

ISSUE 28 – FALL 2020

Sandscript

An eye on the conservation of the wildlife in the Sahara and in the Sahel



The biannual publication of the Sahara Conservation Fund,
only organization dedicated uniquely to the biodiversity
of the Sahara and the Sahel



SANDSCRIPT

ISSUE 28 – FALL 2020

Welcome to this 28th issue of Sandscript. In spite of complex health and safety conditions, SCF continues to carry out its work and field missions, taking all necessary precautions. This perseverance has been crowned with success. We are very pleased to share with you the news of the birth of a dama gazelle at the Oryx project site in Chad. Born of a couple of adults captured in the wild at the beginning of the year, the calf is in perfect health and revives the hope of seeing this species one day wandering the Sahel in great numbers.

In this issue, we also share news of two other antelope species SCF is working on – the scimitar-horned oryx and the addax. None of these achievements would have been possible without our dedicated field teams, local partners, experts, and especially our loyal and generous donors to whom we are eternally grateful.

In Niger, a one-week humanitarian assistance mission was carried out in association with our partners Education et Santé Sans Frontières (ESAFRO) and L'Afrique à Coeur in the Gadabeggi Biosphere Reserve. More than a hundred people were examined, treated, or vaccinated. We stress the vital importance of these missions in achieving our conservation goals by bringing much-needed healthcare to the people on whose support and understanding is essential. Regularly in contact with the people who live in remote

areas far away from cities and public services, we have long realized both the difficulty for them to access healthcare and the opportunity for us to do something of value about it. Health missions are not only a key element of SCF's approach, they also reflect the idea of restoring "healthy" ecosystems, including humans and wildlife in an equal and mutually beneficial way.

Although, the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Project (POROA) in Chad has experienced the impact of the Covid pandemic, the team is working hard on the development of the reserve's management plan, an essential tool in the quest for improved cohabitation between pastoralists wildlife. Detailed knowledge of the area is a crucial prerequisite. In this issue, the Project Leader gives an overview of the exciting work he is carrying out with his team and local partners in this vast area - which is, as we like to put it, more than twice the size of Belgium.

Finally, as our local project manager explains, our vulture awareness work is beginning to bear fruit in Niger. Good news for us all and hopefully also for the critically endangered vultures our work is targeting. We hope to see this important work translated into concrete action and results in the near future. In the meantime, stay safe and enjoy the read!



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Chad Oryx Reintroduction Project

LITTLE RAYS OF LIGHT

THE CHAD ORYX REINTRODUCTION PROJECT IS NOW IN ITS SECOND PHASE OF OPERATION, IN COLLABORATION WITH THE GOVERNMENT OF CHAD AND THE ENVIRONMENT AGENCY ABU DHABI. PHASE II OF THE PROJECT MAINTAINS STRONG FOCUS ON BUILDING THE ORYX POPULATION BUT ALSO ADDS NEW SAHELO-SAHARAN SPECIES TO THE MIX, INCLUDING THE CRITICALLY ENDANGERED ADDAX ANTELOPE (*ADDAX NASOMACULATUS*), DAMA GAZELLE (*NANGER DAMA*), AND NORTH AFRICAN OSTRICH (*STRUTHIO CAMELUS CAMELUS*). ALTHOUGH WE FACED BIG CHALLENGES IN 2020, SCF IS HAPPY TO REPORT ON SOME VERY POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS.

Trying to save critically endangered species from extinction is never easy and the undertaking is often punctuated by long periods of doubt, dismay and abject frustration. It's a slow, slow process, where progress is rarely smooth and often, like in a game of snakes and ladders, marked by one step forward and two steps back.

Once in a while, though, something happens that fans the flame of hope, rekindles optimism, boosts motivation and invigorates the soul. The successful capture of wild dama gazelles in January 2020 was one such moment. And although two animals were subsequently lost – remember snakes and ladders – the remaining male and female have survived and in August they produced their first, staggeringly beautiful sandy-coloured calf. She, for it's a female, is truly a little ray of light.

