

## GIRAFFES UNDER FIRE: The Cowboy of Samburu

<https://www.spektrum.de/news/giraffe-conservation-foundation-conservationist-heavily-criticized/1842544>

He would protect giraffes, says Julian Fennessy. Critics say: The man is a fraud who stalks the animals with torturous methods and maintains close relationships with trophy hunters. An exclusive report.

von Roman Goergen

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When an incoming text message lit up John Doherty's phone in the morning of 31 August 2019 the British researcher had no idea he would be talking about that day for months. Doherty heads the Reticulated Giraffe Project (RGP) which studies reticulated giraffes in Kenya's Samburu National Reserve. »The text message was from a tourist guide who inquired if RGP was capturing giraffes in the reserve,« says Doherty.

The answer was »no.« Neither he nor his staff were doing that. Question being who was in the convoy of vehicles entering the reserve shortly 8.30 a.m. and started hunting the reticulated giraffes in Doherty's care while being guided by a light aircraft? Neither Doherty's team nor the manager of the reserve, Lmakiya 'Tom' Lesarge, knew what was going on. According to Doherty, Lesarge sent out his game wardens to track down the unknown group. However, the visitors disappeared as quickly as they had turned up. There was no trace of the convoy in Samburu after about 10.30 that morning.

Eventually, a long list of eyewitness reports, internal research reports, letters, e-mails and official announcements painted the following picture: without knowledge of the competent authority an expedition had driven into the Samburu National Reserve to capture giraffes and drill holes in their horns which they affixed GPS transmitters to. This

was initiated by the Australian biologist Julian Fennessy from the Namibia-based Giraffe Conservation Foundation (GCF) and David O'Connor, who has Irish and American citizenship and was working for the San Diego Zoo Global at the time.

»Fennessy and O'Connor were felling giraffes that my team and I have studied for many years and within a few hundred yards of our office, all without any prior communication,« he says. »It was inexcusable.«

When asked by »Spektrum.de« both confirmed that the entire operation had been done by the book, apart from some misunderstandings in their communication with the authorities, and that they merely took the wrong gate when entering the reserve.

The foundation has documented the expedition in an internal report obtained by »Spektrum.de«. According to the report, the biologists used their drills on a total of 24 reticulated giraffes in the region. Among them were three from Samburu. In the report they are named as F6, M3 and F7.

Distraught giraffes bearing defective transmitters

F6 is known to John Doherty as »Napunyu.« Nine days after the incident he spotted the female giraffe in the south of the preserve and took a photo of a semi-damaged GPS transmitter dangling from the animal's horn. »I saw steel bolts protruding from holes drilled through the living tissue of Napunyu's skull. The tip of one of her ears had been removed.« Even though »Napunyu« knew the RGP's van and its occupants, the female exhibited shyness towards them which had not been the case before. »It seemed likely that the stress continued to affect her days after the event,« says Doherty.



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**The female giraffe »Napunyu« | On the horns of the animal, which are actually outgrowths of the skull bone, you can see steel bolts and the transmitter, which is no longer properly attached.**

The details of the operation and everything that followed caused outrage among giraffe researchers worldwide. However, only a few people were surprised as the questionable methods of Julian Fennessy, his German wife Stephanie and the Giraffe Conservation Foundation they run have been known and resented for years. In the community there is talk of »flagrant« violations of scientific decorum, of disrespect for colleagues and local authorities. Moreover, their wildlife conservation is said to be inefficient and focused on fundraising, at times even at the expense of the giraffes. When talking about the Fennessys and their foundation some researchers call them »cowboy conservationists«. This description is anything but flattering.

**»The Fennessys will demolish anyone around them«**(former giraffe researcher who wishes to remain anonymous)

However, Fennessy and representatives of his foundation feel that they are constantly attacked by the same, allegedly small group of critics who have personal animosities towards them. The chairman of the board of trustees of the US branch of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation, Till Holland, speaks of a »personal vendetta« by colleagues that seem to be resentful of Fennessy.

