



Capturing a giraffe on Jan's game farm in Mount Etjo, Namibia.

# The man who revolutionised game capture

Independent, brave and headstrong, the legendary **Jan Oelofse** pioneered a mass game capture technique which transformed the practice of antelope capture. **Heather Dugmore** reflects on his life.

**I**n game capture terms he was a genius. His contribution deserves the highest praise because he is the one who developed the unique mass capture method that enabled us to go from a handful of captured game animals in a month to several hundred. He will go down in history as one of the greatest animal capturers ever."

This is how Dr Ian Player, distinguished South African wildlife conservationist, describes Jan Oelofse, who worked with him at the Natal

Parks Board (now Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife).

Late last year, aged 79, Jan died of heart failure on his wildlife ranch in Namibia. But his name lives on in a recently published book *Capture to be Free*, written by his wife Annette Oelofse. It's an essentially African story of wild adventures in then Tanganyika, of Hollywood movies with John Wayne, of life and work in the Natal Parks Board, and of the Oelofse Method Jan developed in 1968, which is still the recognised method used for mass game capture.

**INSERT:** Jan Oelofse worked for the Natal Parks Board (now Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife) as a game ranger from 1964 to 1972.

**RIGHT ABOVE:** Jan loads individual crates for translocation in the Hluhluwe Game Reserve. PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANNETTE OELOFSE



Ian Player's tribute to Jan is fitting, because together they paved the way for the growth of game ranching in South Africa. Ian pioneered the capture and translocation of large numbers of antelope.

Today there are an estimated 10 000 private game ranches covering 15 million hectares of land in South Africa, excluding national parks and provincial nature reserves. According to the Wildlife Translocation Association, there are between 80 and 100 wildlife capture operators in SA that move over 300 000 head of game per year. Without the

Oelofse Method, this would not have been possible.

## BREAKTHROUGH

Jan joined the Natal Parks Board as a game ranger in 1964. He worked hard at improving existing capture techniques in the Umfolozi and Hluhluwe reserves where game was intensively culled to deal with population pressure.

Rudimentary capture methods for game translocation were used as an alternative to culling, but they were clumsy and ineffective. "We would chase the herds on horseback and try to catch them with nooses and nets, but too many animals got injured," explained Jan





## The Tanganyika years

Jan's spent years working with wildlife capture pioneer Willie de Beer in Tanganyika (now Tanzania) from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s.

"They captured wild animals for zoos in Europe. After reading an article about Willie, Jan decided he wanted to work for him. So he drove from Namibia to Tanganyika to seek him out," Annette explains.

It took Jan several months to get there but finally arriving in Tanganyika he headed for Arusha and asked for directions to Willie's farm. "I am Jan Oelofse and I am here to work for you," he said to Willie, who immediately took him on. The two captured many animals, using primitive

methods and equipment, including nets, cages and a lasso or *vangstok*.

During this time the two worked on the Hollywood classic *Hatari*, starring John Wayne. Jan was in charge of 'animal habituation' or taming wild animals for the film. The wild cast included baby elephant, leopard and lion. His job involved accompanying 40 wild animals on a DC6 to the US.

When his Tanganyikan work permit was not renewed he came to South Africa in 1964. He took whatever work came his way, before getting a job as a ranger with the Natal Parks Board (now Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife), then run by John Geddes Page.

### LEFT FROM TOP:

- Jan Oelofse pioneered the mass game capture technique known as the Oelofse Method. Plastic sheeting was tied onto capture nets so that they appeared to the animals as a solid wall. Animals could be driven into this structure and loaded straight onto trucks.

- Early days at Mount Etjo, Namibia. Jan, Annette and their son Alex as a baby with an elephant calf they reared.

- Alex, Annette and Jan Oelofse last year.

### RIGHT:

Jan loads a captured giraffe in Tanganyika (now Tanzania).



was in a position to carry out an experiment which I had been planning in regard to eliminating the animals from running into the nets. The plastic 'wall' was so effective that even when the animals were chased they could not be forced to run into it."

At the same time he formulated another idea of building a wooden pen onto the capture boma, which led directly to the transport lorry

via a ramp. "Game was successfully transferred to large wooden boxes positioned on the lorry without having to be handled. Ten animals at a time could be loaded. It was a red letter day in my game capture career; something I had always hoped to achieve."

Jan had not only revolutionised game capture, he had

in an interview after he received the Audi Terra Nova Environmental Innovation Award for the Oelofse Method some years ago. Affected by the many deaths and injuries that took place, he threw himself into refining game capture methods.

Then, in 1968, he came up with the plastic sheeting method in which animals were herded into a funnel-shaped capture boma, enclosed with plastic sheeting.

"They couldn't see through the plastic so they didn't try to charge through it," he explained. The antelope saw the plastic as an impenetrable barrier. This breakthrough

### FAST FACTS

- Jan Oelofse made a significant breakthrough in game capture.
- Antelope can be moved in large numbers using the Oelofse method.
- Jan Oelofse died last year, but left a lasting legacy.

made it possible for a capture team to capture large numbers of animals in a relatively short time, herd them onto trucks and translocate them with minimal trauma.