Against the sobering backdrop of humanity brought to its collective knees by the Covid-19 pandemic, hope, too, has been rekindled for the addax. With only a few dozen left in the most inaccessible recesses of Niger's Tin Toumma desert, a recent survey by Noé and the local Wildlife Service spotted a few wild addax, including a tiny calf. The little creature had been tucked away by its mother behind a tussock of vegetation while she grazed nearby.

In Chad, the reintroduced scimitar-horned oryx population continues to grow and to explore its grassy domain. Aided by a fruitful wet season, a few oryx for the very first time in decades forayed right up to the desert's edge, over 250 km as the crow flies from their release site. Since the initial release in 2016, the oryx population has steadily grown to almost 350 animals. And although there have been setbacks from bushfires and especially livestock-borne diseases, the dynamic is overwhelmingly positive. There have been an estimated 200 calves born in the wild since 2016, with something like a 65% survival rate. This is outstanding and rivals the performance of captive herds living under much more controlled conditions.

Our little dama gazelle calf is now a sturdy four-month-old. Called "Shaikha", she has lost her sandy pelage and now sports typical dama colours of rich chestnut and white. She has grown considerably and if all goes well should be joined in the coming months by a sibling.

Birth of new life is a time for celebration and hope. Or as one Donald J. Trump once said "The old saying that "success breeds success" has something to it. It's that feeling of confidence that can banish negativity and procrastination and get you going the right way." Well, he was certainly right about that. The recent births have galvanized us all. Little do those baby oryx, addax and dama gazelles realise the hope they are kindling in us all and the role they are playing in the survival of their respective species.

BY

John Newby

SENIOR ADVISER

SAHARA CONSERVATION FUND

Photos © Marc Dethier



GOING TO THE WELL. These photos are all emblematic of the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve, with regard to the landscape, water sources that are critically important for nomadic people and their livestock, or the vibrant colors.

Project Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim (POROA)

SAHARA, SAHEL, & OUADI

THE 4-YEAR POROA PROJECT IS PART OF THE "CONSERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY AND FRAGILE ECOSYSTEMS IN CENTRAL AFRICA" ("ECOFAC") PROGRAM FINANCED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION THROUGH THE 11TH EUROPEAN DEVELOPMENT FUND. THROUGH THIS UNIQUE SUPPORT, THE GREAT VALUE OF THE OUADI RIMÉ-OUADI ACHIM RESERVE IS BEING INCREASINGLY RECOGNIZED. IN EARLY 2020, HENRY BAILEY REPLACED FORMER PROJECT LEADER ANNABELLE HONOREZ. POROA IS NOW COMING TO THE END OF ITS SECOND YEAR AND THE TEAM ARE MAKING STEADFAST PROGRESS TOWARDS A MAJOR GOAL: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE RESERVE.

Ignoring the thousands of migrating storks standing to one side the nomad gently walked his horse into the water up to his waist. Staying cool from the midday sun a woman draped in colorful shawls with braided hair was already enjoying the pause on their long migration south, only her shoulders and head showing above the water. Below the dunes of Goz al Fahal the camels of the Walad Turk, the migrating storks and the Zakhawa Arabs bathing in the pool barely looked up as the three cars approached and spilled out their load of people brandishing different colored Runbos - handheld data recording devices - paper forms, folders and clicking their POROA pens.

This group included Michael, a geography student specialising in Geographic Information Systems at Ati University neighboring the reserve. He is striving to map all the seasonal waterpoints and fields within the 77,800km squared reserve - two times the size of Belgium. Another student, Djimmé, working for a PhD in anthropology from the University of N'djamena, and accompanied by his Professor Dr. Gondue Ladiba, approached a man on horseback and greeted him from the water's edge in hopes of carrying out his first anthropological study on this tour spanning several months.

Two other fresh faces, the new community liaison officers of POROA Zakaria and Ousman, were eager to use their new handsets and take their part in discovery under the guidance of Eric the Information manager, who during the Covid months had been remotely trained in SMART by Zoological Society of London. Rather than counting wildlife they were using the spacial monitoring application in a new and unorthodox way - to carry out socio-economic studies of the Reserve; charting routes, human activities, schools, key personalities, and more. Meantime Abdel-Kerim, SCF's awareness and education officer, moved amongst the people, talking, gleaning the history

Photos: Left page, left photo © Henry Bailey ; Left page, right photo © John Newby. Above, left photo © John Newby ; Above, on top © Henry Bailey. Below © John Newby.

of disappeared trees, grasses, wildlife; and taking the opportunity to explain POROA's goals and approaches.

