

SABLE

shenanigans

In Zambia's newest national park, on the outskirts of its capital Lusaka, live more than 200 sable antelope. Corralled in conditions that are far from ideal, the animals have languished there for almost three years, the victims of bureaucracy, unscrupulous operators and a disregard for conservation imperatives. Investigative journalist **Ian Michler** filed this special report.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN MICHLER



In November 2009, *Africa Geographic* published a notice (Sable Alert; Vol. 17, No. 10) warning of the illegal importation of sable antelope *Hippotragus niger*, most likely of the subspecies *H. n. kirkii*, from Zambia and Malawi into South Africa. With a number of wildlife breeders reputed to be involved, there were murmurings of animals being smuggled, some bound by their feet, across international boundaries in light aircraft using unregistered airstrips and via road shipments through small or remote border posts.

During the first half of 2010 there were subsequent reports in the wider press of a deal involving the sale of sables by the Zambian Wildlife Authority (ZAWA) to a South African consortium. These accounts also covered disputes between government and private-sector agencies over the importation of these animals and the subsequent transfer (without notice) of three officials from the South African Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries – apparently for refusing to sign permits authorising the sables' irregular importation.

Almost three years have passed since the ZAWA deal, yet the animals remain corralled at Lusaka National Park (see 'Incarcerated by red tape') on the outskirts of

the Zambian capital. Now numbering around 210, they are split into pens, some dismally small, that divide breeding herds from single adult bulls.

The story of why they languish in such conditions is one of red tape and squabbles over the spoils that involves ministers from both countries and their respective officials, a host of businessmen, wildlife traders and breeders, their agents and middlemen, and a collection of veterinary scientists and game-capture specialists.

On 6 May 2009, a company called Swanvest 234, acting on behalf of a South African consortium based in the Northern Cape province, paid US\$734 000 (a sum well below the market price) to ZAWA for 153 sables. In the months that followed the animals were captured, supposedly from Kafue National Park, by ZAWA and a South African game-capture company. By September, all 153 had been relocated to holding pens in Lusaka Park for quarantine purposes. In the meantime, the Swanvest 234 group, operating under the name Ecological Management Services (EMS), sent a document to the South African Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries outlining how and why it wanted

to import the 'Western Zambian sables' for breeding purposes at a facility called Wolwefontein just outside Kimberley.

However, because Zambia is regarded as a high-risk area for foot-and-mouth (FMD) and other infectious diseases, there is no protocol to import sable into South Africa and state veterinarians rejected the proposal. With the clock ticking on its investment, the Swanvest 234 group then appealed directly to the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Tina Joemat-Pettersson, who coincidentally also hails from the Northern Cape, to ask for her 'favourable consideration of this application'.

According to police sources, Swanvest 234 also had in place a Plan B, which was to use a Boeing 737 to fly the animals under cover of darkness to an airstrip near Zeerust in the North West Province. The suspicion was that the animals would then be 'laundered' by distributing them across farms within the greater region. The flight never happened, possibly because of a tip-off that the airstrip had been staked out.

By December 2009 there was a brief hint of hope for the importers when the Minister, going against the findings of her own departments and using, in part, recommendations from the same vet employed by the Swanvest 234 group, made public her intention to allow the sables to be imported into South Africa. Joemat-Pettersson planned to have a protocol written and, to this end, the sable deal had been discussed during bilateral talks with the Zambians two months earlier.

Again there was an immediate court application to have the importation blocked. Opposition came from various government and private-sector quarters, including Joemat-Pettersson's own deputy minister, a group of veterinarians and, most significantly, the Red Meat Industry Forum, which lists a number of local sable breeders among its members. This time there were also claims that advisors and family members close to the Minister had been cut into the deal to influence or even help fast-track her decision.

These allegations were countered by the consortium and others who claimed that the opposition was being promoted and funded by existing South African sable breeders. Allegedly already carrying



Incarcerated by red tape

Lusaka Park, situated on the eastern edge of the capital city, is Zambia's 20th and newest national park. Gazetted in May 2011, it was established as a result of the collective efforts of local conservationists and government departments, who saw



it as the most effective way to save two small woodland reserves that were heavily threatened by deforestation and poaching. Although not open to the public yet, the park has been securely fenced, and a restoration and restocking process is under way. Within the next year or so, Zambia's capital is likely to have a recreational wildlife sanctuary and an environmental education facility right on its doorstep.