It is impossible to determine how many critics there are. What is certain, however, is that many international giraffe researchers, the number of which is quite modest, would rather not speak out publicly, even though they harbour a grudge against the Fennessys. »The Fennessys are ruthless and have money,« says one former giraffe researcher who does not want to be named for fear of reprisals. »They will demolish anyone around them.« Like many others, he has changed research fields due to the atmosphere prevailing in this discipline.

»I feel very strongly that giraffe are being discounted and are suffering because of the work of Julian Fennessy,« says giraffe expert Anne Dagg, the »Queen of Giraffes.« »The men and women who are working to keep giraffe from extinction, perhaps up to ten of them, are working hard to do this, while Julian can get money from the groups he heads,« says the 87-year old Dagg, who the Canadian government bestowed the country's highest civilian award upon in late 2019 in recognition of her pioneering work since the 1950s. Further Fennessy would use money from wealthy donors for his own means, she says, not for improving the status of giraffe in the wild as the donors would hope.

The giraffes disappeared almost unnoticed

And yet, these graceful giants are in dire need of protection. According to estimates, there are fewer than 70,000 adult specimens left in sub-Saharan Africa today. There is just one giraffe for every four elephants. Unlike the pachyderms, their silent disappearance went almost unnoticed for a long time, even by researchers. It was only thanks to a number of large projects such as Doherty's, which he runs in cooperation with the University of Belfast and the Kenya Wildlife Service, that a worrying trend became apparent: from the mid-1980s to 2016, the giraffe population declined by 36 to 40 percent.

In 2016 the World Conservation Union IUCN reacted and put giraffes on its Red List as »endangered species.«





© SPEKTRUM DER WISSENSCHAFT, SOURCE O'CONNOR, D. ET AL.: UPDATED GEOGRAPHIC RANGE MAPS FOR GIRAFFE, GIRAFFA SPP., THROUGHOUT SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA, AND IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGING DISTRIBUTIONS FOR CONSERVATION. MAMMAL REVIEW 49, 2019, FIG. 1 / CC BY 4.0 (AUSSCHNITT)

**Where giraffes live | The map, published by a team of scientists led by David O'Connor in 2019, shows a highly fragmented giraffe habitat. In Central and East Africa in particular, it has shrunk considerably in the 20th century. The subdivision into four giraffe species made here is not generally accepted in science.**

»Giraffe populations have declined most drastically in West Africa and the Sahel,« says Derek Lee, a Pennsylvania State University biologist and ecologist who runs another long-term study project in Tanzania, East Africa, where the Wild Nature Institute studies the Masai giraffe. According to the biologist, it is only in southern Africa that giraffe populations are still thriving. The animals are mainly affected by the loss of their habitat. Other dangers include bushmeat poaching, diseases introduced by productive livestock and last but not least human crises: armed conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the problems as researchers can no longer get to the animals and since the income generated from tourism is dwindling.

However, doing giraffe research without bias is difficult since one can hardly avoid a man Lee openly calls a »fraud« and a »liar«: Julian Fennessy.

Giraffe shows rather than giraffe conservation in Namibia?

The trouble surrounding the methods of the Fennessys started shortly after they took control of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation which was founded in the UK in 2009. A few years later all founding members had turned their backs on the organisation following disputes. In the meantime, the foundation, which has moved to Namibia since, has been getting the largest share of all donations and grants raised for giraffes worldwide; on average it is ten times higher

than that of any other giraffe organisation. Their critics feel that the members of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation have not proven yet that the donations actually serve the welfare of the animals.

In a written statement sent to »Spektrum.de« Fennessy counters that they collaborate with the people in charge in Africa »like no other organisation.« The Australian has indeed launched numerous conservation projects throughout Africa. It is also undisputed that the foundation and its associated researchers have published numerous scientific papers. Fennessy cites 40 publications in professional journals to prove that.

Taking part in giraffe hunts for US\$ 12,000

Meanwhile, the foundation has become a focal point of discussions for organising questionable events, like the one in Samburu one morning. Affixing transmitters to animals, hunting them from off-road vehicles and the air is a selling point – and literally so. Wealthy donors are permitted to participate, provided they pay a large amount of money. According to an advertisement, anyone can take part in such an expedition for US\$ 12,000. »Giraffe Conservation Foundation uses giraffe captures as fundraising events populated by unqualified donors,« says Derek Lee.