Sleeping under the stars, getting stung by scorpions, digging out cars from the walking sands, uncovering a cache of forty year old broken ostrich eggs hidden in the sand, this team experienced a picture of the reserve like no other; trade routes and disappeared forests, stories of conflicts and control, rain and fire, the hopes and dreams of a myriad of peoples, the threads of life in the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve.

This now experienced field team, with the help of other experts, will weave these experiences into maps, tables

BY
Henry Bailey
POROA LEADER

SAHARA CONSERVATION FUND

and reports to visualise for others a vision of the future. A management plan and an environmental education plan and training will create new laws to govern, guide, and communicate to the peoples of the reserve the need and the means to protect these fragile and inextricably exquisite colors of nature: human, wildlife and landscape. Yet, a plan is not a realisation and In the field over the coming months the youth of the reserve will be sweating and striving. Some will build and some will compete to be selected as one of the few forty forest guards who will protect this wondrous tapestry of Sahara, Sahel and Ouadi.



MAKING HEALTH A PRIORITY. Though challenging in terms of administrative constraints and logistics, the health missions conducted by SCF and ESAFRO are greatly appreciated by the communities in remote areas. With relatively modest resources, these missions provide primary health care and vaccinations to hundreds of people.

Healthcare activities

A Second Health Mission in the Gadabeji Biosphere Reserve, Niger

IN EARLY NOVEMBER 2020 SCF, IN PARTNERSHIP WITH ESFARO, COMPLETED A MEDICAL ASSISTANCE MISSION TARGETING PASTORALISTS LIVING AROUND THE GADABEJI BIOSPHERE RESERVE. THIS EXERCISE BUILT UPON THE PREVIOUS HEALTH MISSIONS IN THIS AREA UNDERTAKEN IN DECEMBER 2018 AND MARCH 2019. THROUGH ALL THESE MISSIONS SCF HAS ESTABLISHED STRONG CONNECTIONS WITH THE LOCAL FULANI AND TUAREG POPULATIONS, ESPECIALLY DURING THE TRANSLOCATION OF WEST AFRICAN GIRAFFES TO THE GADABEJI BIOSPHERE RESERVE.

In addition to the SCF team members responsible for the overall logistics of the mission, the medical team was composed of two nurses, Rabi, from the French NGO Education et Santé Sans Frontières (ESAFRO) and Chamsoudine, from the Gadabeji area itself. The team was completed by a local guide, Hamed, to assist with navigation over the vast and roadless grassland. Anne Vilaseca, the ESAFRO doctor who usually takes part in these missions, participated remotely in both the planning and post-field phases. For Anne and many others like her, this year's health and security issues made travel particularly complicated.

The SCF and ESAFRO teams met up in the provincial capital of Maradi before heading to Gadabeji and the reserve's entrance. The first task was to meet with the

members of the reserve's Protected Areas Management Unit, including its conservator and wildlife protection officers. The meeting allowed the SCF-ESAFRO team to lay out its objectives and agree on the most useful itinerary. One of the main challenges of the zone, like many others in which SCF works, is its isolation and almost total lack of basic infrastructure. This deprives the locals of access to even basic education and healthcare, reasons behind our desire to help these people as best we can.

The prime objective of the Gadabeji healthcare mission is to provide first-aid to the mainly nomadic population inhabiting the zone, especially those furthest from rural dispensaries. The Gadabedji nurse had drawn up a list of villages and camps that needed medical assistance. The idea is not to compete with the local services but to

CHANGING BEHAVIORS. The role of the medical team is not limited to providing drugs, treating illnesses, or dispensing vaccinations. Rabi and Chamsoudine did a wonderful job in taking the time to sensitize their patients on the importance of hygiene and simply taking care of themselves despite complex living conditions. They constantly reminded them of ESAFRO's motto 'be your own doctor'.

complement their work. Furthermore, the village chiefs are always consulted and they in turn support the operation by notifying the surrounding camps.

