

## Call of the Dwindling Wild Returns Zoo Bongos to Home

By MARC LACEY

Published: February 10, 2004



NANYUKI, Kenya — The bongo is not an animal known for going in circles. It surges straight ahead through the thickest of forests, with its reddish hue and striking white stripes confusing predators.

But a herd of 18 bongos now living at the base of Mount Kenya, Africa's second highest peak, has just completed the most circuitous of journeys, one that has taken them back to their ancestral home.

From 1966 to 1975, several dozen bongos were shipped from the wilds of Kenya to the staid confines of various American zoos. They thrived in captivity, breeding with abandon. Eventually, their American population exceeded 400.

Zoogoers loved them, with their cartoon character appearance making them stand out from more garden variety antelopes.

The bongo's hindquarters are outsized. Its coloring and stripes appear painted on by hand. And it towers over the the oryx, the eland and the gazelle. Some males reach 900 pounds.

But while the transplanted bongos thrived in their American enclosures, their brethren left behind experienced the grim realities of the wild. Natural predators like lions and hyenas devoured them. Hunters chased them down as trophies or meat, their bulky bodies proving to be most enticing. The poaching, combined with the steady loss of habitat, whittled down the bongos' numbers to virtually nothing.

Shy by nature, mountain bongos (*Boocercus eurycercus isaaci*) travel in small family herds dominated by one adult male. Unlike other antelopes that flee pursuers at top speed, bongos sometimes freeze in place, making them easier to catch. Still, they do fight back, using their ample horns as weapons.

Decades back, bongos were found in three separate forests in central Kenya. Today, though, they are gone from the Mau Forest. A tiny population may survive in the forests around Mount Kenya, but no sightings have been reported in 10 years or so. In the Aberdares Conservation Area, the population is estimated at fewer than 100.

In an effort to preserve the species in Mount Kenya, scientists have implanted bongo embryos into female eland, but so far without success.

So conservationists have opted to repatriate some American bongos and hope that their offspring revert to their wild ways. A program, organized by the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation in Florida, has the potential to revive the mountain bongo and give hope to scientists trying to save declining species.

Eighteen robust bongos, 4 males and 14 females, were donated for the effort from Busch Gardens and Disney's Animal Kingdom in Florida, from the Cape May County Zoo in New Jersey and from zoos in Los Angeles, St. Louis and Houston.

All the bongos' ancestors are from Kenya, but biologists sought out as much genetic diversity as they could. They also selected animals from particularly fertile bloodlines.

Before their trip to Kenya, the bongos were quarantined for three months at the White Oak Conservation Center in Yulee, Fla., under the supervision of Dr. Mark Davis, a veterinarian who helped bring some of the bongos to the United States in the 1970's.

In January, they were sedated, blindfolded and loaded aboard a DC-8 cargo plane and flown back to Africa. Arriving in Nairobi on Jan. 29, they were then taken by truck to the Mount Kenya Game Ranch, where a special enclosure had been set up for them, separate from the 18 bongos in captivity there that had never left Africa.

The American-born bongos are not prepared for the mountain's rugged terrain. They are used to eating pellets, not scrounging through the bush for nourishment. They are also far more susceptible to diseases than wild bongos. And they are so accustomed to humans that they may view a poacher as just another admirer.

"They are zoo animals," said Dr. Paul Reillo, director of the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation. "They know how to eat and reproduce. That's it."

But as the bongos were unloaded from their crates the other day, they moved immediately for the thick vegetation inside their enclosure, an instinct that encouraged the scientists. "You can take the bongo out of the bush but you can't take the bush out of the bongo," said William Woodley, the chief warden of the Mount Kenya National Park, who goes by the nickname Bongo.