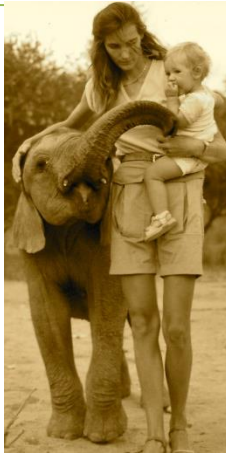


Dear friends

Right: Annette – raising Alex, and the first small elephants at Okonjati Game Reserve.



The 5th August 2024 will mark a memorable day in the history of conservation. The first seven of 26 elephants were darted and tranquilized by helicopter (Alex being the pilot) and loaded on to two trucks, each fitted with two containers. Their destination was Cuatir, Angola, a private reserve about 140 km from the Katwitwi border post between Namibia and Angola. It would be the first time in 50 years that the Angolan reserve would see elephants again, after decades of war and destruction to its people and wildlife.

Rewind to January 2024. Namibia was hit by the worst drought in a very long time, and Alex and Annette had to make the pragmatic choice to remove at least half of the 50 elephants that were residing at Okonjati, to relieve some of the pressure on the already fragile ecosystem. Finding a new home for elephants, though, is not easy. Who would be willing to take elephants? Even if they were being offered for free, nobody in Namibia would be able to provide for them. The search for a new home for them led Alex as far as to North Africa, but after personally travelling to and visiting the reserves in question, he found them unsuitable, with management and resources lacking to host the magnificent animals.

But as always, a bit of luck and sheer willpower led Alex to meet Namibian Stefan van Wyk, pilot and conservationist, who had leased a pristine area of 20 000 hectares from the Angolan government, and busy rewilding and building eco-tourism business. Stefan agreed to accept the animals and got to work to fence in 5000 hectares of initial release area, which could not have been more suitable: a vast jungle of soft-leaved trees, soft ground and the mighty Cuatir river permanently flowing through it. Alex first thought may



ELEPHANT TRANSLOCATION September 2024

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“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” – African proverb.



Top: Elephants are tranquilized by helicopter, loaded on a lowbed truck by crane, dragged into the wake-up crate by conveyor belt. They are woken up and then walk over into the custom containers for transport. Doors closed, off we go!

have been “at least, if they decide to break ALL the water pipes, they will always have water!”. But perhaps even more importantly, he saw in Stefan a like-minded passionate conservationist – and long-term friend, who would go over and beyond to put wildlife first.

Alex made several trips to Angola before the big move, and already discovered that moving two heavy trucks loaded with elephants, would be logistically challenging. The route included 600 km tarred road up to the Katwitwi border post and then – no roads whatsoever. After the Katwitwi border post, large potholes loomed, rocks, calverts, cattle. A total of 106 km would take the trucks 10 hours to reach the next hurdle, the river crossing. Stefan had set up a ferry to take small cars across the river, but the trucks would have to be towed across by 6x6 trucks to make it to the other side. But just on the other side of the river, the next obstacle loomed: thick, soft sand, stretching an impossible 40 km before the reserve would be in reach.

It seemed luck was at his side, and Stefan came in touch with a UK-based NGO demining company in Angola, who, after learning of the big conservation project, gracefully offered to help, and to make three of their 6x6 trucks available to tow the elephants where necessary. Alex meticulously planned the entire operation, took measurements to make sure the trucks would be

compatible with the NGO’s equipment, single-handedly rebuilt and customized two containers to provide safe transport for the elephants, and made sure operations were streamlined and that if something went wrong, he would come prepared with all his tools packed and ready. Alex would take responsibility for the lives of 26 elephants and his team, and he was making sure that they would arrive safely. It was a massive responsibility, even for someone with shoulders as broad as his. Nothing could go wrong. Or so it seemed.

On the big day, the elephants were carefully selected to minimally disrupt the delicate social structure of the resident elephant herd at Okonjati Game Reserve, with Rudie and Annette having observed and noted the social bonds between the groups for weeks.

The main priority was to under no circumstance separate calves from their mothers, and if possible, to keep family groups together. Distinguishing the animals and relaying the information to Alex and the veterinarian in the helicopter, was a feat of its own. But both veterinarians on site, Dr HO Reuter, Dr Ulf Tubbesing and his incredibly organized assistant Mariska Bijsterbosch, had all done this before. On the ground, Rudie and Annette steered the recovery vehicles and Mr Frank Schatz, took care of loading logistics. The importance of accurately communicating and selecting the right elephants was understood by all team members.

It needs to be noted that this team is probably the only one in Namibia with this experience, skill and expertise in handling elephants. Mr Frank Schatz has been on the ground of every single elephant capture that has happened in Namibia during the past decades. Together, Frank, Alex and Dr HO had captured and delivered elephants from the Kamanjab area to Dubai for the Namibian government tender in 2020. Both Rudie and



Left: Two of the elephant cows were collared with a satellite collar, which allows tracking of their movement throughout the park. The collars were donated by ELEPHANTS WITHOUT BORDERS.

