



# Sandscript

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*As the hot season approaches and temperatures rise to over 45°C in the shade, many plants dry out but it's nice to see a few of the hardier perennials still in bloom.*

## They're back!

After weeks of “standing by”, Justin Chuen finally delivered the news I'd been waiting for: the inaugural shipment of 25 scimitar-horned oryx from Abu Dhabi to Chad was confirmed for March 14<sup>th</sup> 2016. More importantly, I'd passed required security clearances and there was a seat for me on the plane!

During the 12-hour flight from Washington to Dubai, I found my mind drifting back in time to 1998, the year I attended a Convention on Migratory Species meeting held in Djerba, Tunisia. That meeting brought together 14 range countries and international experts to discuss ways to help conserve Sahelo-Saharan antelopes. My takeaways from this meeting were that there was an ongoing biodiversity crisis unfolding in the Sahara, but sadly, there was no concerted effort underway to do anything about it. I was also surprised to learn how little connectivity existed between the work being done to sustain these species in human care and efforts designed to secure and restore these species to the wild.

And yet, here I was with the tiny universe of experts with the knowledge, connections and passion to do something to save Sahelo-Saharan wildlife if only they would act collectively. Fortunately, John Newby and I became fast friends, and we soon hatched a plan that led

rapidly to the establishment of the Sahelo-Saharan Interest Group (SSIG), best described at the time as a “group of like-minded individuals”. We soon morphed into the Sahara Conservation Fund, the only conservation organization fully committed to conserving the wildlife of the Sahara and its bordering Sahelian grasslands.

As I fast-forward 18 years, I am awestruck that SCF has managed to inspire and coalesce its diverse partners from the private sector, zoos, non-governmental organizations, governments and civil society to work across multiple disciplines to achieve tangible conservation outcomes for species like the addax, ostrich, dama gazelle, and many others. Among our proudest achievements has been catalysing a great partnership between the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi and the government of Chad, a visionary relationship that has made it possible for all of us to fulfil a dream of re-establishing the iconic scimitar-horned oryx back onto the grassy Sahelian plains of Chad.

Accompanying the first 25 pioneering oryx by air and overland to their new home in the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Faunal Reserve was a great honor. And I'm not ashamed to say that my view of the animals charging hard out of their shipping crates into their new enclosure was partially ob-

scured by the tears of joy and pride that streamed down my face. It is a moment I will always treasure. Of course, it is all too easy to forget that the real work lies ahead of us, and that the challenge of saving a species is really a “forever challenge”. Even as we achieve important milestones we must remind ourselves of our rather audacious goal, which is no less than establishing multiple, self-sustaining and secure populations of scimitar-horned oryx that will roam free for many generations. Achieving this goal, and others, will require us to continue harnessing the knowledge, passion and will of like-minded people worldwide who understand the majesty and importance of deserts and the wildlife and people that rely upon them for survival.

*Dr Steve Monfort  
Chairman of SCF*



Steve Monfort (left) and John Newby at Abéché airport





*Twenty-five scimitar-horned oryx, sourced from the EAD collection in Abu Dhabi, are now back in Chad (Photo: John Newby)*

## Oryx are back in Chad

After an absence of more than 25 years, scimitar-horned oryx are once again present on Chadian soil. On the evening of March 14, 25 oryx were unloaded from the massive belly of a chartered Ilyushin 76 cargo plane to riotous applause from the crowd gathered at Abéché airport to welcome them home. The oryx, drawn from the world herd being assembled by the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi (EAD) in the United Arab Emirates, were accompanied by Justin Chuven, Ric Pusey, Louis Lignereux and Ahmed Al Dhaheiri (photo top right shows Justin and Ahmed), and by SCF's chairman, Dr Steve Monfort. The team was warmly welcomed by Chad's environment minister, Mr Brah Mamane (bottom right), and by the governor of the Ouaddai region, Mr Abbadi Sayir. Receiving their thanks on behalf of EAD, Ahmed spoke of the importance of the oryx reintroduction project, stressing the immense value of the partnership between the governments of Chad and Abu Dhabi.

Thanks to the dynamic sup-

port of soldiers from the local French military detachment, the heavy, individual crates containing the oryx were quickly moved from the plane and loaded onto trucks provided by the Chadian army and SCF's local construction partner, Geyser SA. By 09.00 PM all was ready and the orderly convoy of trucks and SUVs started its long voyage north to the Oryx Basecamp and pre-release pens some 200 kilometres distant in the vast Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve.

