

Sandscript

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With the new wet season not far away, the African bullfrog and Abdim's Stork will soon again be present in and around many of the desert's seasonal pools and wetlands.

Saving species, engaging people

Next year SCF will be 10. My, how time flies. It only seems like yesterday a small group of like-minded individuals got together to see how they could contribute to conserving some of the planet's most endangered yet most overlooked species: the antelopes and other large birds and mammals of the Sahara and bordering Sahel.

While putting together my presentation for the 2014 Sahelo-Saharan Interest Group meeting (see back page), itself a product of those "like-minded individuals", I thought about our achievements over the past decade and it was comforting to note progress in many areas: endangered species, protected areas, wildlife survey, education, communications, training, public awareness and outreach. We may not have saved anything from extinction just yet but it is at least comforting to know that species like the addax, dama gazelle, scimitar-horned oryx and North African ostrich are now firmly on the international conservation radar screen; something that could not have been said ten years ago.

None of this could have happened of course without our donors, supporters and partners, each bringing their re-

spective roles, skills and resources to the table in pursuit of a common goal. SCF is blessed by the diversity, breadth and loyalty of its allies and collectively we have raised more than 8 million dollars for conservation in the Sahel and Sahara since 2005.

Of all our loyal and dedicated supporters there can be no doubt the world zoo community is among the most important. Zoo people helped establish SCF, zoos help fund SCF and its projects, and zoo people provide a great deal of unique and highly valuable technical support and advice for our activities. In return, like all good symbiotic relationships, SCF helps the zoo community meet its own goals and conservation agenda both at home and in Africa.

The vital importance of strategic relationships like ours with the world zoo movement, was made abundantly clear at the recently held mid-year meetings of the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) held in Memphis. Drawing on research recently commissioned, AZA Chair and keynote speaker, Jackie Ogden, stressed not only what the zoo community was already doing to support conservation (currently some \$160 million per year) but

more importantly the vast potential for zoos and their visitors to do more.

In making this happen, AZA stresses the importance of building effective, long-term partnerships with non-governmental organizations like our own. Since our inception in 2004, SCF has benefited from the support of almost 90 zoos worldwide and we are a great example of what AZA is so keen to do more of. We are proud of this and look forward to another decade consolidating this relationship for the benefit of the Sahara's wildlife. As Jackie so nicely summed things up, it's all about "saving species, engaging people". We are with you all the way, Jackie!





2014 crop of ostrich chicks: ostriches hatching (left) and parents with nine young (right) (Maimounatou Ibrahim/SCF)

Saving the largest bird on the planet

Saving the largest bird on the planet is no small feat. The Saharan race of the ostrich is no mere barnyard chicken. Ask anyone in the commercial ostrich business, and they can rattle off the list of challenges that had to be overcome with domestic birds in order to produce them for market. The Saharan red-necked ostrich comes with all those same challenges and more, and in an even larger package: a big male can be over 2.75 meters in height and weigh in excess of 135 kg. This is no gentle bird, either. Wildest of the wild, there's a reason you don't see the Saharan red-neck on commercial ostrich farms. Easily spooked and tough to handle, these birds don't lend themselves readily to farming.

Small wonder, then, our efforts to breed them in captivity in Niger had some early setbacks to overcome. First and foremost was identifying purebred Saharan birds. Domesticated hybrid ostrich have been distributed around the world. We needed to be sure the captive birds we found in Niger were the proper sub-

species *Struthio camelus camelus*. Forty-nine of the 100 known captive birds were identified as purebreds through genetic testing. Next came containment. The small flock in Kellé that we targeted for development needed a major upgrade to the fencing and facilities just to keep these flightless powerhouses contained. The birds were also in poor condition. An improved ration made from locally available ingredients was developed and the birds began to thrive. Even so, egg production lagged behind: 0 in 2009; 0 in 2010; 3 infertile eggs in 2011. Hope rose considerably when egg production exploded in 2012 (45 eggs) and 2013 (52 eggs), yet still no surviving hatchlings. Meanwhile, the differences between domestic ostrich and our Saharan red-necks began to reveal themselves. Despite designing our breeding compound based on domestic ostrich production standards, we learned quickly that red-necks are birds of a different feather. Some of our males were too aggressive in this setting, and some birds were lost as a result of this aggression. Feral dogs chasing

birds along fence lines further complicated matters until a perimeter barrier could be established. Not surprisingly, local people began to think the project cursed!