Right: Stefan, Mariska and Dr Ulf.



Right: the river crossing in the early morning.

Below: Little Keira and Frank feeding and watering the elephants.



Annette had joined our elephants on their long trip to the DRC in 2019, with Rudie almost losing his life after being trampled by a scared elephant cow. Annette has her own story with this species, having raised an elephant baby while carrying little Alex on her hips. Our veterinarians, Dr Ulf and Dr HO and Mariska, have darted and moved countless of these massive animals across borders, by plane, ship and road. Dr Mark Chase and Kelly from elephants without borders, had both dedicated their lives to the conservation of elephants.



Last but not least, Byron Pace, who had documented the DRC elephant move and produced the movie "Paid in Blood", was equally hands-on ready for another adventure. They all knew exactly what to do, and the capture operations were as smooth as they could have been. By 10h00 am on all of the four capture operations, the elephants were loaded and ready to go.



But despite expertise and meticulous preparations, the first trip would push the limits of everyone involved. Leaving at 10h00 am, the team arrived at the border shortly before 19h00. They drove through the night, into the unknown, making 10 km/hour at most. Exhausted and sleep-deprived, they arrived at the river crossing in the early morning hours. The elephants were still doing good, having received loads of Angolan brush and water breaks in between.



Top: Rudie with Jan and Keira during the first capture morning.

Below: the team after offloading the first seven elephants!

But the struggle had only begun. Nobody could have foreseen that the NGO would out of sheer ignorance, fail to provide the trucks that had originally been promised. The saddle did not fit, and the trucks were fitted with road wheels instead of balloon tyres, greatly reducing the grip in the thick sand that would lie ahead. The trucks did not provide the power that would have been required to pull the massive load of elephants. But "Mc Guyver" Alex (as he was henceforth lovingly called by the



Back: Alex and Frank. Front: Apollo, Mariska, Dr Ulf, Annette, Rudie and Byron.



Left: Another obstacle during the first trip were the low-hanging trees. Luckily, the crew had chopped off most of them during the first trip, to allow easier passage during subsequent travels.

Right: Alex, in his element!



team), made some adjustments. He had packed his grinders, his welding machine, his entire workshop, and he made it work as best he could, and forward they pushed through the river crossing, into the deep sand.

a few hours while they fed the elephants with the lush Angolan brush that the surroundings so graciously provided.



Finally, finally... a day later than planned, the team made it to the offloading ramp that Stefan had built. They opened the crates and could watch the elephants carefully taking the first steps into their new home. Mesmerized, they watched how all elephants had survived the ordeal unscathed, maybe a bit bruised, but in far better condition than the human travelers. Alex and Annette hugged and shed a few tears in endless relief and gratitude, knowing that all the struggles and efforts had eventually been worthwhile.

Endless hours of getting stuck, of digging into the relentless Angolan sand, mopane flies circling their ears and eyes, they pushed forward by mere centimeters at a time, leaving the team worried about their precious cargo. The NGO trucks did not perform and what should have taken 6 hours, turned into a seemingly endless nightmare of 27 hours. The team had only packed food and water for themselves for another day. Stefan greeted them with some more water on the way while they carried on struggling. Sleep deprived for then 44 hours, exhausted to the point of breaking, Alex fell asleep at some point, and the team decided to let him rest just



Right: Max, and Byrons feet, covered in black Angolan dust.

Alex and Annette, eternally relieved and grateful after a stressful first trip.





Still that same day, the NGO decided they would take the empty trucks back to the river crossing. Dr Mark Chase, who left the camp earlier on his way back, however, found three trucks swimming in the river, with one of our trailers... they had, once again, slightly over-estimated the abilities of both their drivers and their trucks to find their way through the shallowest part of the river at night and had completely abandoned the mission – without even as much as a good bye.

Top: It took Alex 3 days to design, weld and assemble the tracks, and repair the trailer.

What would have in other moments in time been a major irritation, though, left Alex laughing at the whole situation. The elephants had been safely offloaded, everything else felt like negligible, immaterial collateral damage. Local “mokoros” (small wooden boats), were seen collecting items from the NGO trucks... our team shook their heads in absolute disbelief of such incompetence and made their way home.

This was the first trip, three more would need to follow. Alex put his engineering mind to work to figure out a way which would make the next transfers easier, faster, safer. The obvious choice would have been to find bigger trucks, but these are nowhere to be found in Namibia, at such short notice, and with a limited budget at hand. So, “McGyver” Alex decided to build tracks which could be temporarily fitted over the tyres of the trucks, to allow for better traction and grip in the thick sand. He called on “Cowboys”, a renowned Namibian company, to borrow one of their 6 x 6 trucks to allow for safer passage. It took him and his team 3 days to cut, weld and assemble the tracks according to his ingenious design, using conveyor belt which he had lying around, and whatever materials were available.

