



ANDY TUTCHINGS (2)

# tall order

First catch your giraffe... Not as easy as it may sound, this is an exercise with many pitfalls, any one of which could result in the death of a West African giraffe, a subspecies that the 2008 IUCN Red List classes as Endangered, with high conservation priority. But to conserve it effectively you need to learn more about it, and for this a satellite collar is invaluable – and that, explains **Andy Tutchings**, brings us back to catching your giraffe.

**‘Attention, attention!’** – in a dreadful French accent that only an Englishman is capable of – was the warning for the team to strengthen their hold on the fully conscious giraffe we were restraining and look out for its flailing, plate-sized hooves. It was one I uttered only if I felt the animal’s immensely strong neck muscles tense up, to pre-empt by a second or two its bid to break free and regain its footing.

The action was taking place some 60 kilometres east of Niamey, the capital of Niger, and we were fitting satellite collars to eight West African giraffes *Giraffa camelopardalis peralta*. The most endangered of all the giraffes, this subspecies is believed to have once ranged from Senegal across north-western Africa as far as Chad, but by the mid-1990s barely 50 individuals remained. Against all odds, its seemingly terminal decline has been halted – at least for now – and there has even been an increase in the population: according to a 2009 survey conducted by Jean-Patrick (J-P) Suraud, the scientific

manager for the Association pour la Sauvegarde des Girafes du Niger (ASGN) and a research associate of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF), it now stands at some 200 animals.

An ongoing continent-wide study of giraffe DNA (see ‘Giraffe Research Vehicle: Do Not Follow’ in the April 2010 issue) has confirmed that the West African giraffe is genetically unique and suggests it may even be a distinct species rather than a subspecies. The research, which is being carried out by the International Giraffe Working Group (IGWG) and GCF, shows that it continues to exist only in Niger but, because the animals live outside protected areas and share their environment with the local people, its long-term survival hangs in the balance. We therefore need to gain a better understanding of the range and the habitat and forage requirements of the remaining individuals.

Working closely with Julian Fennessy, the world authority on giraffes, Suraud is conducting a complete genetic analysis of this isolated population as well as

studying its dynamics and home range. It was agreed that the most efficient means of doing this would be GPS satellite technology – and that’s where we came in.

Anaesthetising and capturing giraffes and then fitting satellite collars to them has only been done once before, as part of Fennessy’s research in the rugged desert of north-western Namibia (see *Africa Geographic*, June 2003). Given the precarious state of Niger’s extremely valuable population and that giraffe capture is a potentially dangerous business for all concerned – not least the animals – it was essential that we employ as much experience as possible. So Fennessy and I once again took our lead from Namibian wildlife vet and game-capture expert H.O. Reuter, and were also fortunate to have with us **Philippe**

**ABOVE** A fragile coexistence. Some of the world’s rarest giraffes feed peacefully just metres from the huts of local villagers in Niger.



PHILIPPE CHARDONNET

**Chardonnet**, Chair of the IUCN Antelope Species Specialist Group.

Suraud decided that the eight collars available would best be fitted to relatively young, non-pregnant females. Finding suitable candidates presented its own problems, but once they’d been selected the real adventure could begin. The following extract from the expedition blog explains the capture procedure: ‘...even the calmest of giraffes will start to run once the drug begins to take effect. The problem is that if the drug is allowed to completely knock out a giraffe, this is likely to be fatal, so once the drug has taken sufficient (key word!) effect, the “fun” is tackling the giraffe and applying an antidote ASAP. To do this we use a rope to tie up the animal’s legs. The plan is for the capture team to drive alongside and then ahead of the running giraffe, alighting from the vehicle at the right moment and effecting a capture. This requires one person with one end of the rope to run in front of and then around the giraffe, where he is to be met by his supporting team (who ran behind it). The other end of the rope is held by the rest of the team and

the rope is ideally “held” at giraffe thigh height (a man’s shoulder/chest height), with two teams of about three people running alongside the giraffe before crossing over behind it, effectively lassoing its legs and making it fall... The antidote is applied immediately while the animal is restrained – and then, of course, we have a fully alert giraffe trying to get up again! To prevent this we put on a blindfold, insert cotton wool in its ears and apply a little muscle power too...’

It sounds straightforward, doesn’t it? Indeed, when all goes smoothly the entire process, from firing the dart until the giraffe is back on its feet, takes about 25 minutes. Some of the captures went almost exactly to plan but, not surprisingly, there were also missed tackles, side-stepping giraffes, tyre blow-outs, rope burns, spectacular falls and an array of cuts and bruises (only for the team, I should add – all the giraffes were fine). A highlight was demonstrating our procedure, fortunately successfully, to government minister Issouf Baco and his entourage one morning. Less heartening was having to spend a day and most of a night modifying all the collars after some giraffes had managed to ‘throw’ them.

Despite the fun caused by the capture team’s atrocious French pronunciation – it raised many a grimace among our locally recruited, French-speaking crew, especially Kimba, our giraffe guide extraordinaire, who would have us all laughing as he mimicked us perfectly – we were acutely aware that just one fatality would have constituted the loss of some 0.5 per cent of this fragile population. So it was with tremendous relief that we observed all the giraffes regain their feet and wander off to feed, unaware of the importance of their new accessory and the essential

information it was already contributing to the long-term future of their species.

Unfortunately it turned out that the collars did not fit correctly and three months later Suraud decided to remove them. Thanks go to South African vet Peter Morkel for flying up to Niger and helping out at short notice, and to the French Fund for the Environment (FFEM), African Wildlife Tracking and GCF for their quick response and support. The data collected in even that short period provided Suraud with extensive and essential information on the giraffes’ dry-season range and movements. And, while the design of the collars and the incorporation of new technology are being urgently reviewed, he and his team are continuing their field observations and adding to their knowledge of this extremely rare species. ■

The author would like to express the team’s gratitude for the invaluable support of the project’s sponsors (FFEM, GCF and **Fondation IGF**) and the collaboration of Niger’s Environment Ministry and the Giraffe Guide Association. To read the entire expedition blog and follow Suraud’s ongoing research in Niger, go to [www.giraffeconservation.org/our\\_projects.php](http://www.giraffeconservation.org/our_projects.php)

**LEFT, TOP** Complex manoeuvring is required to bring the darted giraffe down safely, and all are hoping the drug has taken sufficient effect.

**LEFT, ABOVE** With the collar on, all we need to do is let go – and keep clear of the animal’s flailing feet.

**BELOW** What was all that about? A newly collared giraffe wanders off somewhat bemusedly, then turns to look back at us.



PHILIPPE CHARDONNET