

NEWSLETTER AUGUST

In this newsletter:

- 🐾 [Reintroducing elephants in south-eastern Angola](#)
- 🐾 [Sand ingestion and Sand impaction](#)

Dear clients,

We hope all is good on your side! While last year was the year of the giraffe for us, 2024 is the year of the elephant! We assisted the Mount Etjo team with several elephant translocations to the Cuatir Nature Reserve in Angola. We hope you enjoy the story where we try to give you a glimpse into this epic project! Due to the drought, we see more and more animals getting supplemental feeding. When you do give food, please be aware of sand ingestion and impaction. We give you a full summary of our online article, we hope you will find it useful. Kind regards, the Wildlife Vets Namibia

REINTRODUCING ELEPHANTS IN SOUTH-EASTERN ANGOLA

In the rugged landscapes of south-east Angola lies the Cuatir Nature Reserve. This pristine area was discovered by Stefan van Wyk in 2012. Since then, it has become his mission in life to protect and develop this area for conservation purposes. In 2020, we re-introduced zebras, eland, kudu, impala and giraffes into this reserve, and in 2022 more giraffes and kudus followed. Now, the reserve was ready to take a step bigger... After 50 years of absence, it was time to bring back the African elephant!

The elephants come from Mount Etjo, owned by Annette and Alex Oelofse. In 2019 we took several elephants from Mount Etjo to the DRC, but in the meantime the elephant population grew considerably again. Due to the ongoing drought, it was essential that more elephants were relocated to prevent further stress on the habitat and the other animals. And Cuatir was the perfect solution!

It is not a small task to move family herds of elephants, but the best team was pulled together to accomplish this mission. During three captures in August, a total of 22 elephants were translocated. Early September the last translocation will follow.

The elephants are darted from the helicopter, and ideally the whole family unit is darted in one go. Once asleep, they are lifted onto flatbeds, and driven to a special wake-up crate. In the wake-up crate they are woken up one by one. Once awake, the doors to a transport crate open, and the elephant walks over. Then, the next elephant is pulled into the wake-up crate!



The elephants were transported in special elephant crates. The road to the border was not long, and typically the border was reached early evening. Both the Namibian and Angolan borders were extremely helpful, and procedures were handled in a quick and efficient manner. While waiting, the elephants got water, and while drinking, they would sometimes give the team a shower too!

After the border crossing, it was not far. The main road to the river crossing is about 106 kilometers, but ‘just’ 106 kilometers in Angola does not mean you will be there in an hour.... Potholes, diverting from the main road to the side roads, sand, and a heavy load of precious elephants made us drive very slowly, so typically this stretch took about 10h.

On the first trip, when we got to the river crossing, the Angolan 6x6 trucks were waiting to take over. Unfortunately, the one 6x6 truck did not fit, and the Mount Etjo truck had to brave the deep sand on the other side of the river. Both elephant trailers crossed the river, and then the real challenge began. Only 43 kilometers were left between us and the release-site... but the road gave us a hard time, and at a certain stage 3 6x6 trucks were needed to get the elephants through the thick and heavy sand. After driving and struggling the whole day, we took a quick break around 02:00 at night to give both the elephants, and especially the drivers a bit of well-deserved rest.

The next morning we only had a few kilometers left, and this went smooth. The bull and cow with calf were offloaded first, and then the four sub-adults. This is always the most exciting part of a translocation! What a great feeling, of course for the elephants, but also for the entire team that worked so hard to get the elephants there.



During stops, the elephants got water, camel thorn pods, fresh Angolan branches and grass.



The release of the first group of elephants. From left to right: the bull, the cow and her calf, and four sub-adults were released. What a pleasure it must have been for them to stretch their legs again!



Since there were quite a few challenges during the first trip, several modifications were made by ‘Mr MacGyver’ Alex to make the next trips smoother. He build tracks that would go around the tyres to prevent getting stuck so easily. Also, an extra 6x6 truck from Cowboys went along, that carried extra water for the elephants and helped pulling the trucks though the sand. The next trips went quicker and smoother each time.

During the three translocations, all elephants were released safe and sound in their new elephant-paradise! A nice story; after the third release, the elephants that were already in Cuatir came to the release site to ‘pick up’ their buddies! A magical moment for the team!



The difficult road conditions did not make things easy, but the team never stopped making plans! © Annette Oelofse

The Cuatir Nature Reserve is a pristine area, with floodplains, grasslands, forests and a river. The elephants will do very well here, and we congratulate Stefan van Wyk with this milestone! For more information about the Cuatir Nature Reserve, have a look at their website [here](#). You can also follow the project on social media.



We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the entire Mount Etjo team – Annette, Alex, Carola and Rudie – for allowing us to be part of this incredible elephant project. They truly exemplify what it means to be conservationists! A big thanks also to Stefan van Wyk, and Dr Mike Chase from Elephants without Borders who helped steering this complex translocation. Furthermore, we thank Frank Schatz from Cowboys and Dr HO Reuter, filmmaker Byron Pace, drivers Apollo and Ferdinand, and everyone else who have been involved in this epic translocation project! We are proud to have been a part of this team and this remarkable endeavor!

Thank you – Baie dankie – Muito Obrigado!

During the 3rd release, this cow and calf turned around and had a good look at the team, before heading off into the reserve. If we could only read their minds! © Stefan van Wyk

SAND INGESTION AND SAND IMPACTION

With the continuing drought and diminishing grazing, farmers are forced to supply their animals (livestock and game alike) with supplemental feeding. As the grazing deteriorates, animals are forced to graze down to ground level, which inadvertently leads to some sand ingestion. This can lead to secondary intestinal sand impaction. A few years ago, we wrote an article on this topic, and we thought it is a good idea to repeat some info of the article since we had a few cases recently.