Cursed or not, the project took a quantum leap forward at the end of 2013, when Ms Maimounatou Ibrahim, a highly motivated Nigerien, took over as site manager. Two months later, we had new red-neck chicks on the ground! Of 12 eggs laid by one pair, ten were hatched with eight still surviving three months later. This momentous event is the result of the loyal commitment of all the project's supporters, including the donors, the AZA Ratite TAG project advisers, the on-site team and the local leaders in Niger. There is still a lot of ground to cover before we see Saharan red-necks back in the wild in Niger. Even so, the long-awaited arrival of our first chicks has strengthened the relationship between project stakeholders and bolstered our collective resolve to see the largest bird on the planet roaming free once again in Niger.





Stunning but extremely rare dama gazelle in the Manga region of Western Chad (John Newby/SCF)

Damas in distress

The dama gazelle is one of the world's most threatened species. Listed by IUCN as Critically Endangered, there are probably fewer than 300 of these stunning animals left in the wild today. SCF has made the gazelle's survival one of its top priorities and was actively involved in a strategic planning workshop held in Edinburgh last November (more on this next time) to design a global recovery plan based on a wide range of activities, including enhanced protection of the wild populations, captive breeding and sperm banking.

Today, the dama gazelle can only be found in a handful of tiny, widely dispersed populations in Chad and Niger. Survey work carried out by SCF and its partners since 2001 has identified three main groups: Termit in Niger, and Manga and Ouadi Rimé in Chad. It is possible a few isolated individuals remain in Niger's Air Mountains and Mali's Tamesna but this needs confirmation. Whereas the gazelles in Termit and Ouadi Rimé are found in gazetted protected areas and as such benefit from a degree of protection, the Manga, which lies between these two sites, has as yet no

formal protection.

Following on from surveys carried out in 2001 and 2010, a joint SCF/ZSL/Chad team carried out a further survey this January. The mission had strong backing from the Chadian government and the endorsement of the IUCN Antelope Specialist Group, and both the AZA and EAZA Ungulate Taxon Advisory Groups. Funding for fieldwork was generously provided by the Addax & Oryx Foundation, the AZA Ungulate TAG, and the zoos of Landau (Germany), Montpellier (France) and St Louis (USA).

Fieldwork focussed initially on an area already surveyed in September 2010, when several damas were found in a sparsely populated area of fresh pasture. This January, other than the tracks of 2-3 animals, no damas were seen. The pasture was sparse and dry and the entire area inhabited by nomads and their livestock. While underlining the value of carrying out surveys at different times of the year, much was learned regarding the seasonal movements of the nomads. During the early part of the wet season, the herders move south to exploit better

pastures, leaving the gazelles to occupy the zone. As the season progresses so the locals return to their traditional haunts and the damas move elsewhere. But where exactly do they go?

With the help of the herdsmen we were able to answer this question, and although we only observed 3 damas during the survey, we did find many tracks and other signs of their presence to the north of the herders' main grazing areas. This belt of suitable wooded habitat, squeezed between the desert to the north and the people to the south, is all that remains for dama to exploit, but even here inroads are being made by tracks and trails, motor vehicles and the inevitable expansion of wells.

Apart from the ever-present threat from poachers, the greatest challenge facing the dama gazelle and many of the Sahel's other species is habitat loss and competition from expanding livestock development. New wells and pumping stations are increasing access and livestock numbers in hitherto lightly used areas. As a result, wildlife is pushed further out into marginal land where pasture is sparse

and the shade and green plants necessary for the gazelles to survive the long hot season insufficient. There is a growing body of evidence for significant die-offs of both dorcas and dama gazelles during the hot, dry season. In the past, gazelles, larger antelopes, ostrich and all manner of smaller species took refuge from the heat in densely-vegetated wadis, where shade and water-rich grazing was available. Most of these areas are now inhabited year-round and in the worse cases are disappearing entirely under the axe for firewood or clearance for seasonal agriculture.

Without better cooperation and understanding between wildlife and livestock interests, the outlook for Sahelo-Saharan wildlife is bleak. Overstocking of livestock and the associated degradation of pastures could also have catastrophic impacts on the pastoral economy. During severe droughts, livestock numbers will plummet, causing havoc amongst some of the world's poorest people. It is in everyone's interest that measures be taken to rationalize pastoral development and to seek a better balance with nature.



Mixed group of vultures: Rüppell's, lappet-faced and hooded (Photo: John Newby/SCF)

Changing vulture culture

Surveys carried out in the Sahel over the past 20 years have shown the tremendous decline of previously common vultures, such as the hooded, Rüppell's and lappet-faced (top photo), the Egyptian (right middle), white-backed (right top) and white-headed (right bottom). Their decline is due to a combination of habitat loss, poisoning and persecution. Recent information concerning tagged birds, like the endangered Egyptian vulture, and data collected by SCF fieldworkers, have identified the importance of persecution by traditional hunters to feed the illicit wildlife trade for traditional use in the Sahel and more particularly in Nigeria. Information collected in Niger has also highlighted the use of strychnine by villagers to kill rabid dogs, without being aware of the danger related to this poison for the general ecosystem. Although aware of these practices, local government foresters do not prevent hunters from killing vultures because the hunters do not realize it is illegal and the foresters assume it is part of normal pest control. This ignorance is

leading vultures to the brink of extinction in many areas of their range, where they used to be quite numerous.

