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No Tall Tale: The Silent Plight of Giraffe

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Giraffe, *Giraffa camelopardalis*, one of the world's most iconic animals, may soon be joining the endangered species list. Many people don't realize there are four different species of giraffe with five subspecies, four of which are already considered endangered or critically endangered with risk of extinction. This beloved giant is well equipped to handle lions and hyenas but comes up short when faced with habitat loss and poaching (Fennessy, Bidon, Reuss, Kumar, Elkan, Nilsson, Vamberger, Fritz, Janke, 2016).

It's estimated that over 30% of wild giraffe populations have been lost since the 1990s, with minimal commentary (Fennessy, 2019). We're familiar with struggles of poaching rhinos for horns, big cats for pelts, and elephants for ivory; but what is the giraffe's story? Why are they disappearing and how can you help?

Giraffe populations struggle due to habitat loss, habitat fragmentation, and poaching. Illegal hunting in Tanzania has impacted giraffe populations due to a misinformed new belief that giraffe brain and bone marrow can cure HIV-AIDS. There is no scientific data that supports this theory. Fresh giraffe head and bones can fetch prices up to \$140 per piece (Muller, 2010).



GPS satellite unit mounted to the ossicone. Ken Bohn, SDZG/GCF

In the Congo, poachers are interested in a different body part: the tail. African Parks' Joint Operations Director Leon Lamprecht explains the motivation behind this unusual hunt: local Congolese men use the tail as a marriage dowry to the bride's father (Lamprecht, 2016).

Local traditions are not the only reason for the demand of giraffe tail. Tourists may be unknowingly purchasing souvenirs made out of the long black hairs, such as good-luck bracelets, fly whisks, and thread for sewing or stringing beads. Most of these products originate from South Africa where giraffe products can be sold legally (Muller, 2010).

It's no wonder saving giraffes seems like such a daunting task. Giraffe currently occur in 21 African countries facing different threats that need a wide range of conservation approaches to secure their future. Luckily, zoos around the world have come together to give voice to this silent extinction. Friday, June 21, was World Giraffe Day 2019. Giraffe lovers around the world came together with a goal to raise \$1 million for the Giraffe Conservation Foundation's (GCF) project known as the "Twiga Tracker." Twiga is Swahili for giraffe. The Twiga Tracker

project is the largest giraffe GPS satellite tracking program ever conducted in Africa, with a goal to track a minimum of 250 wild giraffe to better understand their behavior and the challenges they're facing. Each specialized tracking unit costs \$2,500, and the cost to deploy these units in the field is estimated at an additional \$5,000.

In an effort to save giraffe, the Virginia Safari Park, Gulf Breeze Zoo, and Alabama Safari Park joined the World Giraffe Day Celebration. The weeklong celebration included behind the scenes tours, conservation-centered keeper talks, as well as a 10% donation for all giraffe gift-shop merchandise sold. Guests were surrounded all week by everything giraffe. They learned about husbandry care for captive animals, as well as the conservation issues facing wild populations. Tours provided a behind the scenes look at giraffe holding facilities, a custom designed giraffe transport trailer, and a one-on-one close-up feeding experience with the resident giraffe herd. The event was successful, with 165 behind the scenes giraffe encounters conducted throughout the parks. A total of \$5,000 was raised for the Twiga Tracker program.

Programs like these can only succeed when people are committed on a global scale. The Virginia Safari Park, Gulf Breeze Zoo, and the Alabama Safari Park are excited to partner with the Giraffe Conservation Foundation to help with their continued success. Our animal ambassadors play an important role in giving a voice to their wild counterparts by raising awareness and offering financial support. The issues facing wild giraffe are intimidating, yet it is important to keep in mind that, while there is life, there is hope. We will continue to support one another in this fight to save this gentle giant, giraffe.

References

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Giraffe tail hair sought after for tourist souvenirs. Alabama Safari Park