herd she rejoined, making it easy for the capture team to snap up the remaining giant sable females one by one.

Half an hour later, O'Hara drops another female directly onto the waiting stretcher. In the boma, Morkel checks the antelopes' breathing while Vaz Pinto and the shepherds hold the tranquillised animals by their horns. Morkel finishes by sawing about four centimetres off their horn tips to keep them from stabbing each other. 'Pull off the blindfolds,' he announces as he administers the antidotes, and we all clear out.

We're counting on this *grande macho* to do his duty, for his species AND ANGOLA, AND SIRE A CLUTCH OF CALVES BY NEXT YEAR

The next day, some 100 kilometres to the south, a giant sable bull comes into sight, head thrown back as he hangs below the thrumming helicopter and slowly revolves in the bright morning sky. The villagers in this settlement on the border of the Luando Reserve stare transfixed at a *deus ex machina* that could rewrite the ending of the story of their national animal.

The bull, about 10 years old, carries nicely flared horns 1.32 metres in length. Collared a few days previously, the *palanca negra* had gone down in thick bush, and had had to be dragged a short distance. Perhaps resenting his second darting in just over a week, he struggled violently. Vaz Pinto tried to hold him but was thrown to the ground and his brand-new camera was smashed by a horn tip. In the end, of course, the bull succumbed to the drugs and was swung upside down by chopper to the rendezvous point, where Anderson grabbed his horns and guided him onto the waiting stretcher.

A phalanx of shepherds carries the recumbent bull up the ramp and into the belly of the waiting MI-8 transport helicopter. A smiling Vaz Pinto has his hand shaken by local dignitaries, and the villagers begin clapping, shouting and dancing; women, their faces daubed with manioc flour, pat their mouths with their fingers and ululate.

Further north, outside the gate to the sanctuary in Cangandala, it's midmorning and getting warm. The grassy clearing is already crowded with the usual mix of onlookers, this time swollen with more local media from the town of Malanje and village women nursing their toddlers. We've been waiting for a couple of hours and kill time taking photographs of each other. The warden, standing in tall grass, does a radio interview in Kimbundu, the local language. A bored woman from Malanje flicks on the radio in one of the trucks but she's made to turn it off – we're listening for the MI-8.

It arrives minutes later, circling once overhead before descending onto the grass. People start to move in even before the huge rotors have stopped turning. The cargo bay doors open and as the warden backs up his pickup, villagers press in and local media sprint forward. Blindfolded and hunched up on tucked legs on a stretcher, the sedated black bull twitches quietly.

I can see the #4 tag in his left ear, which is furled with duct tape. Shouting helpers move him to the bed of the pickup where two shepherds grip the red-tipped horns and cameramen clamber on for close-ups. Finally the *palanca negra gigante* is trundled through the sanctuary gate on the last leg of his historic journey.

Once the animal is deposited inside the boma, Morkel goes to work. The bull's collar stays on; it'll be used to monitor his movements later. His magnificent horns are left alone – he is, after all, the poster boy of the entire expedition. Within minutes, he's up and ambling slowly around his enclosure. The females do little dance steps as they walk around him, and shake their backsides enticingly, but he's too drug-addled to react.

There's an awful lot riding on him. But everyone thinks he's up to the job, which frankly doesn't appear all that onerous: we're handing him an antelope harem and he faces zero competition (if there were two bulls in the sanctuary, they'd probably kill each other). We're counting on this *grande macho* to do his duty, for his species and Angola, and sire a clutch of calves by next year.

A week later, a procession of 27 vehicles, led by a police jeep with flashing lights, snakes its way across the marshy track and its disintegrating log bridges from Bola Cassaxi to the warden's camp. The Minister of the Environment, Maria de Fátima Domingas Montiero Jardim, climbs out of a dusty SUV to greet the local administrators, shepherds, the soba, villagers and expedition members who've been waiting since early morning.