Meanwhile, the current situation no doubt suits the owners of the sables that are being kept there. With no official signposting, finding Lusaka Park is not easy nor is trying to gain entrance. Claiming to be following instructions from the South Africans, the gate guards are reluctant to let you in. Gaining access to the sable pens proves even more challenging.

A few hundred metres from the gate, ZAWA has a small office, and it's here that the company contracted by Swanvest 234 to capture and transport the sables keeps its cattle trucks and a helicopter.

To the left, a further hundred metres or so from the office block, is the enclosed camp (below) holding the 200-plus sables. Ten 15 x 15-metre pens contain between 10 and 20 animals each – a breeding male, females and their offspring. Adjacent to them is row of much smaller pens that each hold a single male. All the enclosures are fenced using game wire encased with sacking and shadecloth. The males have little or no access to sunlight as the tops of their pens have additional covering. As you walk past their enclosures, the bulls constantly charge the sacking walls.

Off to one side is an enclosure clearly marked 'Hospital', a place that you are sternly informed not to go anywhere near. Apparently, a vet from South Africa pays a visit once a month to do 'work' there.

Zambian bloodlines, the breeders supposedly wanted the importation blocked to avoid competition in what had become a highly lucrative market.

The court ruled that the Minister and her department had to undertake a thorough veterinary analysis of the sables and provide a risk assessment on FMD. This analysis was duly done and concluded that the sables would not pose a significant biosecurity risk to South Africa. It's a result that lends some credence to the belief that disease legislation was used in a deliberate attempt to block the importation.

During the same period, the Swanvest 234 group was facing another serious issue relating to its appointed purchasing agent, Ed Kadzombe. Kadzombe, a Zimbabwean citizen with close connections to the political and business elites of his home country, is no stranger to controversy when it comes to trading in wildlife. No doubt realising the value of the sables to be far greater than the US\$734 000 paid to ZAWA, he decided to claim full ownership for himself through a company called Nkwazi Resources Investments. ▶

LEFT The sable enclosure at Lusaka Park. The sacking-encased pen marked 'Hospital' is in the background, on the left.

Court cases were brought in both South Africa and Zambia with the former finding in favour of the South Africans in June 2010.

Now, sources say, the sables' legal owners, Swanvest 234, are seeking other ways of getting their money back. Reputedly, they initially demanded that ZAWA reverse the deal, then offered the animals for sale below their current market prices. In the meantime, animals are being bred in the Lusaka Park holding facility, raising concerns in a number of quarters that young antelopes will be smuggled out in small consignments.

The sables' eventual fate notwithstanding, the current mess highlights a number of issues. Why did ZAWA officials sell the animals for so much less than the market price? Insiders suggest that, at the time of the sale, the lot of 153 antelopes had a true market value closer to four times the US\$734 000 paid. (In October 2008, a single sable bull was sold on the South African market for a staggering R3-million or US\$370 000.) With those values likely to be even greater now, it's no wonder that the South African consortium was happy to 'donate' two white rhinos as part of the deal.

Given that this was a straight commercial transaction with no conservation or ecological parameters, surely ZAWA should have ascertained an approximate value of the animals before selling them? One cannot help but ask if any of the officials were due to benefit in their individual capacities from the deal.

More recently though, there has been a dramatic change in ZAWA's fortunes, which may in turn affect the fate of the sables. Within a week of winning the October 2011 general election, Zambia's president, Michael Sata, fired its entire board and dissolved the organisation. While seen in some quarters as a heavy-handed solution to the increasingly problematic authority, for many in Zambia's conservation community the move could not have

come sooner. There were even suggestions that Sata take a closer look at the circumstances surrounding this particular deal.

Regardless of market values and the machinations of the respective authorities, it is the total disregard for the subspecies classifications of sables – and the consequent genetic contamination – that really worries conservationists. Biologists generally recognise four subspecies or races of sable, based on morphological and behavioural differences as well as the pattern of distribution (see 'A fragile foursome'). Although making genetic distinctions is more challenging, the preliminary work that has been done on these four groups to date seems to validate the subspecies classifications. Or, as Pedro Vaz Pinto, a biologist and sable expert based in Angola, puts it, 'At least, we can identify four different genetic populations that mainly coincide with the recognised subspecies boundaries.'

While understanding the genetics of species and subspecies is vital for taxonomy, it also places an obligation on the conservation world to protect the integrity of these classifications. Vaz Pinto says: 'A strong effort should be made to ensure that viable natural populations of recognised subspecies are maintained. The different gene pools are the result of thousands of years of adaptation to different environments and reflect the uniqueness of the various populations.'