Then, Alex, Byron, Max and Frank drove up all the way to Angola again, to test the tracks, and to recover the trailer that the NGO had driven into the river.



Without elephants on board, this trip to Angola did not bear the pressure of the previous trip, but proved just as hard and difficult, with many times getting stuck in sand, flat tyres, and all sorts of mechanical and logistical challenges. The team prevailed. With very little sleep, they made their way back, the lost trailer recovered but in bad shape. Back at home, Alex had to take all the trailer apart, fit new bearings, and make sure it would be

Top: Alex and Frank, grinding and making final changes to the tracks on site.
Left: the ingenious track design – running the show!!!



Left: recovering the lost trailer, Alex and Byron had to wait a while for the others to get back – and started a campfire under the starry night. Right: Byron, Frank, Alex and Dr HO enjoying a well-deserved cold beer!



in running condition for the next trip scheduled to happen in a few days.

The capture operation during the second trip went according to plan, and this time, Alex kids, Carola and Annette’s brothers, Henner and Sohni Diekmann, would join in on the adventure. The team reached the border around 19h00, and drove through the night to reach the river crossing at 05h00 am. They made several stops to cut some brush and give the elephants some water. Veterinarian Ulf Tubbesing had welded some frames to hold the water crates to the feeding windows this time, which made it much easier to give the elephants water. After the river crossing – the deciding moment! The team put on the tracks, using a mechanism that they had fine-tuned. And – WOW – did those trucks run smoothly through that impenetrable Angolan sand!



This time, Cowboy’s 6 x 6 truck as well as Stefan’s Volvo truck did the towing, and even though the Volvo struggled quite a bit, and there were a few flat tyres and a few instances of getting stuck, good progress was made. The elephants were offloaded around 18h00 the



same day!!! Which was an entire day earlier than during the first trip!

The next morning was leisurely spent doing a game drive, enjoying the beautiful area and looking for the elephant herd. In the afternoon, Alex and his team had to bring the trucks back to the river crossing, which again, was not uneventful... and the crew made it back to camp only after midnight. The next morning, they left the 6x6 at the river crossing and drove all 12 hours straight back home.



Two more such trips were completed within the next two weeks, leaving Alex and the team having travelled 7000 km in total! During the third trip, the team was greeted by the entire elephant herd at the offloading ramp, waiting for the new arrivals. It seemed the elephants knew that more of their family were meant to join that day. The new arrivals immediately walked up to their waiting family, and together disappeared into the forest. Our human team was in awe, eternally grateful for this humbling moment. It was a display of the elephants deep connection and bonding with one another, emotions which we, as humans, know to equally treasure. The last trip, however, was the smoothest, with only 4 elephants loaded on a single truck, not a single flat tyre,

Left and above: the crew going on a game drive, exploring the beautiful area, and appreciating grass, lush trees and endless amounts of water.

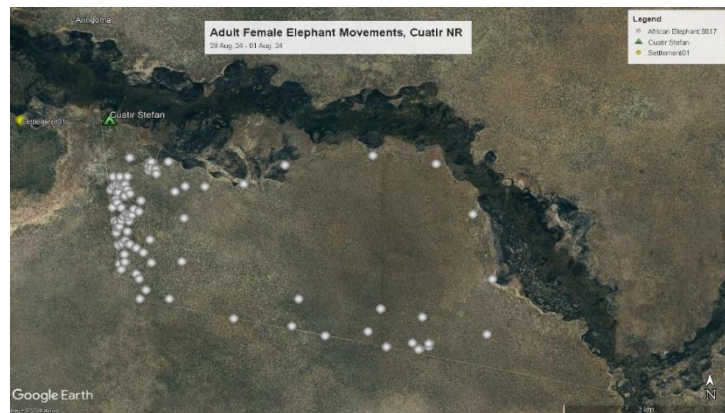


Left: The final moment... offloading the elephants and watching them as they join the rest of their family in their new home, was the most rewarding part of the journey.

the tracks running smoothly, and the crew taking off an extra day to enjoy and take in the astonishing beauty of the Angolan bush. We left wondering, “what will this area look like in the next ten years”? What impact would the rewilding of this place in general have on the fauna and flora? Annette and Rudie immediately noticed a few rare bird species, one of which even they had never seen before.



On the last morning, Annette was courageous enough to climb into a “mokoro” with one of the locals and drift through the reeds of the Cuatir river looking for Sitatunga – she saw some, but they were too evasive for the camera. What a peaceful heaven, we all thought leaving this beautiful place. Ironically, the remoteness, the isolation and inaccessible roads, which have made these trips nearly impossible, are the same reasons why it will be perfect for a wildlife haven.



Top: Tracking the collared female elephant – within a few days, she had explored the entire perimeter!
 Right: the team on the 2nd and last trip, words insufficient of describing the joy felt by all team members at having contributed to a milestone in elephant conservation. Above all, Alex, for his outstanding ingenuity and perseverance throughout this gruelling and challenging project!



Special thanks to our hunting groups for funding this project!