Project Update: April 2023

The commencement of the project's fieldwork in Namibia took off much better than expected. By mid-April 2023, four sites were visited and sampled; two sites with resident spotted hyaenas and two without. With the help and assistance from local property owners, managers, and staff at each site, a total of 28 carcasses have been found and monitored thus far, recording nine different Namibian vertebrate scavenger species. These were lappet-face vultures (*Torgos tracheliotos*), white-backed vultures (*Gyps africanus*), Cape vultures (*Gyps coprotheres*) and pied crows (*Corvus albus*), as well as spotted hyaenas (*Crocuta crocuta*), brown hyaenas (*Parahyaena brunnea*), black-backed jackals (*Canis mesomelas*), Cape foxes (*Vulpes chama*), and slender mongoose (*Herpestes sanguineus*). The carcass species included nine gemsbok (*Oryx gazella*), two Hartman's mountain zebra (*Equus hartmannea*), two blue wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus*), four ostrich (*Struthio camelus*), two greater kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*) and nine springboks (*Antidorcus marsupialis*).

While visiting the second site in the Solitaire area of western Namibia, I had the privilege of meeting and speaking with one of Namibia's top bird and vulture researchers, Mr. Holger Kolberg, working for Vultures Namibia and MEFT (Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism). Whilst viewing some of the data I had already collected, we discussed the plans for vulture conservation efforts in Namibia, as well as uses for the over 30 years of vulture data already collected by the ministry. The consensus was that more work, like this project, needs to be done for informed future decisions.

In addition to the exciting and essential data gathering, this project has produced some surprising finds. Most notable of which was the recording of a lone transient spotted hyaena just a few kilometres from the Oranje River in the far south-east of Namibia. This may be the first official recording of a spotted hyaena in this area of Namibia since the 1980s. This finding will be submitted to the Environmental Information Service Namibia (EIS) to update the ongoing national environmental records. With the project still in the early data collection phase, no concrete trends or correlations can be drawn yet between spotted hyaena and vulture presence, or carcass size and abundance in spotted hyaena occupied areas. However, with the great success experienced at the first four sites, and 10 more sites scheduled to be visited and sampled, we are certain that enough valuable data will be collected to answer the tested knowledge gap of whether large carnivore disappearance impacts vultures and their conservation.

L to R: an Endangered lappet-faced vulture (*Torgos tracheliotos*) roosting in an acacia tree next to an Endangered cape vulture (*Gyps coprotheres*) at the Gondwana Canyon Park. © Karl S Fester.

Camera trap image of lappet-faced vultures (Torgos tracheliotos) and white-backed vultures (Gyps africanus) feeding on a gemsbok (Oryx gazella) carcass at Gondwana Canyon Park. © Karl S Fester.

Mr. Kai Sturm from the Namib Naukluft Habitat by Solitaire setting up a camera and taking recordings for the project at a gemsbok (*Oryx gazella*) recently hunted by spotted hyaenas. © Jan Sturm.

Mr. Josef Nakakuwa from the Sandfontein Game Reserve helping to locate carcasses and setting up cameras for the project. © Karl S Fester.

A scenic showcasing of some of the essential field equipment obtained for this project with the support from The Rufford Foundation. © Karl S Fester.