

ISSUE 24 - FALL 2018

Sandscript

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



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



What's Inside SAND SCRIPT

ISSUE 24 - FALL 2018

The second half of 2018 saw some major achievements for the conservation of the world's tallest animal: the giraffe. In Niger, eight West African giraffes were reintroduced to the Gadabegi Biosphere Reserve. SCF was extremely pleased to participate in this initiative and work alongside the Giraffe Conservation Foundation on what was later called «Operation Sahel Giraffe».

Over the years, SCF has gained unique knowledge and experience of the Sahel and Sahara, allowing it to engage in successful partnerships and network with the stakeholders critical to the success of species conservation and especially reintroductions.

In Chad, SCF is promoting a pragmatic, integrated approach with all land-users to ensure the long-term success of the oryx reintroduction project. The development of effective natural re-

source-sharing models is crucial to satisfy the interests of both wildlife and humans.

The oryx reintroduction site also hosts a small but vitally important population of dama gazelles. In this issue, SCF's John Newby shares news and views on this critically endangered species.

SCF is conducting fieldwork this winter to increase knowledge on the Egyptian vulture and through this facilitate its conservation.

Read more for an overview of the activities planned and stay tuned for some exciting news and results!

Cover photo © Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou

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Sandscript 24 focuses on our activities in Chad and Niger, with articles on the translocation of West African giraffes, our oryx reintroduction site management approach, dama gazelles, and Egyptian vultures. Here's wishing you a pleasant read!

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SUNSET IN THE RESERVE. The Gadabeji Biosphere Reserve is known to be suitable habitat for the West African giraffe; not so long ago, the species lived in the area. Severe drought in the 1970's was the main reason they disappeared. Photo © Kateřina Gašparova

West African Giraffe

Operation Sahel Giraffe: Back To Gadabeji Biosphere Reserve!

BY **Thomas Rabeil**
CONSERVATION BIOLOGIST
SCF SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER

WITH WARMEST THANKS TO JULIAN FENNESSY, ABDOUL RAZACK MOUSSA ZABEIROU, CLOÉ POURCHIER, ALL THE TEAM INVOLVED IN THIS OPERATION AND EVERYONE WHO SUPPORTED IT.

Following a year of meticulous planning, Operation Sahel Giraffe started in earnest in early November. Eight animals were successfully captured from the main giraffe population in Niger, some sixty kilometres south-east of Niger's capital city, Niamey. In preparation for the journey to their new home in the Gadabeji Biosphere Reserve, the giraffe were held in a spacious and shady holding pen for three weeks. The 800-kilometre overland journey to Gadabeji was accomplished without a hitch in 48 hours, with trucks carrying four giraffes each. SCF's Thomas Rabeil shares some personal reflections on the journey:

It's a long and exhausting journey for a giraffe: over 800 kilometres by road, day and night, across Niger. Not to mention the terrible 30-kilometre laterite road followed by 40 kilometres of sand track with a pretty high density of trees that forces the convoy to move at a very low speeds when getting close to the reserve. The truck's movements do not seem to bother the giraffes very much. They look incredibly peaceful. As if they could already see the journey's end.

The team is highly focussed on one main objective: ensuring the safety of the giraffes. No obstacle must stand in its way. The sun is already setting and daylight is going fast, making it even more difficult to see what's going on and inciting the drivers to reduce their speed even more. They sometimes have to stop and get out of the vehicles to check and make sure no branch can hurt the giraffes when driving under trees. Whenever possible, the whole convoy avoids the most wooded places with a slight detour. Stops are also necessary to allow the giraffes to rest and the team to get some precious minutes of sleep.



LOCAL COMMUNITIES SUPPORT. Nomads and villagers welcome the giraffes with shouts of joy near the entrance to the reserve.

ONE LAST MANOEUVRE. Driving slowly and carefully can be tricky and exhausting over a long period of time. But even to the very last moment, the drivers maintained amazing focus on their mission!



The rising sun provides both welcome light and relief. The pre-release boma for the giraffes will be in sight in about an hour. One last stop to meet with the local authorities welcoming the convoy - hearty handshakes are shared all-round. We are finally entering the reserve.

