

MAC

Friday 13th August 2010 started at 4h00 with a hasty drive from the Associated Private Nature Reserves (APNR) to Phalaborwa gate in the Kruger National Park, where I met Section Ranger, Rodney Landela, to find Mac, a Great Tusker, whose movements we have been tracking over a vast range via satellite for more than eight years. Once Rodney and I had located Mac by radio telemetry, the rest of the collaring team consisting of pilot, Charles Thompson, and infamous SANParks veterinarian, Markus Hofmeyr, would join us. Rodney and I followed the Very High Frequency (VHF) signal on foot over the undulating landscape covered in Mopani. Slowly we navigated our way through the sea of shimmering leaves. Distant horizons rose and fell in perfect shades of blue and violet. How beautiful the contrasts of time and colour are in Africa: mixes of ephemeral golden leaves with steadfast violet hills.....It felt good to be walking across the same landscape where Mac has roamed for almost 60 years. I looked forward to seeing him again, a gentleman that we had come to know since 2002, when he was first collared. He had just completed his annual musth cycle further South and was heading back North to the region between Shingwedzi and Letaba, where he would meet up with his familiar male companions while not in musth. Rodney led us carefully past two large tusked-bulls, but they would prove to be nowhere near Mac's huge tusk size. Over time, Mac's tusks have increased exponentially in length and thickness. Gradually we heard the thuds of helicopter blades approaching in the distance. With the collar and drugs on board, we flew to locate Mac in the region where Rodney and I had picked up his signal. We spotted him striding gracefully across the ground below us, and I felt the warm welling of tears at the sight of one so majestic. There are very few big tusked bulls left in Africa today, and it is a great privilege to catch a glimpse of one. Like sentinels of bygone eras, they represent benchmarks of successful conservation endeavours - symbols of beauty and age that are kept alive and protected, despite man's greed and the high price of ivory. The Kruger National Park and a few other conservation areas in Africa are to be commended for their vision and dedication to the protection of these magnificent individuals! Mac slowly went down as the drug took effect. The helicopter landed, and we set to work quickly to replace the collar. We took morphometric measurements and estimated his tusk size at 118lbs a side. While I took a dental impression to age him, Markus treated some wounds which he must have acquired while in musth. Markus asked if he could keep the counter weight of Mac's old collar. He wanted to display it on his desk and tell his sons Mac's story. It is befitting for the young to get to know the old that frequent these ancient landscapes, and a tangible counter weight would make the story real for them. The helicopter hovered above while Rodney and I watched Mac rising majestically to his feet. With goodbye waves, silence slowly returned to the bush. We stood in reverence while Mac gave a deep sigh and turned round to head North again.

For your interest

- Mac is recognised as one of the longest and largest tusked, continually monitored elephants in Africa today.
- Mac's tooth casts placed him in the 50-55 year old category. He is on his last set of molars and they are already well worn which means that in all likelihood he will live approximately another 10 years.
- Mac's home range exceeds 5000km² which represents one of the biggest ranges we have monitored on Save the Elephants' collared elephants to date.
- We suggest you acquire the following wonderful books on the few remaining largest tusked bulls in Africa:
 - Marais, J & Hadaway, D. 2006. Great tuskers of Africa. Penguin Books, Johannesburg.
 - Marias, J & Ainslie, A. 2010. In Search of Africa's Great Tuskers. Penguin Books, Johannesburg.

(**"Save the Elephants" Transboundary Elephant Research Programme, Elephant Newsletter – March 2011, Michelle Henley**)