Hunts with tranquilliser guns are an ideal setting for many media outlets. For example, in June 2020 ZDF viewers could see the Fennessys affixing transmitters to giraffes in Namibia on the German »Terra X« television programme. »I wonder what scientific rationale was behind that operation,« says Andy Tutchings, a former member of the giraffe foundation and an expert for affixing transmitters to wild animals. In Namibia the animals are largely unthreatened. According to the expert, giraffes are subjected to completely different environmental influences in regions where they are seriously endangered, and there is also a significant difference in the conflicts between humans and animals compared to Namibia. In view of such different circumstances the findings from Namibia are not transferable.





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**Giraffe with transmitter | Male giraffes use their horns when they fight among themselves. In the process, the boreholes could still interfere even if they have torn off the GPS transmitter.**

Media representatives were also present during the expedition in Kenya, which lasted several days and included the detour to Samburu. Their participation resulted in a comprehensive report on the Giraffe Conservation Foundation in the renowned US magazine »The Atlantic.« The article also reveals how close journalists were to the action and that even Fennessy himself used the drill, although this may only be done by trained veterinarians pursuant to Kenyan law.

According to the organisers Fennessy and O'Connor, neither journalists nor the paying spectators have an influence on the course of such expeditions since all procedures are carried out by specially trained personnel as required by the prevailing law in the countries in question. However, the critics are not only concerned about how such events are organised but also why they are staged in the first place.

The US zoologist Amy Phelps says that a transmitter should only be considered if there is no other option and provided that the scientific value is indisputable. She was the first one to call the Fennessys »cowboy conservationists.«

However, the scientific goals are only vaguely formulated in the confidential report by the Giraffe Conservation Foundation and the San Diego Zoo referred to at the beginning of this article. There is talk of »population numbers and densities« or the »general conservation status of reticulated giraffes.« Furthermore, Fennessy elaborates that the data could help conservationists and local authorities decide where it would be worthwhile to establish corridors between protected areas and where giraffes would come into conflict with development projects in Kenya. David O'Connor, with whom he organised the expedition in Kenya, adds that all data go straight into a digital

monitoring system as real-time information. This system helps rangers track the whereabouts of all large mammals monitored in the country.

However, giraffes are not in hiding. Due to their size they could in principle be observed without employing satellite technology. Especially since the method that Fennessy and his foundation are testing does not seem to be very reliable itself: at least two of the three animals in Samburu did not wear their transmitters for »24 to 36 months« as promised in the report. According to Doherty, in whose study area the incident took place, the animals tore them off their injured heads after a short while. Moreover, »one or two randomly-fitted GPS units bring negligible, if any, scientific benefit and importantly zero conservation benefit,« says Tutchings.

First immobilise, then drill, then affix the transmitter

This method is extremely distressing to begin with. Unlike Fennessy and O'Connor, who claim that no harm was done to the animals, their colleague from Samburu speaks of the danger of »long-term trauma.« »The giraffes are shot at with darts, tracked, captured, immobilised and eventually mutilated,« Doherty says. Phelps, the zoologist, adds members of the CFG »often seem to lack empathy for the fear and distress it causes the animal.«

»Giraffes easily die,« says Andy Tutchings, who has led expeditions during which giraffes, rhinos, elephants and lions were immobilised. The particular physiology of the animals renders the entire undertaking extremely risky. It is important to take a closer look at the procedure to understand why.





**An overlooked disappearance | It is widely known that elephants are endangered, but the fate of giraffes is not: Today there are four times more elephants than giraffes.**

According to the internal report on the expedition, a dart was used to sedate each giraffe first with etorphine. The opioid, also known as M99, immediately starts killing the animal. That is why an antidote had to be administered as quickly as possible once the animal is down, explains Tutchings, who has experience with such methods and stresses that he does not know the details of the procedure in Samburu. Diprenorphine was administered there as an antidote. »Once antidoted the animal is fully conscious – hence the eye covering and the cotton wool in the ears to help keep the animal calm,« the expert says. The drill is then used on the animal's horns.