During the mission, 129 people, the majority of them women and children, were examined. The medical care offered was of a general nature to treat illnesses such as malaria, abdominal or joint pains, sight, skin and gynecological issues. Serious cases were referred to the medical centers of Gadabeji or Dakoro as a matter of urgency. Vaccinations to prevent meningitis, measles and polio were also administered to children under 16 months old. As always, the nurses take the time to discuss with the patients and to sensitize them to the most important hygiene and sanitary routines.

In each village, SCF also discusses the reserve's biodiversity with the local population. We explain that the health missions are part of a broader, integrated development approach, which also includes the fight against poaching and the conservation of species. They are reminded these activities are impossible without their agreement and support. Their help is instrumental to stopping poaching and the illegal felling of trees. Although the awareness raising is informal and without precise indicators, it appears to meet with success. Everyone interviewed was informed about the recent reintroduction of giraffes into the reserve and of future plans to do the same with ostriches. The healthcare missions are a great example of mutual assistance and the search for win-win situations.

BY
Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou
PROJECT OFFICER IN NIGER

Photos © Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou

SAHARA CONSERVATION FUND



Photo © Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou

A CHALLENGING BUT REWARDING PROJECT. These photos were all taken by our Niger team on the ostrich site, in Kellé. Struggling to secure its ostrich populations, Niger entrusted SCF with the management of the site in 2011. Thanks to well-established partnerships with the local private owners and the support of our international financial and technical partners, there has been a tremendous improvement of the infrastructure, the birds' diet, care, and husbandry over the past decade, that has enabled these birds to be able to reproduce in captivity through natural and artificial incubation.



Photo © Cloé Pourchier



Photos above © Maimounatou Ibrahim Mamadou



ARTICLE BY
John Watkin
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

SAHARA CONSERVATION FUND

North African ostrich recovery project

Next Steps for North African Ostrich

AS A REMINDER, THE GOAL OF THE NORTH AFRICAN OSTRICH RECOVERY PROJECT IS TO PRODUCE ENOUGH BIRDS AT ITS BREEDING FACILITY IN KELLÉ, NIGER, TO BEGIN RETURNING SMALL NUMBERS OF OSTRICH SAFELY TO THE WILD. AS ONE OF SCF'S FIRST CONSERVATION PROJECTS UNDERTAKEN IN THE SAHARA-SAHEL REGION, IT IS FULLY PART OF THE OUR DNA, BUT ALSO ONE OF ITS MOST CHALLENGING PROJECTS. HOWEVER, WITH THE ORYX PROJECT IN CHAD ENTERING ITS SECOND PHASE AND WELCOMING NEW ANIMALS INCLUDING THE NORTH AFRICAN OSTRICH, SCF IS NOW EXTREMELY WELL-PLACED TO CAPITALIZE ON LESSONS LEARNT AND BEGIN THE REINTRODUCTION OF THE SPECIES. OUR NIGERIEN PARTNERS FROM THE GADABEJI BIOSPHERE RESERVE ARE ABOUT TO RECEIVE TRAINING AND A FIRST BATCH OF OSTRICH CHICKS TO BE EVENTUALLY RELEASED IN THE RESERVE ONCE GROWN UP. WE ARE FINALLY GETTING THERE.

Despite the North African Ostrich being the world's largest bird, one that is particularly well adapted to arid conditions, the eggs and especially the young chicks are extremely fragile and sensitive to diet. Rearing the birds by both captive breeding and artificial incubation has taken the SCF team a considerable amount of time, energy and heartache. Many times over the past 10 years the team in Niger, led by the tireless efforts of Maimounatou Ibrahim Mamadou, has had to overcome major setbacks with eggs failing to develop, chicks not hatching, and young chicks failing to survive the first few days or weeks. Despite these hindrances and in the spirit of research, nothing is wasted if we can learn from the experience.