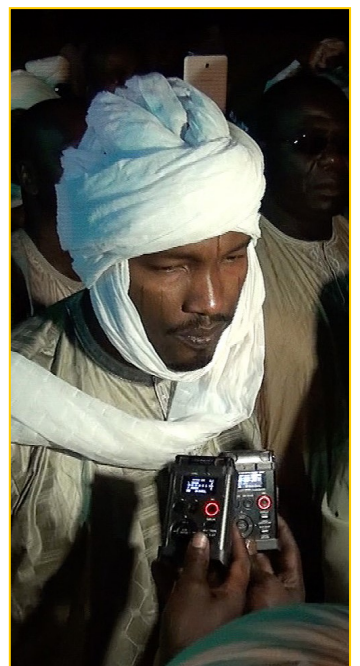
Driving slowly all night via the regional town of Biltine, the convoy arrived on site at 07.00 AM the following morning. Lead by our colleagues from the Chadian wildlife department, Ahmat Brahim Siam, Mahamat Hassan Hacha, Sherif Guett and Hamit Ali, a separate and faster convoy, with a large contingent of Chadian authorities and national media, had arrived during the night at the Oryx Basecamp to assist with the unloading of the crates and release of the oryx into their 250,000m<sup>2</sup> holding pen.

Closely supervised by the

team from EAD and SCF's project leaders, Marc Dethier and Jabulani Sibanda, the crates were carefully unloaded in three batches. The oryx in each were then released by local dignitaries clambering on top of the crates and raising in unison the front panels to the general applause of the assembled crowd. The first oryx touched Chadian soil at 07.55 AM and by 09.20 AM all 25 animals had been safely and successfully released. Within half an hour they were already grazing on vegetation last seen by wild oryx nearly three decades ago.

The vast bulk of Chad's oryx were lost in a brutally short period between 1979 and 1982, when the country was torn by civil war and partially invaded by Libya. At the time, the majority of the world's remaining oryx, perhaps 5,000 in all, were to be found in Chad's Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve, with a small number in the neighbouring country of Niger.

*(continued on page 3)*







Oryx are released into their holding pen in the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve (Photos: Ayman Khalil (top l), Tim Wacher (top r), Justin Chuvén (lower centre))

## Oryx are back in Chad (cont.)

Niger's last oryx probably died in the mid 1980s as a result of hunting and drought. The species finally became extinct in the wild with the death of the last remaining animal in 1989, an adult male, hunted on the banks of the Wadi Kharma, one of the species' former preferred dry season haunts.

One of the big questions asked many times over the past few years as the Chad reintroduction project gradually took shape was "will the same fate await the new arrivals and their progeny?". Frankly, in the long term it's impossible to say. What we do know, however, and what has driven the project since its inception is that we have a unique opportunity for success that may never present itself again. Over the past few years, Chad, under the leadership of President Idriss Deby, has tangibly demonstrated its commitment to nature conservation through the promulgation and application of strict anti-poaching policies and legislation. Chad has also been extremely active in developing and strengthening its

protected areas' network. In doing so, it has attracted considerable international support and funding from partners, such as the European Union and African Parks Network.

The second key element is the unique involvement of EAD and the government of Abu Dhabi wishing to contribute significantly to actions in favour of desert wildlife through the heritage collections of rare species established by the late Ruler of the UAE, HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan. Under the vision and impetus of its leaders, EAD's input has been invaluable both at home in Abu Dhabi, with the creation and management of a "world herd" of scimitar-horned oryx, and overseas in Chad, through the provision of animals, technical expertise and funding for the reintroduction project.

Lastly, the role played by SCF and its partners, both as catalyst in driving the oryx conservation movement and technically by providing the hands-on skills and unique experience needed to implement the Chadian end of the reintro-

duction project. Together with SCF, the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute (SCBI), the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and the Fossil Rim Wildlife Center, and through them many others, are actively involved in the project's implementation and efforts to ensure it is carried out to the highest possible standards.

It is probably safe to say there is no other conservation project like it and if all goes well, the first batch of oryx will be released fully into the wild later this year. The plan is to bring in new shipments of oryx from the EAD world herd at regular intervals, thus seeding over the next 3-4 years a viable wild population. What no one knows yet is how well the oryx will handle the process and how they will adapt to existence in the wild; an existence significantly different from the one they are used to and also significantly different from the one faced by the oryx that lived in central Chad in the 1970s.