### RED LETTER DAY

Jan describes his breakthrough in a quarterly report to the Hluhluwe Game Reserve in 1968: "On 4 September I

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← revolutionised wildlife conservation, aided by a handful of men who worked closely with him on the ground, including John Clark, Begifa Mhlongo, Drummond Densham and Charles Tinley and the courageous capture back-up team of mainly Zulu men, mounted and on foot. Oelofse's method opened the way for animals to be moved to existing game parks and to new wildlife areas.

### SIMPLE AND EFFECTIVE

"I was very fortunate to join Jan's capture team in 1969 at a very exciting and experimental stage of capture," recalls Drummond Densham, who first read about Jan in a feature in *Farmer's Weekly* in the mid-1960s. "He was an incredible

man who would think things through thoroughly. When he said, 'I've thought about this', you knew he had, down to the finest detail. He was one of those characters who inspired exceptional team spirit. The Zulu capture team loved him and called him *Intshebe*, meaning the one with the beard. They saw how he expected everyone to get stuck in and get the job done together."

The perfection of Jan's method was in its simplicity. But it required guts and determination to persevere and convince the many detractors who scoffed at his efforts and ideas. Fortunately, he was encouraged and supported by Ian Player, then the chief conservator of Zululand, and Nick Steele, warden of Hluhluwe. These men shielded Jan daily

### CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

- Jan herds wildebeest towards the capture kraal. Later helicopters, instead of horses, were used to facilitate the capture process.

- Jan with John Wayne, who starred in the Hollywood classic *Hatari* based on the lives of Jan Oelofse and Willie de Beer, both well-known animal capturers.

- The back-up team arrives at Hluhluwe ahead of a day's capture operation.

from the bureaucratic processes and barriers which he could never understand and which he characteristically bucked.

In his book *Bush Life of a Game Warden*, published in 1979, Nick Steele described Jan as: "A typical Afrikaans-speaking South African, tall, with noticeably broad shoulders, he wears a small beard and despite thinning hair is a ruggedly handsome man of the veld, highly individualistic, an outstanding horseman and wild animal handler. His versatility made one understand why the English needed three years and half a million troops to conquer his forebears in the Anglo-Boer War."

### NAMIBIA

Jan worked for the Natal Parks Board until 1972 when he decided to go it alone, starting the first private capture business in South Africa.

Later, with R700 in his pocket, he moved to the Mount Etjo region of Namibia. He had grown up on a cattle farm close to Etosha National Park, where game moved freely through their land, and to which he had always

wanted to return.

He met and married Annette Diekmann who had grown up on a 60 000ha cattle farm in the Otjiwarongo district and shared his love of wildlife.

"Jan's plan was to buy land where he could set up a base for his capture business, but he didn't have the money so he leased 5 000ha, built capture bomas and pens and established a game capture operation called Oelofse Wild," says Annette.

**'HE WAS ONE OF THOSE CHARACTERS WHO INSPIRED TEAM SPIRIT.'**

After a few years of translocating game between South Africa and Namibia, Jan was able to buy the land.

"We faced some really tough times when we were almost down and out financially, but we managed to pick ourselves up, move forward and buy more land. During the 28 years of our marriage, we bought 30 000ha," she continues. The Oelofses worked



Jan Oelofse supervising the loading of game in the Hluhluwe Game Reserve in 1968. Game was herded into the capture boma, moved up a ramp and into the crates on the transport truck. This could be done with minimal handling and reduced stress.

## Translocation of game in SA

According to the vice-chairperson of the Wildlife Translocation Association (WTA), Kester Vickery, between 80 and 100 wildlife capture operators, moving 300 000 head of game annually, are active in South Africa. Capture operators must be registered with the provincial nature conservation authorities, which issue permits for capture and relocation. WTA is a voluntary association for game capturers. For more information contact Kester Vickery on 082 892 6761.

tirelessly to achieve their dream of developing a wildlife sanctuary.

### DIVERSIFYING

To supplement their income from the capture business, they pioneered trophy hunting in Namibia. "Most of the buyers wanted breeding herds, so we were left with many male animals, which we released onto the land for trophy hunting and launched Jan Oelofse Hunting Safaris," recalls Annette. "Hunting and killing wild animals went against our grain but we had to make ends meet. We kept trophy hunting to a minimum, only taking out the old males, and adding a wildlife safari component with a comfortable lodge," she explains.

There are four of the Big Five species, excluding buffalo, and more than 30 different species of antelope on

their farm. Hunting and safari clients come mostly from the US.

Their son Alex ranches with Annette. "He's now 27 and studied mechanical engineering at Stellenbosch. After graduation he decided this was the life he wanted," says Annette.

Before he died, Jan told Annette how happy he was to have achieved what they have achieved. "It was a rare moment of contentment as he was always striving towards a goal."

Jan is buried on the koppie in the centre of their sanctuary. All the game can be seen from there and the couple often went there together. "It is where his soul wants to be," says Annette.

• For more information or to purchase Capture to be Free, contact Annette Oelofse on 00264 67 290 175 or email jan.oelofse@africa.com.na. ■FW

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