Such a special convoy does not go unnoticed. All kind of people in the surrounding villages suddenly realize the importance of what is happening. Children stop playing to stare at the animals' heads that stick out of the top of the truck, completely amazed and stunned. Women clap their hands and shout for joy. Even the old villagers drinking tea outside their homes or the nomads riding their camels pause for a minute to look at this unusual procession. Some of them smile gently. The look on their faces betrays some dusty memory of animals they used to

see when wandering in the bush with their cattle.

Finally, the truck begins to manoeuvre at the entrance of the fence. Everyone has already jumped out of the cars ready to open the truck's tailgate. Given the excellent condition of the giraffes, it is decided the boma will remain open. A few minutes later, the magnificent creatures carefully leave the truck, then the boma. The sounds of the first hesitant steps of the giraffes in the Gadabeji Biosphere Reserve have replaced the agitation of the humans who are now holding their breath. Emotion is filling the air as the animals move slowly away. The intense fatigue of the journey seems to have vanished.

It's done. After an absence of almost 50 years, the West African giraffe has been safely reintroduced to Gadabeji.



NEVER LOOK BACK? Giraffes go out of the boma then pause for a while before heading to the wild. Photos © Thomas Rabeil



MOVING IS LIVING. In the deserts more than anywhere else on earth, movement means life. Photo © Thomas Rabeil

Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Wildlife Reserve

Aridlands, Pastoralists And Conservation

SCF cannot stress enough the fact that deserts are full of life, ranging from the numerous human communities to the most endangered antelopes on earth. Life depends on sparse resources and faces many natural constraints. Mobility is a key strategy of all desert inhabitants, essential to deal with unpredictable rainfall and grazing. SCF believes that successful conservation depends on finding win-win solutions to ensure an equitable sharing of water and pasture between human beings and wildlife.

In the world's northern hemisphere, aridlands stretch from the Atlantic coast in West Africa across the Sahara and Sahel, then through the Arabian Peninsula, across Iran and parts of central Asia, and into Mongolia and China. This is a significant proportion of the earth's terrestrial surface.

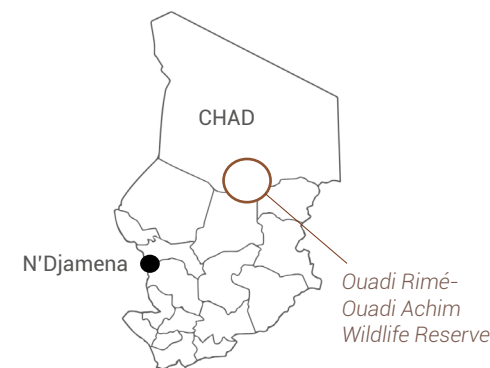
In this vast area, the raising of livestock, whether sheep, goats, cattle, camels, or yaks, is probably the most common occupation. In general, the more unpredictable or extreme the climatic conditions, the more mobile pastoralists must be to make ends meet. They are often living at the margins of viability, experiencing good times after rain when the grass is high and milk plentiful, but alternating with periods of great hardship and often food shortage.

It is in this context that SCF works to protect and conserve the valuable wild plants and animals of the aridlands of the Sahel and

Sahara. Knowing that effective conservation must involve the people and consideration of their needs, aridlands do offer great opportunities because in general there is plenty of space for wild species and pastoralists, with both depending mutually on productive rangelands for their survival.

However, this is a somewhat rosy and idealistic view of the situation on the ground in places like Chad, where SCF has its flagship project for the reintroduction of the scimitar-horned oryx.

Despite excellent relationships between the project and the area's pastoralists, there are ecological and social pressures on the pastoralists and their way of life. Livestock numbers are increasing rapidly, putting a severe strain on the pastoral way of life, provoking the loss of productive habitats and increasing competition with wildlife.



More livestock inevitably leads to more wells and the loss of seasonal grasslands hitherto out of reach of people.

SCF is in a very privileged and challenging position in the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Wildlife Reserve but working with pastoralists on such issues is critical to SCF in the pursuit of its Mission. This means ensuring the growing population of scimitar-horned oryx thrives, and there are accompanying benefits for the remnant dama gazelle population. If this can be done, then the prospects of returning the addax, releasing more dama and reintroducing ostriches is an increasingly attractive and feasible prospect. The Ouadi Rime / Ouadi Achim Wildlife Reserve can then become a model of effective resource-sharing between different interests in an arid environment. Who could wish for more?