Angolan media accompanying Jardim gather around her with microphones and video cameras as she thanks Vaz Pinto, acknowledges the role of the Catholic University, contributions of the oil industry, the Ministry, Malanje province and local authorities, and speaks movingly about the giant sable. She talks about an ongoing programme to retrain demobilised soldiers as game guards, something Angola's moribund parks and reserves could certainly make use of – if they were given the resources to hire them.

Afterwards, Vaz Pinto takes the VIPs to peek at the sables in the boma. Later, when everyone has left, he returns with a crew to quietly dismantle a large section of its wall. In the slanting afternoon light the bull walks out with dignified steps, followed by the nine females.

The timing couldn't be better. It's the onset of the miombo spring, when purple, red and pink flowers and green shoots of new grass mysteriously sprout from the dry, blackened soil weeks ahead of coming rains – the breeding season for giant sables. As the *palancas negras* fade into the darkening sanctuary forest, the shepherds and villagers leave the camp for Bola Cassaxi to party with the sacks of rice, boxes of juice and cases of beer that the *ministra* distributed before she and her entourage drove off.

The capture team holds a final celebratory dinner. Vaz Pinto opens a bottle of 1905 Sercial Madeira from his mother's side of his family. We toast him and the extraordinary success of the expedition, and talk on into the night. Later, in my sleeping bag, I think about how biologists, conscious of how every life form from the smallest bug to the tallest tree contributes to an ecosystem, often roll their eyes at the public's disproportionate interest in 'charismatic quadrupeds'. But none of us on this expedition feels apologetic about our feelings for the giant sable. If we can't get people to care about what happens to a creature that looks like a walking emblem, how will we ever motivate them to care about the fate of some pop-eyed forest frog?

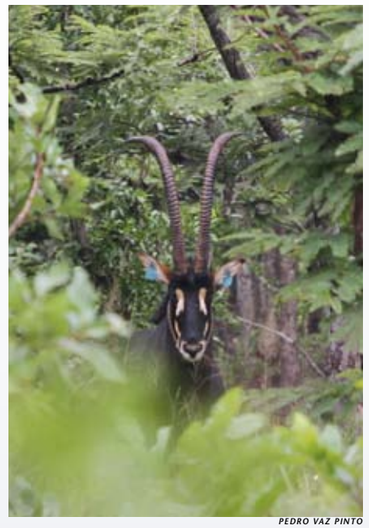
I think too about Jardim's speech. In effect, she said all the right things. But I fear that nothing will actually be done for the *palanca negra gigante*; I hope I'm wrong.

When the giant sable bull was brought to Cangandala, the police in camp spontaneously set up a checkpoint at the head of the road to the sanctuary, consisting of a length of stretched, red-striped plastic tape. They kept it up for a day, then, lacking any support for their impulse, let the tape drop to be driven over and half-buried. When I left, pieces of it were still fluttering in the dusty wind.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE Still groggy from the drugs, the bull inspects the holding boma.

OPPOSITE, BELOW Veterinarian Pete Morkel wrestles with the tranquillised bull.

BELOW The captive bull guards his harem in Cangandala's breeding sanctuary.



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Angolans say they hold their *palanca negra gigante* in high regard, but too many of them fail to connect the enthralling idea OF THE ANIMAL TO THE DEADLY THREATS THAT FACE IT: POACHING AND HABITAT LOSS

The 20 or so giant sables found on Vaz Pinto's expedition renew hope that this extraordinary species can endure, if it's given half a chance. Angolans say they hold their *palanca negra gigante* in high regard, but too many of them fail to connect the enthralling idea of the animal to the deadly threats that face it: poaching and habitat loss. If their government does nothing to safeguard its future, the great antelope that has returned like a symbol of renewal from the ashes of war will not survive the peace. ■

John Frederick Walker is the author of A Certain Curve of Horn: The Hundred-year Quest for the Giant Sable Antelope of Angola. *His latest book is* Ivory's Ghosts: The White Gold of History and the Fate of Elephants.