Wildlife Research Group and Bushskies embark on wildlife census

Dr Morgan Hauptfleisch, a researcher in the Faculty of Natural Resources and Spatial Sciences, conducted a wildlife census with his students. The census covered approximately 95,000 ha of land in north-central Namibia, and it was supported by landowners and Bushskies Aviation. Over the course of a week, the team of pilots, scientists and 13 students counted close to 5,000 large wildlife of 28 different species.

The novel approach used aerial observations, high resolution photography, camera traps and road counts to estimate the abundance and distribution of wildlife. This builds on research conducted by NUST, Bushskies and the Namibian Chamber of Environment over the past four years. The initiative gave important practical exposure to fourth-year Natural Resource Management students.

Dr Hauptfleisch said: “You cannot manage what you do not measure, and counting of wildlife gives important feedback to conservationists. Management of wildlife is particularly important in an environment where there are limitations such as fences and conflict with other land uses. Taking high resolution photographs from an aircraft, at the same time as physical observations from the aircraft is cutting-edge. It can verify physical observations, something classic aerial counts cannot achieve.”

Data collected at the Kunene site will also be used as part of the ORYCS project, which is a collaborative initiative between NUST, the University of Namibia, the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, and four German institutions. The project intends to understand the link between different wildlife management practices and the health and productivity of the ecosystem.

Dr Morgan Hauptfleisch, NUST academic (far left), pictured with students and a Bushskies pilot at the Etosha Heights Private Reserve.