

Disney Leads Team to South Africa on Special Mission: Elephant Sterilizations

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla., April 20, 2011 – A two-week visit to South Africa requires thoughtful planning, a good book for the long flights and efficient packing skills. Now imagine that your trip includes a vasectomy – for an elephant. Better not forget anything.

As they prepare to leave from Orlando International Airport April 22, a team from Disney's Animal Programs is packing enough medical supplies to conduct a series of procedures to help reduce elephant overpopulation in the wild. The team hopes to perform laparoscopic vasectomies on as many as 15 bull elephants in the Selati Game Reserve in South Africa.

Elephant overpopulation in wildlife parks and reserves is a growing problem in southern Africa that can have devastating effects on the natural habitat as well as other animal species that live there. Without a proven method of reproductive control for elephants, wildlife officials in many countries have considered culling elephants in an effort to control continued population growth.

During the past seven years, this international coalition of veterinarians, conservation groups, zoos, universities and private industry has performed the procedure on nearly 30 male elephants. The procedure is designed to reduce the elephant birth rates in wildlife reserves, while maintaining normal hormone levels and social behaviors for the individual elephants.

"Elephant population management is one of the most critical conservation issues facing many areas of Africa" said Dr. Mark Stetter, Director of Animal Health at Disney's Animal Programs and principal investigator. "Through our recent successes, elephant vasectomy has been an effective tool at several wildlife reserves to reduce the need for culling, and help support the ecosystem. As an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), Disney's Animal Programs is committed to pioneering creative solutions to problems facing all wildlife by using the technology and tools available to address conservation and wildlife issues."

In July 2004, this team of experts performed the first ever sterilization of free-ranging female elephants. In 2005, the group began its work with bull elephants and started developing laparoscopic vasectomy techniques for sterilizing males in the wild. Since then, the team has performed surgeries at the Swaziland Big Game Parks, Welgevonden Wildlife Reserve, Songimvelo Wildlife Reserve and the Pongola Game Reserve.

"Elephants are unique among most mammals since their testes are internal and require abdominal surgery to perform a vasectomy, making the relatively simple procedure much more complex to conduct on elephants in the wild," according to Stetter.

The innovative procedure involves state-of-the-art laparoscopic equipment developed specifically for this project and scaled from human to elephant proportions by KARL STORZ at their headquarters in Germany. Laparoscopic surgery allows the surgeon to view the internal organs on a monitor and use long thin instruments to perform the surgery. With this type of minimally invasive surgery, the risk of infection is greatly diminished, procedure time is significantly reduced and post-operative discomfort is minimized.

In collaboration with the Selati Game Reserve this work is part of a long-term behavioral research study investigating the genetic, animal behavioral and population dynamics of elephant herds over many years. The primary focus of this

year's effort is to transfer the international coalition's skills to their South African counterparts. Veterinarians from the University of Pretoria Faculty of Veterinary Science at Onderstepoort will participate in the elephant procedures and learn to perform the surgery. Developing this kind of local expertise is critical to the long-term success of the program.

This is an international collaborative project that brings together conservation groups, universities and private industry that make up the Elephant Population Management Program, (EPMP). The EPMP is non-profit organization formed to help solve complex issues associated with elephant management including saving the elephants and preserving ecosystems. Working with the Selati Game Reserve, Disney and the EPMP hope to ensure that elephants and their habitats will flourish for many years. For the EPMPs website for more information:

<http://elephantpmp.org/>