And learn we have. With the assistance of many partners*, SCF has developed a suitable diet from locally-sourced ingredients that provides the correct balance of energy, vitamins and minerals vital for the optimum development of the chicks' feet and legs. It is also safer for all concerned to translocate the chicks when they are less than three-months old, raising them in suitable enclosures near the site where they are to be released when they are able to defend themselves - approximately 18-months old.

The teams in the field are also mindful of trying to diminish the association of people with food and water, reducing contact over time. In so doing, it is hoped that the released individuals will have a healthy disregard for people they encounter in the landscape.

Taking all these lessons together, SCF is on the cusp of shifting from a captive breeding project to undertaking the reintroduction of this enigmatic species. Already there are 11 ten-month old individuals in the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve in Chad. These will be released in 2021. In Niger, through SCF's collaboration with the government, we hope to translocate a first batch of North African ostrich chicks to Gadabegi Biosphere Reserve, where they will be raised and eventually released. This will restore a species that has not been seen in this landscape in over 50 years.

*SCF would like to acknowledge all our partners who have assisted in building the North African ostrich program, including the many donors to the AZA Ratite TAG Adopt-an-Ostrich campaign, Disney Conservation Fund, NGO CERNK, Niger Wildlife Service, Saint Louis Zoo, San Diego Zoo Global, Smithsonian National Zoo, and the Solar Energy Team of the Wildlife Conservation Network. Thank you all.



TALKING ABOUT VULTURES. On the left page and below photo, Souleymane, who is in charge of the sensitization work on the markets of Zinder, Maradi, and their area, is sharing information on the Egyptian vulture and showing brochures on the different vulture species. Mourtala, chief of the traditional medicine practitioners of Niger's Zinder region sits right in the middle of the photo opposite, dressed in red.

The Egyptian Vulture New LIFE project is funded by the European Union and initiated as an innovative collaboration between several partners including the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds – BSPB / BirdLife Bulgaria.

Photos © Souleymane Dila



ARTICLE BY
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Egyptian vulture New LIFE project

Building Local Capacity to Combat Illegal Logging and Vulture Trafficking in Niger

RAISING AWARENESS IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ACTIVITIES OF OUR TEAM IN NIGER, ESPECIALLY AS PART OF THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE NEW LIFE PROJECT. AFTER HAVING DEDICATED MANY EFFORTS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PROJECT TO UNDERSTAND WHAT CAUSED THE VULTURE POPULATIONS' DECLINE IN NIGER, THEY KNEW THEY HAD TO WORK CLOSELY WITH SOME OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL GROUPS IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY. THE TRADITIONAL MEDICINE PRACTITIONERS ARE AMONGST THESE.

'We are proud to think that those who come after us will be able to find vultures in Zinder because of our struggle.' These are the words of Mourtala, chief of the traditional medicine practitioners of Niger's Zinder region.

The demand for traditional medicine is extremely high with an estimate that 80 percent of the population in Africa turn to traditional medical practitioners as a first line in treatment of ailments and maladies. Investigations conducted by our teams in Niger since 2019 have shown that illegal logging and trafficking of vultures are the main conservation threats encountered in the region. These threats are fueled by the local and regional relationship that exists between hunters supplying the traditional medicine practitioners, who in turn sell the vulture parts to consumers. Following this observation, SCF initiated an intense public awareness

campaign in June 2020, with the objective of building local capacity to combat illegal killing of vultures and trafficking of their body parts. The main actors in these practices, starting with those whom Mourtala calls "our people" - traditional medicine practitioners and hunters - were involved in this work. As a reminder, our awareness-raising activities are carried out in the framework of the EU-funded Egyptian Vulture New LIFE project. The groundbreaking idea here is to incentivize people to take measures themselves to protect vultures. First, they must assess and understand better the consequences of their actions on the birds, and then try to identify alternatives, particularly plant-based ones, for the maintenance of their traditional practices. At the same time, efforts are made to develop their interest in these birds by not only sharing information on their ecological role but teaching them how to recognize

the different species of vultures and their particularities.