You might have heard of pica; this is when animals eat/nibble on something which does not have any (or hardly any) nutritional value. Examples of pica are the eating of bones (osteophagia), or eating soil (geophagia). This behaviour is likely associated with some nutritional deficits (e.g. phosphate deficiency or starvation).

Animals can, however, also ingest sand unintentionally when sand sticks to food (poor quality and/or sand contaminated hay) or where soil is ingested directly by eating grass from a sandy soil. Animals forced to eat a pasture all the way down to the grass's roots, as under drought conditions, are also at risk.

Why is sand a problem?

Sand in relatively low quantity is not a big issue, it might be irritating to the intestinal mucosa, often causing diarrhoea. But when an animal ingests lots of sand, it will become a problem. Since sand is heavier than the normal intestinal content, it accumulates in the lower parts of stomach/intestine. This causes distension (swelling) and eventually impaction (blockage), thereby disrupting the normal peristalsis of the intestine.



White rhino eating the last straws of lucerne of the ground, thereby possibly also ingesting sand © M. Bijsterbosch

What are the symptoms?

Animals suffering from the effects of sand ingestion may show one of two main presenting signs:

- 🐾 In milder cases of sand ingestion sand irritation to the intestinal mucosa, it can cause diarrhoea which can be constant, or coming and going (intermittent).
- 🐾 Animals with sand impaction usually appear dull and weak in the hind legs (reluctant to rise or move when approached). In addition to the above, they are lethargic and have a reduced appetite. They may show signs of abdominal discomfort (colic); the animal keeps looking at the abdomen, kicking at the belly, stretching the abdomen, constantly lying down and standing up, not passing any manure, pawing and rolling.

It is not easy to diagnose this condition. You can look at the symptoms an animal is showing, and observe the feeding routine, the habitat and the quality of grazing. An easy, but unreliable test, is to shake up equal volumes of faecal balls with water and then observe sand sedimentation after a minute or two. Since sand is heavy, it will settle at the bottom, while the rest of the faecal matter will settle on top. However, be aware that this test can be negative in animals suffering from severe sand impaction and it does not tell us how much sand has accumulated in the intestines!

If the animal is dead, it is important to do a thorough Post-Mortem examination. The gastrointestinal tract will likely show mucosal irritation and ulcerations in the abomasum (ruminants) and colon/caecum (equids and rhinos). Sand accumulation will be evident in the abomasum and intestines (ruminants) and caecum/colon (equids and rhinos). This can be up to 10 – 50 or more kg! Depending on the species, the involved abdominal organs will be swollen/distended and feel hard or doughy.



This is the colon content from a rhino shaken up in water. You can see the content is nearly 100% sand. © U. Tubbesing



Sand impaction of the colon in a white rhino (see picture above of the bottle with sand). © U. Tubbesing



Enlarged abomasum of a giraffe, filled with sand © [HO Jegede et al \(2015\)](#)

How to treat it?

There are different opinions regarding the treatment and effectiveness sand impaction cases. In wild animals the diagnosis will most likely only be made during a PM, or based on suspicion. Effective treatment usually requires intensive “hands on” management which is impractical in game, but may be considered in horses and cattle. Check the article for more info.

As always... Prevention is better than a cure!

First of all, make sure your animals get a well-balanced diet, which will reduce the inclination to nibble on dirt, bones, etc.

Wherever possible, avoid overgrazing to prevent animals eating too close to the ground (esp. important in sandy areas). If you have to give supplemental feeding, avoid feeding directly from the ground since this will increase sand contamination of food and sand ingestion.

- 🐾 Feed off the ground as much as possible:
 - Feed in hay stacks and use a rubber mat under feeding areas to catch the feed that inevitably falls on the ground. This also minimises wastage of expensive food.
 - Feed on rubber covered (conveyor belting) ground away from sandy areas. Please note that these do get very hot in the sun thus place in shady areas!
 - Feed on natural rock surfaces (if available) or make concrete slabs.
 - Provide feeding bowls.
- 🐾 Provide multiple feeding spots spread over a wide area to ensure all animals get a chance to eat.
- 🐾 A high fibre intake (ideally in unlimited quantity on farms with sand ingestion problems) is a high priority since the high fibre content will assist with sand removal from the gut.
- 🐾 Since dehydration will exacerbate intestinal impaction always provide plenty of fresh water.



Put rubber mats/conveyor belts under your hay stacks, to reduce wastage, and sand ingestion. Make sure these are regularly cleared from sand. © M. Bijsterbosch



Some examples of feeding off the ground under (semi) intensive circumstances. When you use feeding bowls, make sure you have enough feeding bowls for all animals, and make sure there is enough space between each bowl © M. Bijsterbosch

If you want to read more, have a look at our different articles available [on our website](#):

- 🐾 Sand impaction and Sand ingestion: Silent killers
- 🐾 Change, the driver of feeding behaviour in (wild) animals
- 🐾 Feeding wildlife in drought



Dr Ulf Tubbesing

P.O. Box 50533, Windhoek

+264 (0)81 128 3050

ulft@africaonline.com.na

Mariska Bijsterbosch

+264 (0)81 382 8473

+31 (0)6 4369 3095 (WhatsApp)

mariska@wildlifevetsnamibia.com



www.wildlifevetsnamibia.com.na



Facebook: [Wildlife Vets Namibia](https://www.facebook.com/WildlifeVetsNamibia)



Instagram: [@wildlife_vets_namibia](https://www.instagram.com/wildlife_vets_namibia)



YouTube: [Wildlife Vets Namibia](https://www.youtube.com/WildlifeVetsNamibia)