BIG HERDS ARE A BIG DEAL.

More livestock means more competition for the resources in areas where they are already limited. As a consequence, no sustainable undertaking in Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim can happen without including the pastoralists in the decision-making process. Taking care of their cattle since a very young age, the reserve is above all their own heritage.

Photo © John Newby

NEXT DOOR NEIGHBORS.

About two hundred reintroduced scimitar-horned oryx wander the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Wildlife Reserve in search of pasture and water every day. Many pastoralists witness their forests of horns on a regular basis and have always provided great help to the team's project. Their goodwill is the evidence - if it was needed - that the local communities are very happy with their new neighbors.

Photo © John Newby



THE GRACEFUL QUEEN OF THE DESERT. These Dama gazelles is amongst the less than a hundred animals living in the wild. Photo © Tim Wachter

Dama Gazelle Conservation

Thinking Outside The Box

Saving the dama gazelle is currently one of the biggest conservation challenges around. A few tiny populations still remain in the wild in Niger and Chad. Specialists now discuss the feasibility of what can be qualified - given the dire situation - as “rescue operations”. The conservation community is united and SCF will be there leading action in the field.

The dama gazelle is one the most magnificent, the most graceful but, unfortunately, also one of the most threatened species on earth. Standing over a metre tall at the shoulder and weighing in at around 40 kilograms, the dama is the largest of all gazelles. The sad reality is that this superb creature may well be extinct in the wild within the next few years if efforts are not significantly increased to counter its decline.

It was with solutions in mind that specialists from six dama gazelle range states met together with several international experts under the auspices and generous hospitality of the Al Ain Zoo in December. Facilitated by David Mallon, co-chair of IUCN’s Antelope Specialist Group, and Helen Senn, geneticist with the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, the participants reviewed the current situation and discussed measures to reverse the dama gazelle’s alarming decline.

As far as is known, there are almost certainly less than a hundred damas left in the wild, distributed between four main populations, two in Niger and two in Chad. No single population has more than 40 animals and the smallest, the one lying along the borderlands between Chad and Niger, probably numbers less than a dozen. This “Manga” population is not only extremely vulnerable, lying as it does outside of any protected area, but is also the most genetically-diverse known to date.

WHERE THERE’S LIFE THERE’S HOPE. This is one of the latest photos taken by a camera trap placed by SCF’s Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou in the Air & Ténéré National Nature Reserve (northern Niger). These difficult to access rocky plateaus are not the usual habitat of dama gazelles but it is where they can find refuge from disturbance and growing human presence. This tiny population is very isolated but relatively safe from threats.



Although there may be as many as three thousand dama gazelles in captivity across the globe, the majority of these derive from a very limited number of founder animals. On the basis of genetic analyses carried out by Dr Senn and her colleagues, the diversity of the few remaining wild animals is significantly more diverse than the entire population of captive specimens. And while it is clear that efforts must be increased to protect dama gazelles in the wild, serious consideration has to be given to reinforcing the size of these populations with animals bred in captivity. This way, the genetic and behavioral capital that currently exists in the wild animals can be saved and multiplied before it is lost forever.

For the Manga animals, far from protection in an area prone to lawlessness and insecurity, only radical and immediate action can save them. One proposal seriously discussed in Al Ain was the possibility of capturing as many of the remaining wild

dama gazelles as possible and moving them to safety in other sites in Chad, where they can be bred in captivity. An exercise like this will call for enormous care and the deployment of a top-notch team and logistical support. It’s risky business but at this stage anything less is probably insufficient.

With relatively little recent news to share on most of the dama gazelle populations, the Al Ain group was pleased to learn from Chad’s representatives that the gazelle population in the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Wildlife Reserve appears to be stable, with the appearance this past year of several young calves. With good protection and access to optimal habitat, the chances are dama gazelles will survive but it’s going to take all the conservation skills and tools we have to guarantee this outcome.