We started these activities in Niger's second largest city, Zinder. Mourtala's involvement was crucial in getting the messages across. As a leader, he was particularly satisfied with our support in helping him create the conditions for vulture protection in his region. Many meetings were organized in the various markets of the city and its surroundings. Markets are the main gathering and selling places for traditional practitioners. Communication materials, such as brochures on the main species of vulture and their threats, and T-shirts, were produced to facilitate the transmission of messages.

Participants generally showed very positive attitudes and expressed their willingness to get involved. As their leader kept reminding them, vultures are part of their heritage. To date, Mourtala estimates that almost all the traditional practitioners in and around the city of Zinder,

i.e., more than 400 people, have been reached. He says they are themselves in the process of spreading the word and changing attitudes. Similar work has been done with hunters, as well as in the Maradi region further west. In total, hundreds of key actors in about ten different localities have been involved and are now spreading the word.

In order to strengthen the impact of these activities, create synergy, and ensure effective and regular follow-up, SCF collaborates with the authorities at the local level but also at the level of the wildlife authorities. Awareness-raising meetings and discussions with forest rangers and the various stakeholders related to the hunting and use of vultures have been organized. These activities have led to a better understanding of the conservation status of vulture populations, of the threats they face, and above all of the actions required to save these species.



How you can help

Until very recently, the silent crisis of extinction in the Sahara and the Sahel has been largely overlooked and underfunded by the international conservation community and aid agencies around the world. In 2004, a small group of committed individuals and institutions launched the Sahara Conservation Fund (SCF) in response to an urgent call to action: "If not us, then who will speak for Saharan wildlife?"

SCF is now leading a rapidly growing Sahelo-Saharan wildlife conservation movement to protect and restore a unique and exquisitely adapted assemblage of species, including

addax, scimitar-horned oryx, Saharan cheetah, North African ostrich and dama gazelles.

As a fully registered NGO in the U.S and France, SCF relies on donations, grants and other funding from individuals, corporations and organizations to help drive its mission and to give voice to the Sahara and the plight of its wildlife.

We invite you to add your voice to the growing chorus calling for the protection and restoration of Sahelo-Saharan wildlife through your support of SCF.

TO DONATE TO SCF JUST SCAN THE QR CODE OR VISIT :

WWW.SAHARA CONSERVATION.ORG/DONATE



www.saharacconservation.org | comms@saharacconservation.org

If you would like to know more about our work and how to contribute to our projects, please do not hesitate to contact us. We would love to hear from you!

Special thanks go to John Newby for his diligent review and editing work on Sandscript.

SCF is grateful to John Newby, John Watkin, Henry Bailey, Cloé Pourchier, Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou, Maimounatou Ibrahim Mamadou, Marc Dethier, Calbe Ngaba for their photos and contributions to this issue. Sandscript is edited internally by SCF. You can contact comms@saharacconservation.org for any comments and feedback (contact informations above). We also would like to thank the growing chorus of supporters that gives us the precious support that makes our projects and their achievements so tangible.

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 Sahara Conservation Fund

SAND SCRIPT

The biannual publication of the Sahara Conservation Fund

Launched in 2007, Sandscript has been bringing you news of the Sahara Conservation Fund and its projects for over a decade.

Since its inception, Sandscript articles have been written by the SCF team, their collaborators, and all those who, through their fieldwork, make the conservation of biodiversity a reality. Its primary purpose is to inform the public of our conservation activities in the Sahara and Sahel, to share relevant news items, but also to sensitize the reader to the beauty and richness of this region of the world. Over the years, Sandscript has gone beyond a simple informative role to provide original perspectives on poorly-known areas of Africa and their amazingly diverse, unique and threatened wildlife. It is thanks to its narrative style and its beautiful photos that the publication invites the reader, twice a year, to delve into this universe. Taking readers behind the scenes, Sandscript creates a new perspective on the fauna and flora of the Sahara and the Sahel and the efforts undertaken to ensure its survival.

We are sincerely grateful to all those who have helped make Sandscript one of the first and finest sources of information on the unique but neglected wildlife of the Sahara and the Sahel.

To accompany and complement Sandscript with brief news items, an e-newsletter is also available. Subscribe online at www.saharaconservation.org.



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.