Countries like Niger, Chad, Sudan and Nigeria are also critically important for migrant or wandering vultures, like the Egyptian, lappet-faced and Rüppell's. SCF feels it is extremely important to join forces with organizations worldwide to implement regional programs to conserve these species and their global flyways. Hotspots for vulture conservation are being identified through nest surveys carried out by SCF in the Termit & Tin Toumma National Nature Reserve with support from the Houston and Al Ain zoos. Our data shows this reserve to be one of the most important remaining breeding zones for the lappet-faced vulture in Niger.

SCF is also implementing a new project with the support of the Saint Louis Zoo's Wild-Care Institute to raise awareness at all levels in Niger of the decline in vulture populations. As part of this process it is crucial beforehand to gather information from local

people in the areas used by vultures to improve our knowledge and understanding of traditional hunting practices and the related trade networks. The project team will explain to local communities and the foresters in charge of nature protection the conservation status of vultures and the valuable role they play in ecosystem management and the food chain in particular. The project aims to reduce the threat from illegal poisoning and persecution. Any progress made in reducing the use of poisoned baits for pest control will have the added benefit of reducing collateral damage to other species, like the fennec, Rüppell's and pale foxes, wildcats, caracal, striped hyena, and the critically endangered Saharan cheetah; species all at great risk from non-specific means of pest control.

The important role of vultures as scavengers and providers of ecosystem services, including to public health, are increasingly well-known and our goal is to spread this information more widely in the Sahel.





The judge inspects the evidence, the skull of an addax hunted by soldiers in Niger's Tin Toumma desert (Le Damagaram)

Historic victory for Niger's wildlife

The photos may not be the best in the world but the evidence was more than enough to create history in Niger, where for the first time ever, an active duty soldier has been prosecuted and sentenced for poaching wildlife in the newly established Termit & Tin Toumma National Nature Reserve.

For many years, SCF and its partners have fought hard to bring an end to the incredibly destructive and senseless slaughter of wildlife perpetrated by the various armed forces in Niger. Region-wide, hunting like this, with modern weapons and powerful all-terrain vehicles, is the main reason species like the addax, dorcas gazelle and ostrich are absent today from over 95% of their former ranges. The scimitar-horned oryx was

driven to extinction in the wild by the same cause.

In January this year, thanks in large part to information gathered from our network of community game guards, photographs came to light (see top right) of one particular poaching incident that took place in 2013. This and other images were circulated on the Internet by local activists incensed by such flagrant disrespect for the law and abuse of power by the armed forces. It must be said this incident is just the tip of the iceberg but at last there was some tangible evidence upon which to act.

And action there was. The issue was rapidly taken up by Niger's wildlife department, and with support from the civil authorities and a whole raft of local NGOs, the issue was debated by Niger's Coun-

cil of Ministers. Further pressure for a transparent process was brought to bear by the Termit project's sponsors, including Noé Conservation and the Convention on Migratory Species.

Victory came in March, when after a thorough trial, the culprit was found guilty and sentenced to pay a fine of about \$1,000 and serve a one-year prison sentence.

While we all sincerely hope this will serve as an object lesson to the armed forces, we fully recognize the main challenge is working with the military to harness their vast potential for good and to encourage them to assist rather than hinder our efforts to help save Niger's most unique and precious natural wildlife heritage.



Sandscript is the regular newsletter of **SCF**, the **Sahara Conservation Fund**.

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Sandscript is edited by John Newby, who can be reached [here](#) with any comments and feedback.



SCF's mission is to conserve the wildlife of the Sahara and bordering Sahelian grasslands.

To implement our mission, we forge partnerships between people, governments, the world zoo and scientific communities, international conventions, non-governmental organizations and donor agencies. A powerful network with a common goal – the conservation of deserts and their unique natural and cultural heritage.

If you would like to know more about our work and how to contribute to our projects, please contact us at scf@saharaconservation.org We would love to hear from you!

To donate to SCF just scan the QR code below or visit our website by [clicking here](#).



SSIG 2014 in Portugal



With over 70 participants from 15 countries, the 2014 meeting of the Sabelo-Sabaran Interest Group (SSIG) was one of the best attended yet. The gathering was admirably hosted by our colleagues at the Research Center in Biodiversity and Genetic Resources at their campus in Vairão. SSIG is rapidly becoming the premier event for biodiversity conservation in the Sabelo-Sabaran region, something clearly demonstrated by the quality of the presentations and the number of institutions represented.