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## SABLE SIGHTING IN TSAVO EAST NATIONAL PARK

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### ABSTRACT

The East African sable antelope (*Hippotragus niger roosevelti*) has declined considerably in its former range in the last 30 years. A remnant population exists in the Shimba Hills National Reserve on the southern coast of Kenya. Anecdotal records suggest some animals have existed outside this area over the past 20 years. This article records a single sighting of a mature male sable antelope in Tsavo East National Park.

### INTRODUCTION

Sable antelope *Hippotragus niger* used to occupy grasslands and scrub over much of central and southern Africa, with the northern most race *H. n. roosevelti* (Heller, 1910) occupying the coastal regions of eastern Africa. The populations are now much reduced, with at least one sub-species *H. n. variiani* thought to be extinct. Reductions in populations in southern Africa have led to translocation and restocking of areas from Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi. The animal is highly valued by tourists and on game ranches.

### KENYAN SABLE ANTELOPE POPULATION

*Hippotragus niger* in Kenya were reported as early as 1975 to be restricted to the Shimba Hills National Reserve and the immediate vicinity (Sekulic, 1975). Earlier reports (Anon., 1968; Estes & Estes, 1969; Glover, 1969) recorded small numbers in other areas, most notably in the sectors west of Malindi and west of Shimba towards the Tanzanian border (Lunga Lungu near Vanga). Early this century inventories recorded animals in northern Tanzania as far as Lake Jipe but not in recent times. Anecdotal reports suggest that, earlier this century, sable antelope were hunted in Tsavo East north of the Yatta Plateau. But these are unsubstantiated. One animal with a snare was found dead near the eastern gate of Tsavo (Sala) on the Malindi road in the late 1960s and animals were seen in the 1960s on the lower reaches of the Voi River (fig. 1).

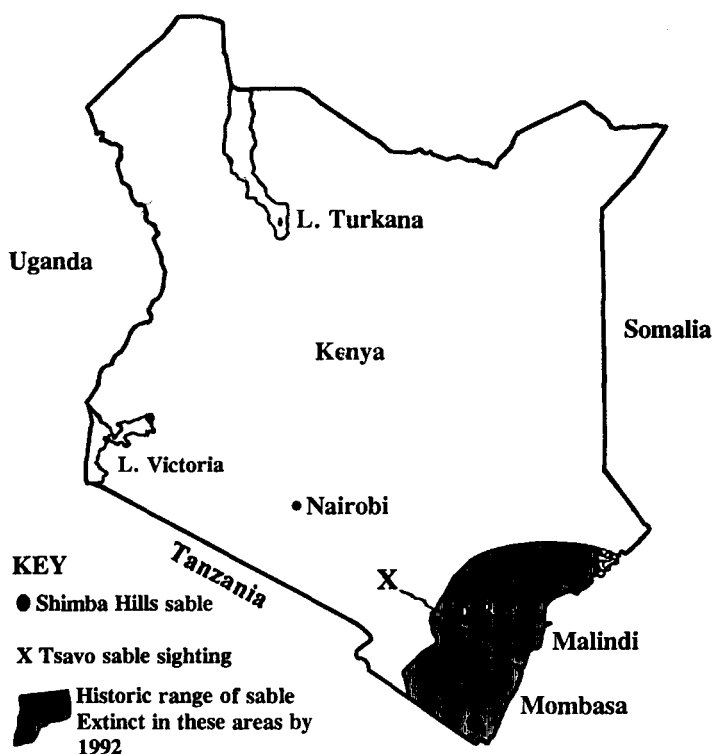


Figure 1. Sable antelope (*Hippotragus niger*) distribution in Kenya this century. After Stewart & Stewart (1993).

Reports (aerial and ground census) between 1975 and the present record a fluctuating population size with a downward trend from approximately 260 to 122 individuals within the reserve (Andanje, 1994; Litoroh, 1989; Ross, 1984; Rakwah, 1987; Anon., 1975). Aerial census error can be high (DRSRS data 1977–83:  $530 \pm 250$ ; East, 1988) which may account for the variable numbers. Earlier reports (Glover, 1969) suggested even lower counts (56) but they were based on single day, ground and aerial counts and a significant number of animals may have been missed. Up until about 1973 the population had grown to around 200 from this reported low (Sekulic, 1981). Ecological factors and habitat considerations affecting *H. niger* were researched and published by Ross (1984). Poaching with wire snares may account for some of the loss (Andanje, 1994), as animals spend considerable amounts of time on the periphery or even outside the reserve in populous and agricultural areas. This may in fact be a natural dispersal pattern. The optimal carrying capacity is unknown (Davies, 1994) and may in fact be reduced once fencing plans are completed. To date the reserve is unfenced except for a stretch on the south-western sector.