The horns of a giraffe, called ossicones in technical terminology, are only faintly comparable to those of a cow or antelope. Anatomically speaking, they are outgrowths of the skull bone that are traversed by nerves and blood vessels. It is unclear whether the animals feel pain during the procedure. Fennessy says that there had been no visible or physiological signs of distress or pain in any of the well over 150 drilling procedures that he or his foundation took part in. This is why no local anaesthetic is administered. On request, the Kenyan veterinarian performing the procedure in Samburu gave a different account of it though. »We used anaesthetic drugs with analgesic effects and where possible used a local anaesthesia on the horns being drilled to ensure no pain to the animals,« says Dominic Mijele, a veterinarian working for the Kenya Wildlife Service. Why does a competent veterinarian anaesthetise a body part that feels no pain according to Fennessy?

Fennessy banned for life – temporarily

The Kenyan authorities' initial response to the hunt on reticulated giraffes in Samburu was prompt and indignant. Since this reserve is not a national park the local government of Samburu County is in

charge rather than the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). The director of the National Reserve Lesarge opened an investigation and asked Fennessy and O'Connor for a statement. Three months later both got similarly worded letters which »Spektrum.de« has obtained: »I regard the offences you committed that day as extremely serious,« Lesarge wrote in his letter adorned with the seal of the government of Kenya. He went on to say that the unauthorised expedition was testimony to »a flagrant disregard for legal frameworks, utter professional misconduct and gross disrespect towards the County Government.«

Fennessy, O'Connor and their respective organisations, the Giraffe Conservation Foundation and San Diego Zoo Global, were banned from Samburu for life.





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**Human-animal conflicts on the rise | Across Africa, the habitat for giraffes is dwindling. In the process, the animals inevitably have conflicts with humans.**

The ban remained in place for seven months. However, when Lesarge's letter began circulating in the international giraffe research community on 19 June 2020 Fennessy and O'Connor contacted people in Kenya. According to John Doherty, Kenyan representatives of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation got in touch with Lesarge and requested a meeting three days later, on 22 June. In early July 2020 David O'Connor terminated his employment with San Diego Zoo Global. In the end Fennessy got a letter from Samburu lifting the trespassing ban on 2 July.

When »Spektrum.de« asked the director of Samburu why the ban was lifted he did not provide any details. »We have already resolved the issues around it, so there is no point discussing it.« By the time this article was published Lesarge had not responded to the question as to how he had resolved the issues. The San Diego Zoo is by and large also keeping a low profile. »We can confirm that David O'Connor is no longer employed by San Diego Zoo Global. San Diego Zoo Global continues to actively conduct and support giraffe conservation work collaboratively throughout their range in Kenya without restrictions,« a zoo spokeswoman said.

The reasons for Lesarge's change of heart remain unclear. Julian Fennessy and David O'Connor say they were informed by the director of Samburu that the most serious violation they had committed was entering Samburu through the wrong gate. Staff at Lesarge's office had verbally given them the green light for the expedition formally led by the Kenya Wildlife Service but had failed to inform their director accordingly. For both offences Fennessy and O'Connor apologized to Lesarge. Critics of Fennessy who have insight into the matter are not convinced by this explanation. They say it is not good enough to just inform people. If the team had entered Samburu through an official, manned gate, it would have become obvious that they had no proper

permit. Moreover, it is an open secret that some African wildlife authorities are critical of affixing transmitters to horns. It is therefore doubtful that Fennessy and O'Connor would have got a permit for their project in the first place.

»The Giraffe Conservation Foundation has disrupted the two longest running giraffe projects in Africa«(Derek Lee, Ecologist)

The fact that the Samburu county government suddenly changed its mind is for many critics yet another example of how the foundation is wielding its power in order to carry on with its controversial methods.

The foundation also used tranquilliser guns in Tanzania

What happened in Samburu is not an isolated incident. Something similar happened in neighbouring Tanzania a mere five months or so after the events in Kenya. The Maasai giraffe project in Tarangire headed by Derek Lee also received an unannounced visit from Fennessy and his Giraffe Conservation Foundation in January 2020. »A group of my study giraffes were captured and had transmitters affixed by the GCF without my knowledge,« says Lee. He goes on to say that years of research had been affected within no time at all as that intervention had impacted the behavioural studies carried out by the Wild Nature Institute. »We documented in February that giraffes in Tarangire were behaving abnormally, including running from vehicles in a manner we had not seen before,« says Lee. »With John Doherty's project in Kenya and mine in Tanzania, the GCF has disrupted the two longest running giraffe projects in Africa,« says the researcher.