(continued on page 4)







*Reconciling pastoral development with wildlife conservation will call for significant interaction and dialogue with the reserve's population (Photos: John Newby & Tim Wacher)*

## Oryx are back in Chad (cont.)

To monitor all this, a large number of the oryx released will be fitted with collars, enabling data on position and movements to be transmitted via satellite or VHF radio signals on the ground. In collaboration with SCBI and ZSL, the monitoring program will also comprise a local team to follow the animals and to respond to information received via the satellite tracking data.

While the threat of poaching is never entirely absent, new challenges face the oryx, their multiplication and dispersion. The biggest of these is competition with livestock and pastoralism for access to undisturbed space, shade and grazing. And while there is still more than ample space and habitat for a viable population of oryx, over the past few years, livestock numbers have soared as more and more grazing has been made available through the sinking of wells and deep water boreholes throughout the Ouadi Rimé reserve. In the past, wells were few and far between and for most of the year, wildlife had unrivalled

access to tens of thousands of square kilometres of grazing. With the increase in people and traffic across the reserve, the incidence of bushfires has also risen (photo top right), consuming vast areas of annual grazing and destroying fire-sensitive species necessary for survival of wildlife during the long, hot dry season.

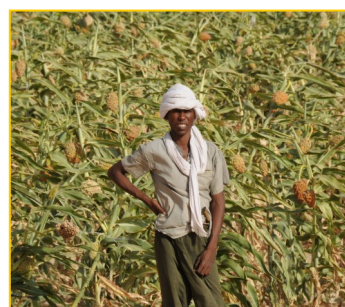
While awareness-raising amongst the local population and their leaders about the oryx reintroduction has been going on successfully for some time already, long-term and mutually beneficial solutions addressing cohabitation between wildlife and livestock need to be worked out. Unlike more sedentary species, desert ungulates, like the oryx, addax and dama gazelle, require access to vast areas to respond effectively to the highly unpredictable inter-annual fluctuations in rainfall and resulting pastures. Unless equally vast and well managed, protected areas are only a partial response and generally lack the flexibility in terms of boundaries and regulations required to accommodate wide-ranging desert species.

Perhaps the answer lies in more flexible temporary reserves and zonation based on consensus agreements reached through specially created consultative councils made up of local leaders, pastoralists and the wildlife and protected areas services.

One thing for sure, is that everyone is pleased by the results to date. Oryx are back in Chad. Many see their return as the welcome and much-awaited homecoming of a long lost child. Genetically-speaking, the vast majority of the world's remaining oryx, possibly some 20,000 in number, are descended from the 60-70 animals captured in Chad during the 1960s. One local leader told me he dreamed of the day he could show his grandchildren an animal he knew well as a boy and that figured so prominently in local lore and legend. He and many others now have that chance.

*John Newby*  
CEO

*Sahara Conservation Fund*







*Oryx at Fossil Rim (top) and Marwell (top right). Prepping the oryx (middle right) and loading supplies (bottom right) (Photos: Justin Chuven/EAD)*

## The journey begins

It's rare I have a smile on my face when I hear the alarm go off at 4:00 AM but this was no ordinary morning. Before I was even fully conscious I was thinking about the cargo plane that was waiting for us at the airport and the fact that the journey would culminate in the scimitar-horned oryx returning to Chad. After three years of planning and coordination, we were finally going to get hooves on the ground.

The team arrived at the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi's wildlife conservation facility just before daybreak to begin loading the pre-selected oryx into their crates. Although we were only a small core-group this morning we knew there was a much larger team of partners and passionate conservationists excited about this day and supporting us from across the world.

As I watched the 25 oryx run down the short alleyway into their crates, I couldn't help but think of the long journey that had already preceded it. Getting the cargo plane and determining where it would land and how many animals and supplies it could hold was just the latest of many prior arrangements. There was the formation of the partnerships with the government of Chad and the Sahara Conservation Fund that made up the backbone of the project. Then there

were the genetic assessment, agreements, myriad phone calls and e-mails, all required to source diverse animals from around the world. There was the vital work that places like Marwell Wildlife and Fossil Rim Wildlife Center undertook to ensure the project began with a source population of maximum genetic diversity, all leading up to this very day.