Odd reports from the Lunga Lunga area during late 1992 (Davies, 1994), late 1993 and early 1994 of animals whose description resembled that of sable antelope prompted the Kenya Wildlife Service and Eden Trust to investigate. A field team spent a week in the Soloita Dam area and were able to report massive meat poaching of and disturbance to the wild herbivores. The only other additional finding was by the ground team which reported suspected hoof prints (no measurements taken) of sable antelope (approximately eight individuals) at Kaliaka,

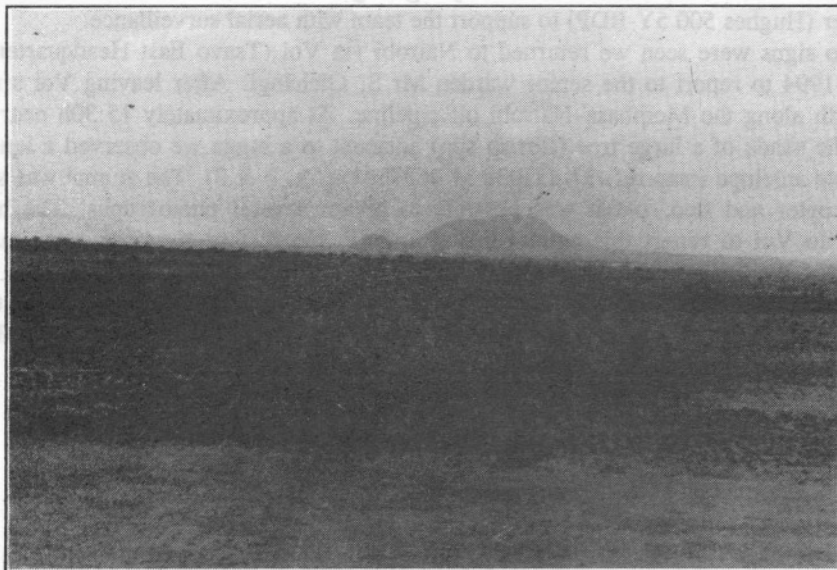


Figure 2. Area in Tsavo East where sable antelope were sighted north of Voi,  
map reference: 37-451038M-4637361



Figure 3. Mature bull sable antelope (photographed from helicopter)

Jengomzuri which were unsubstantiated by sightings. We visited the area at this time in a helicopter (Hughes 500 5Y-BDP) to support the team with aerial surveillance.

As no signs were seen we returned to Nairobi via Voi (Tsavo East Headquarters) on 21 January 1994 to report to the senior warden Mr S. Gichangi. After leaving Voi airstrip we flew north along the Mombasa–Nairobi oil pipeline. At approximately 15:30h near Mařima Hill in the shade of a large tree (*Cassia* spp) adjacent to a lugga we observed a lone mature male sable antelope (map ref. 37-451038 M 4637361) (fig. 2 & 3). The animal was scared by the helicopter and fled, but it was possible to obtain several photographs. The helicopter returned to Voi to report this extraordinary finding. No further sightings were made until May during the Tsavo elephant count on the plains south-east of Voi when a single lone bull was seen (Brett 1994, pers. comm.) in company of hartebeest and was presumed to be the same animal. A census of the Taita Ranches in October 1993 (Muriuki *et al.*, 1993), which might have been the area this animal passed through, did not find sable antelope, so this only adds to the enigma as to how the sighted animal arrived in Tsavo.

## DISCUSSION

The sighting of a mature male sable antelope, in excellent body and coat condition, in Tsavo East National Park is remarkable, but it confirms the anecdotes of animals outside of the Shimba Hills in recent times. Its presence in Tsavo may be a result of disturbance and poaching pressure but equally the excellent rains and associated lush vegetation at Tsavo over this period may also be relevant. This species is fairly water dependent, avoids dry hot exposed areas (especially the black bull which is likely to absorb radiant heat from the sun). It is also a selective grazer, preferring the more succulent and easily digestible parts of plants (Andanje, 1994) so will tend to avoid the drier arid areas. Tsavo East would normally fall into this latter category and could only be a seasonal habitat for this species. The origins of this individual remain unclear but it is possible that sable antelope remain in the area east of the park (from the original Malindi herds) or in the area between Shimba and Tsavo West.

The East African race in Kenya is threatened with extinction unless the downward trend can be reversed. It is time to focus on this extant population and investigate the sable antelope's viability out of protected areas. If this is poor, it may be advisable to rescue these remnants to boost the Shimba population which may not be at carrying capacity due to the apparent poaching effects. An alternative might be to set up a second population elsewhere in the original range or other suitable area.

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