Fennessy considers Lee's accusations to be a »malicious and baseless ad hominem attack.« The biologist claims to have spoken with representatives of Lee's Wild Nature Institute in good time, which Lee denies. Fennessy also claims that the GCF had obtained all permits from the competent authorities. In fact, in Tanzania giraffes do not belong to the researchers working on the ground but to the state. Therefore, the Foundation was not obliged to ask Lee for permission. Fennessy does not address the accusation of having violated the

common rules of decorum among researchers – as was also the case in Samburu.

However, representatives of other teams also complain about having been passed over. Among them is the American zoologist Sheri Horiszny who oversees the Care for Karamoja project in Uganda which is dedicated to preserving the highly endangered subspecies of the Rothschild's giraffe, among others. According to Lee, GCF has first and foremost incorporated its own views into regional wildlife conservation plans in both Uganda and Tanzania. Researchers, who have gained expertise on the ground thanks to observation projects which have been running for years in some cases, feel pushed aside, no matter how much Fennessy denied this being the case vis-à-vis »Spektrum.de« while stressing the integrative approach of his Giraffe Conservation Foundation once again.

The foundation's power and influence extend to the highest international wildlife conservation bodies. The IUCN's Giraffe and Okapi Specialist Group (GOSG) assesses how endangered this species is and is influential in terms of wildlife conservation recommendations. Julian Fennessy was heavily involved in founding this group in 2013. In his capacity as co-chair he was responsible for giraffes for quite a while. No sooner had he taken up his position than he was accused of using it to primarily benefit the work of his giraffe foundation.

One species or many?

How many species of giraffe there are is a highly debated topic among giraffe researchers. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) adopted the traditional one species and nine subspecies model when it put giraffes on its Red List in 2016. That same year, biologist Julian Fennessy and a team of international researchers used genetics to show that there are in fact four separate species. Since then Fennessy has promoted this model as the only one that is scientifically acceptable. This view is also mirrored in the above map.

However, not every researcher is convinced by the DNA evidence presented by Fennessy and team. Some argue for a division into three or even eight species, while others propose to keep using the IUCN taxonomy until a scientific consensus has been reached.

The question itself has serious practical implications: Under a four-species model only three would be considered threatened while the »Southern giraffe« wouldn't. Similar considerations apply to the CITES listings.

»I do recall there being lots of resistance to his reappointment in 2017,« says Jon Paul Rodriguez. The ecology professor from Venezuela heads the Species Survival Commission of the IUCN and is thus responsible for the specialist groups. Fennessy was due to be reappointed in 2021, however, the Australian pre-empted possible disputes in late February by announcing say that he would not stand for reelection which came as a surprise.

A vote against giraffe conservation

The following episode clearly shows how Fennessy has wielded his influence over this group in recent years. The setting is the meeting of the Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) which took place in Geneva at the end of August 2019. At these conferences, which are held every three years, the participants endeavour to introduce globally-binding regulations as to which animals and animal products may be traded internationally subject to permits, and which animals a global trade ban mainly applies to.







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**Hunting giraffes | In the south of Africa, giraffe populations are stable enough in many places that authorities allow trophy hunting.**

In the event that a species is listed in Appendix II to the Agreement, the respective animals or parts thereof may in most cases only be exported from a country subject to a prior non-detriment finding. Trophy hunting and the international trade in animal parts are only permitted in countries where such hunting and trade have proven to be sustainable. The authorities provide data and facts in return: Where do such products come from? How many items are imported per annum and from where? Does trophy hunting actually endanger animal populations?

This is precisely what six African countries wanted to accomplish with regard to giraffes in 2019, the trade in which had not been regulated by CITES until that point in time. However, arguments against this proposal were put forward in a so-called analysis according to which there was no reason to assume that the trade in giraffe products was responsible for the decline in population, so that giraffes should remain unlisted in the Appendices. The analysis was initiated by the TRAFFIC organisation, a joint project of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). In his capacity as co-chair of the IUCN Giraffe and Okapi Specialist Group Fennessy had reviewed and endorsed the section in the report dealing with giraffes.

