

Thamo Telele Giraffe Program

Conservation educators have long touted the success of programs that allow for human-animal interactions that illicit empathy, attachment and conservation action. Situated in a tourism hub on the edge of the Okavango Delta alongside the rapidly growing town of Maun, Thamo Telele is an ideal location to develop a meaningful conservation education experience that attracts tourists while supporting local conservation education programs and providing an accessible platform for research.

The Thamo Telele Reserve is a relatively small wildlife reserve (250 hectares), which means that opportunities for a species' range to expand is limited, so, in essence, the wildlife population is under a type of captive management due to the boundaries of the reserve. This means that animals are increasingly habituated and there are opportunities for visitors to have safe and meaningful interactions with them. Secondly, because there is a rapidly increasing human population on the edge of one of Africa's most iconic wildlife areas, there is a need for impactful conservation education tools. A close interaction with a large, charismatic species is incredibly impactful.

Giraffe have been iconic, long-time residents on Thamo Telele after being moved here from hunting farms. They have bred successfully and have become habituated to the horse riding and walking tourists who frequent the reserve. In the past, the reserve has been used to educate school children due to the ability of riders and walkers to safely get close to the animals, especially the awe-inspiring giraffe. It is the intention of this program to establish a centre that provides safe interactions with giraffe as meaningful and impactful conservation education experiences for both tourists and local people.

Guest - animal interactions:

The Thamo Telele team have employed two conservation scientists who specialize in giraffe and in the captive management of large mammals. For many years, they have both worked for the Giraffe Conservation Foundation in Namibia on desert-adapted giraffe of north-west Namibia. Prior to this they have both accrued years of experience with captive large mammals in different parts of the world. At Thamo Telele, they are working with the most recent young giraffe residents of the Reserve, guiding these individuals towards positive interactions with humans on platforms. As you may have guessed, that positive interaction involves food. Highly nutritious, and therefore sought after "treats" are provided to giraffe who come to the platform. This means that the reward is not their main diet but additional to their normal daily browsing.

Giraffe engaging in this experience with visitors will be acting of their own free will and can choose to participate or not. They will not be confined (aside from the existing property fencing). The giraffe experience will be very similar to that of the meerkat experience at Jack's Camp whereby guests can sit with the meerkats while they go about their daily routines. Animals will be habituated to people and will interact if and when they choose to, and it is important to note that animals can leave the area whenever they want.

By allowing this process to slowly develop, there are two phases to the program. Initially, only simple platforms will be used during which interactions with tourists will slowly become regular and more predictable. Once these interactions become more regular, the program will launch a phase II that provides a platform linked to an education centre focused on community engagement through educational classes, school visits and community outreach.

The experience at Thamo Telele has the goal of connecting visitors with nature and creating empathy for animals through:

1. Framing conversations to educate visitors about nature.
2. Modelling by NS and Thamo Telele of how animal and land conservation is important and needs action
3. Increasing knowledge of animal behaviour to create empathy vs. anthropomorphism.
4. Opportunities to watch and interact with animals to create a bond with nature.
5. A call to action for conservation and preservation of animals and natural habitat.

See the link below for the extensive research done on the above:

[Empathy for Animals: A Review of the Existing Literature | Request PDF \(researchgate.net\)](#)

Research into Southern Giraffe taxonomy and distribution:

The tourism side of the Reserve (Thamo Telele) will support much needed research into the taxonomy and distribution of giraffe in Botswana working with the Giraffe Conservation Foundation.

For the last 15 years the Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) has collected genetic samples from giraffe throughout Africa for a taxonomic assessment. This study clearly shows that there are four different species of giraffe, and not only one as previously assumed. So far, more than 1,000 individual samples have been collected from giraffe across their range in Africa. This work has helped to better understand how many types of giraffe there are and where they live, but most importantly it guides conservation management decisions for giraffe in all of Africa and where we should focus urgent conservation actions.

Two subspecies of the Southern giraffe (*Giraffa giraffa*) occur across Southern Africa and, together, they make up 50% of the continent's total giraffe numbers. Both of these sub species naturally exist in Botswana and are considered native to the region.

Angolan giraffe (*G.g. angolensis*)

Despite their name, Angolan giraffe were extirpated (*locally extinct*) in Angola until recent translocations from Namibia. The Angolan giraffe's range includes central Botswana, most parts of Namibia, and various populations in Zimbabwe. Extralimital populations (*those outside their natural range*) have been translocated to South

Africa, and to private land in Botswana and Zimbabwe. The estimated 5,000 individuals three decades ago have, today, more than tripled to an estimated 17,750 in the wild. In light of this recent increase in numbers, the Angolan giraffe has been listed as *Least Concern* on the IUCN Red List.

South African giraffe (*G.g. giraffa*)

The South African giraffe ranges from west to east across southern eastern Angola, northern Botswana, southern Mozambique, northern South Africa, south-western Zambia, and parts of Zimbabwe. Previous re-introductions of the South African and Angolan giraffe to overlapping areas have most likely resulted in hybrid populations. There have also been extralimital (*outside their natural range*) introductions of South African giraffe across Angola, Senegal, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. At present, the South African giraffe population is estimated at 37,000 individuals, showing a marked increase of over 150% over the past three decades. An assessment of the South African giraffe for the IUCN Red List is ongoing, but with the large increase it will most likely result in a listing of *Least Concern*.

For more information and distribution map, follow the link below:

[Southern giraffe: Giraffa giraffa - Giraffe Conservation Foundation](#)

GCF continues to collect genetic samples from giraffe in Namibia and South Africa and will explore opportunities to collect more samples from Botswana and look into future giraffe conservation action opportunities in the country. If the appropriate permits can be obtained, Emma and Katie (as NS employees), could assist GCF in collecting genetic samples from Botswana giraffe populations. This would further expand the understanding of existing populations of the two subspecies and determine whether hybridization of the two subspecies is occurring naturally which will help guide future movement of giraffe throughout Botswana.