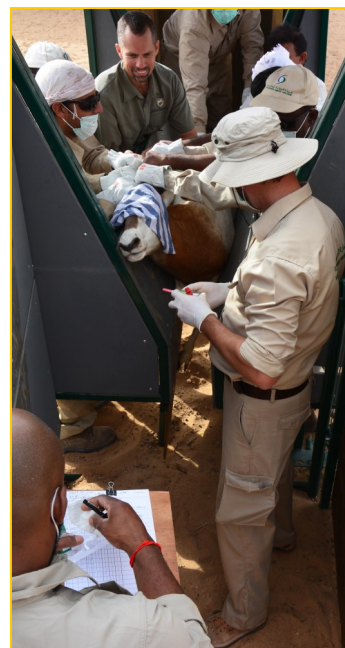
One of our goals is to build a "world herd" of oryx in the UAE derived from zoological institutions and private collections throughout the US and Europe, as well as different collections within the UAE. These animals would then be mixed with other screened and selected animals from EAD's own oryx herds; the whole representing the new founder population for the world herd. This would thereby ensure that a genetically diverse, healthy population, resilient enough to handle anything they may face in the wild, could be used for reintroduction.

The journey of the oryx from an ex-situ conservation facility in Abu Dhabi to their native habitat continued via four large flatbed trucks fully loaded with the crated animals and several months' worth of food and husbandry supplies. Though the plane was vast, it appeared much fuller than expected after only the crates were on board. I began to won-

der if my capacity calculations had been accurate when the pilot, in quite a panic, informed me we had to leave in 10 minutes or we wouldn't get permission to land in Chad. The problem was we had all the food, husbandry supplies and a vehicle still sitting on the ground next to the plane. There was no way we were flying live animals to one of the most remote places on Earth without these supplies. Everyone jumped into high gear and we gave it one final push, used some skills that could only be acquired while playing Tetris, and before we knew it we had the plane loaded and were being ushered up the ladder into the front of the plane while the crew closed the giant rear door and fired up the engines. One last check of the animals before taking off found them all calm and doing well.

We were up in the air within minutes at which time we all had a difficult time containing our joy. Although this was only the first leg of the journey and we still had about 20 hours before we would see the oryx come out of the crates, we couldn't help but feel like a huge milestone had been achieved and that celebrations were in order.

*Justin Chuven  
Environment Agency Abu Dhabi*



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

SCF is grateful to Steve Monfort, Justin Chuvén, Tim Wachter, Ayman Khalil, Thomas Rabeil and John Newby for their contributions to this issue.

*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](mailto: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](#).



## Addax survey in Niger

With the assistance of Niger's wildlife service, the Niger Fauna Corridor Project and staff from the Termit & Tin Toumma Project managed by Noé Conservation, SCF has just carried out an ambitious ground and aerial survey of key addax habitats in eastern Niger. The survey was made possible thanks to funding from the IUCN SOS Save Our Species conservation fund, Saint Louis Zoo, the European Union and UNDP-GEF, with precious logistical support from the Nigerien air force.

While over 3,200km of transects were being surveyed from the air force's C-208 Cessna Caravan, the ground team carried out an intensive search of over 700km of prime addax habitat and other areas where addax tracks have been seen during the past six months.

The plane used for the aerial survey was equipped with the latest IRS (Intelligence, Reconnaissance & Surveillance) technology, allowing it to spot wildlife with great accuracy through an infra-red captor and very high resolution camera, capable of identifying wildlife from the air. Unfortunately and despite the use of this sophisticated technology, not a single addax was seen from the air in over 18 hours of flying. On the ground, only one small group of three very flighty addax (photo) was spotted after following their tracks for over 10 km.

The absence of addax observations from the air provides further



evidence for a catastrophic decline in addax numbers since 2010, when oil exploration and associated illegal hunting carried out by the military started in Tin Toumma and neighbouring desert areas. At that time it was estimated the Niger addax population numbered in excess of 200 animals. Today, it is likely that Niger no longer has a viable addax population and that short of some really radical solutions, the species may well totally disappear within a year or two.

SCF is working very hard to insure this does not happen. More information on our response to this drastic situation will appear in the next issue of *Sandscript*.

Thomas Rabeil  
SCF Region Program Officer