Seven prominent animal welfare groups, including the Born Free Foundation and Humane Society International, strongly disagreed with this assessment. They wrote to the IUCN Specialist Group headed by Fennessy in February 2019 and voiced their objections to the assessment. Fennessy blocked the letter insofar as he merely forwarded it to the group's hand-picked Advisory Committee – Fennessy says this was »according to protocol«. The official recommendation made to CITES thus remained unchallenged, and

the application of the six countries appeared to have been rejected – the next opportunity for resubmitting it would not have presented itself until the next meeting in Costa Rica in 2022.

All of a sudden, things turned around. The Central African Republic gave the giraffe expert Fred Bercovitch five minutes' speaking time at the Geneva conference which he used for an urgent appeal to observe the precautionary principle. He also summed up the circular conclusion of the reasoning laid down in the expert opinion: the upgrade had been rejected by referring to the lack of scientific grounds while conceding that only an Appendix II listing could provide such grounds. »So why not list it?« asked Bercovitch. The plenary followed suit. In the end, giraffes were upgraded and listed in Appendix II by the signatory states by 106 to 2 votes. The symbolism of this decision was made evident in media reports: it was celebrated as »good news« and a »success« for giraffes.

How can it be that the chairman of the largest giraffe foundation in the world did not advocate for such a popular measure? After all, it is a self-declared goal of the GCF to make the public aware that giraffes are endangered.

»The Giraffe Conservation Foundation is not a lobby organisation and as such did not provide 'help' to any organization in their efforts to list giraffe under CITES,« Fennessy writes. He goes on to say that science clearly showed that, unlike elephants or rhinos, giraffes were not poached to cater to the international market. »Any request to list them be based on science rather than on emotion. The Giraffe Conservation Foundation recommends to list giraffes by four species and/or subspecies as the threats vary markedly for the different taxa of giraffe throughout their range in Africa.« However, since CITES advises against separate listings such a project would have little prospect of success from the very outset.

The analysis rejecting the application provides yet another explanation. Just one potential risk of listing giraffes is stated therein. It is claimed that if giraffes were to be listed in Appendix II, hunting –

which is still permitted – could be »stigmatised«. As a result, hunting could be less attractive and reduce interest in giraffe trophies.

According to TRAFFIC and the GCF, this would indeed hit many community projects at a sensitive point, as hunting tourism generates considerable sums in Namibia. The respective village communities are supposed to get a share of the revenue. At least in part, it is linked to the requirement to support the conservation of wildlife and their habitats. As a consequence, not only local conservation initiatives are dependent on money from the trophy hunting lobby but apparently also the largest giraffe foundation in the world.

Transported by truck to hunting areas

If you look into the giraffe foundation's connections to the hunting lobby, you may come across a video on YouTube produced with great pathos. Among others, it shows the Fennessys capturing and relocating a total of 14 giraffes in June 2020. »Let's go catch some giraffe!« the protagonists shout, high-fiving each other. A helicopter takes off and chases the animals into a catch. The Fennessys later explain in an interview that the animals are then transported by truck to Doro !Nawas, among others, where they are to refresh the local population. They claim that even the corona pandemic is not stopping their unconditional commitment to the giraffes. »If we don't do it, who else is going to do it?«

Doro !Nawas is a community-managed project in Namibia that derives its income mainly from hunting tourism. According to Namibian experts, the brisk issuing of shooting permits for meat sales means that there is hardly any game left in many of these projects. The 14 giraffes are a still meagre, but nevertheless highly welcome addition to the population. According to Fennessy no giraffes are hunted in Doro !Nawass.

In the film there is no mention of the financial and logistical involvement of the internationally renowned trophy hunter Ivan Carter. He and his Wildlife Conservation Alliance are closely linked to the foundation. The group, which promotes hunting as a sport around the

globe and particularly so in Africa, trades under the name of the same accounting firm in the US as GCF. According to a former member of the Giraffe Conservation Foundation's board of trustees, the hunters' association, which operates from an office complex in Orlando, Florida, takes care of all administrative matters on behalf of GCF in order to be exempt from taxation as a non-profit organisation in the US.