Vaz Pinto also notes that 'natural populations (and subspecies) are often porous and may contain contact zones. However, there is no obvious natural hybridisation occurring between the previously mentioned recognised races of sable antelope.' And herein lies the crux of the conservationists' concerns: deals such as the one between ZAWA and the South African consortium ignore biology and are highly likely to result in ongoing genetic contamination of the recognised subspecies.

In the scramble for the longest horns, unscrupulous breeders and traders, mostly from South Africa, make every effort to get hold of *H. n. kirkii*, a subspecies that does not naturally occur south of the Zambezi. Once in the country, the antelopes are either sold on auction or moved to established breeding facilities. The authorities have undertaken investigations involving a number of farms in the Free State, Northern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces, but as yet no prosecutions have been made.

Vets and biologists have also voiced their concerns about the growing contamination within a number of herds that are being bred in captivity. If this process is allowed to continue, the contamination will become irreversible, a genetic cesspool. To add insult to injury, sellers make all sorts of claims about the genetic make-up of their stock in order to achieve higher prices.

With the cross-breeding of *H. n. kirkii* and *H. n. niger* well under way, there are fears that the breeders

and hunters are now after the giant sable, the most prized trophy of all. Biologists involved in sable conservation relate stories of untold attempts by individuals and organisations that ostensibly want to assist in the conservation efforts, but whose real interest lies in gaining access to the surviving population.

As the geographical spread indicates, the Angolan subspecies occurs far from any of the others, and genetic testing done to date supports its classification. But this has not stopped rumours and claims that the bloodline may already be found in South Africa. If true, given the lack of road infrastructure within Angola, there are only two ways this could happen. Either sables are being flown out in small aircraft or someone is stealing sperm. It is not inconceivable that once access to the animals is gained, adult males are darted, sperm is drawn and placed in vials of liquid hydrogen to be smuggled out.

Officials from SADC and Angola who issue tenders for wildlife work in that country need to be aware of this possibility, and should not award tenders to companies involved in sable breeding. Should giant sables be stolen for cross-breeding purposes, their endemic status – their most valuable and distinguishing conservation attribute – will be threatened.

Lastly, as is so often the case when wildlife is reduced to a commodity, the welfare of the 210 sables is of little or no consideration to the traders. According to a number of ecologists and veterinarians who have seen my photographs, the conditions under which these antelopes are being



kept are unacceptable. Not only are the enclosures overcrowded and too small (South African state veterinarians also made note of this in their feedback to the Minister), they should never have been allowed to remain confined in this state for almost three years. Clearly, there is an urgent need for concerned organisations to get involved and lobby both the Zambian and the South African authorities for their immediate release. **AG**

OPPOSITE Moments after taking this photograph, this bull charged the game-wire fence of his pen. A number of experts have slated the cramped conditions under which the animals are being kept.

BELOW The breeding herds at Lusaka Park are producing young, raising fears that these small antelopes may be smuggled into South Africa.



A fragile foursome

Typically found in the drier zones between moist woodlands and more arid terrain, the sable antelope *Hippotragus niger* is classified into four subspecies or races.

- *H. n. niger* is regarded as the 'typical' sable as it was the first to be described and named way back in 1838. Often referred to as the black sable because it tends to have the darkest coat, this subspecies occurs south of the Zambezi River, particularly in northern Botswana and Zimbabwe.
- *H. n. kirkii*, the common or southern sable, has the largest geographical range, which extends north of the Zambezi River through Zambia, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and Malawi into south-western Tanzania. The race shows a wide variation in form across its range, but typically has slightly longer horns than *H. n. niger*. Because of these differences, some biologists have proposed a fifth subspecies, *H. n. ansellii*, which would include populations in eastern Zambia and Malawi, but this has yet to be officially recognised.
- *H. n. roosevelti* or the Shimba sable is the smallest of the races. It occurs in the coastal hinterlands of southern Kenya, particularly in the Shimba Hills National Park, and ranges through the region east of Tanzania's eastern escarpment and into northern Mozambique.
- *H. n. varianii*, the giant sable is so named because the horns of both sexes are recognisably longer. Found only in a few remaining localities in central Angola, the giant sable is listed as Critically Endangered by the IUCN and its continued existence was confirmed just three years ago (see *Africa Geographic*, June and July 2010).



Approximate distribution of the four sable subspecies
 ■ *H. n. niger*
 ■ *H. n. kirkii*
 ■ *H. n. roosevelti*
 ■ *H. n. varianii*