This amicable arrangement does seem to pay off financially. According to its 2018 annual report, Ivan Carter's Wildlife Conservation Alliance transferred a total of US\$ 643,000 to the Giraffe Foundation.

The skin and bones of giraffes are good business

According to GCF's annual report, another donor joined the top donors to the GCF in 2018/2019: the notorious trophy hunting lobbyists of the Dallas Safari Club.

Trading in giraffe trophies and products is good business in the US. »We import everything from giraffe-skin pillowcases and bible covers to bones, which are starting to be used as a replacement for elephant ivory in products like knife and gun handles,« explains Tanya Sanerib, a legal expert and a director of the Center for Biological Diversity conservation organisation. According to an analysis of US import statistics made by Humane Society International (HSI), about 40,000 giraffe parts and products were imported between 2006 and 2015.



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**Prepared hunting trophies | The big game hunters get their memories of the hunting trip delivered to their homes. But the skin and bones of giraffes are also very popular, especially in the USA.**

According to HSI, the main hub for this trade in the US are the exhibitions staged at the Dallas Safari Club. At an auction held there in 2018 a billionaire bought a permit to shoot one of the highly endangered African black rhinos for US\$ 275,000. He told a tv station through his lawyer »They have over 3,000 rangers on private lands and somebody has got to pay for that.«

There are indeed good arguments for exploiting the willingness of trophy hunters to pay for such expeditions and to use the revenue to fund wildlife conservation. »Very often giraffe populations are still doing fine in regions where precisely formulated hunting laws are applicable,« says Andy Tutchings. According to the official assessment of top bodies such as CITES and IUCN, the financial connection between an organisation such as the Giraffe Conservation Foundation and the hunting lobby does not in itself constitute wrongdoing. Moreover, Fennessy claims that his foundation sides neither with trophy hunters nor with hunting opponents.

Question being whether numerous other donors to the foundation feel the same way. According to the foundation's latest annual reports, donors collectively transferred about US\$ 1.5 million to the foundation each year. For example, the Born Free Foundation is one of the biggest opponents of trophy hunting in the world. In the GCF's annual reports, it is listed a few lines below the hunting lobbyists. On request, Born Free stated that »it is something we are looking into but not something we can comment on at the moment«. According to Fennessy, his foundation has since signed a new agreement with the NGO to financially support research on giraffes in Niger.

Critics say that effective wildlife protection is a different story altogether



Born Free and a number of other animal protection organisations have been petitioning for giraffes to be listed as an endangered species in the US since 2017. If they were listed under the Endangered Species Act, this would mean that hunters would have to apply for an import permit for their trophies and prove that shooting the animal contributed financially or scientifically to the conservation of this species.

»The Foundation has never pushed anyone aside«(Julian Fennessy, Biologist)

The Giraffe Foundation does not support the petitioners. Fennessy pointed out again to »Spektrum.de« that his foundation is not a lobbying organisation and does therefore not support such initiatives. He said that African giraffes on the whole were not endangered by legal hunting and that trade restrictions would only make sense in the case of individual species or subspecies. The same is true in this case: the impact of hunting and trade can best be determined when both are regulated.

Fennessy and his companions cannot dispel the doubts their critics have about the alleged effectiveness of their giraffe conservation. Even more so since the Fennessys have meanwhile chosen to rewrite the history of giraffe research. At every opportunity they portray themselves and their foundation as the first ones to have made a serious effort to save the animals and as one of the few groups to taking care of them by doing genuine field research on the ground. Fennessy accuses colleagues who are offended by such remarks of »professional envy«: »The agreements we have with highly reputed institutions show how much the Giraffe Conservation Foundation focuses on partnership and cooperation. The Foundation has never pushed anyone aside«.

Such statements sound like sheer mockery to researchers who have already changed research fields. »The Giraffe Conservation Foundation has burnt many bridges,« says the former giraffe researcher who prefers to remain anonymous. The foundation »symbolically has cut the throat of many ground-based scientists, research projects and conservation efforts«.