COLLATERAL BENEFIT. The Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Wildlife Reserve in Chad has seen its dama gazelle population remain stable over the last few years. Thanks to the oryx reintroduction project, the area is indeed better protected. Photo © John Newby



BY **John Newby**
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FIELDWORK AND PHOTOS BY **T. Rabeil, T. Wachter, A. R. Moussa Zabeirou, J. Newby.**



HAVE A DRINK? "First-come, first-served", seems to be the rule for these three ostrich females and one male on their way to the freshly re-filled water tank.

THEY ARE THE FUTURE. These two chicks have been brought to SCF's captive-breeding center from Mainé - a neighbouring breeding center - to improve the genetic diversity of the ostrich population on site. A very important success criteria for future reintroduced birds.

North African Ostrich Recovery

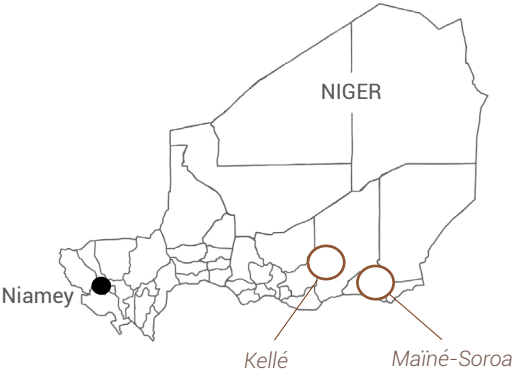
Hatches, Matches, And Dispatches

Over the past decade, SCF and its partners have significantly improved the infrastructure, the food, the captive-breeding, the handling and the husbandry of Niger's remaining North African ostriches, paving the way for the program's long-term goal of reintroducing this magnificent bird back into the wild.

Major progress has been achieved lately towards our objective of re-turning North African ostriches back into the wild in Niger. Our captive population of ostrich in Kellé is growing, with the birth of three baby ostriches this past fall. For now, the chicks are still in the enclosure with their parents, under the close watch of the keepers and Maimounatou, our Nigerien site manager. In November, births were also recorded at the neighbouring site of Mainé, where six eggs hatched from a clutch of nine.

To keep building and diversifying the ostrich population held at Kellé, two chicks were moved from Mainé when they were about one week old. Translocating them at this early stage allows the reduction of the transportation risks and enables close monitoring by staff in Kellé. With no protection from their parents, the chicks are housed in a closed facility before being integrated with the main group. As the resident adult ostriches are already taking care of their own chicks, they are expected to accept the new arrivals without fuss.

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WELL ARRIVED. These five custom-built and equipped containers were made possible in large part by support from the Wildlife Conservation Network and Stephen Gold, a San Francisco-based solar energy fan who wants to help with conservation. He found that many conservationists were using either diesel generators or antiquated solar systems that were inadequate for their needs.

IN GOOD HANDS. The little newcomers have no protection from their parents anymore and would be particularly exposed to predators. They have been placed in a closed shed until they become confident enough to join their adoptive parents outside.

Translocating them at this early stage allows the reduction of the transportation risks and enables close monitoring by staff in Kellé. With no protection from their parents, the chicks are housed in a closed facility before being integrated with the main group. As the resident adult ostriches are already taking care of their own chicks, they are expected to accept the new arrivals without fuss. Juvenile birds transferred from a third site at Diffa earlier in the year are also in good shape and seem to adapted well to their new environment. One of the young birds has already been identified as a male. Unfortunately, one of the chicks died in late September of as yet unknown causes.

To improve the security and protection of the Kellé site, a perimeter firebreak is under construction, as well as the setting of a system

to keep the jackals away from the pens. This wily and common predator is one of the main threats to young ostriches.

After a long sea journey from California, we are really pleased to announce the arrival on site in Kellé of the five custom-built containers destined to serve as a solar-powered ostrich egg incubation and hatchery unit. In February, three experts from the States will come to set up the solar array and associated circuitry and hardware. They will also train project staff in facility use and maintenance. Along with the containers, incubator and hatchery we will also install a pump to bring water from a nearby well and a parabolic antenna for communications and Internet reception.

We're getting there!



Photo © Clark Andres

Egyptian Vulture Conservation

Spending The Winter In Niger

The Egyptian Vulture is facing a worldwide decline in numbers and the Balkans have not been spared. From the hundreds of pairs historically present on the peninsula, only some 70 pairs remain. The population is thought to have declined by 7% a year for the past 30 years. This rapid decline is difficult to halt as it is due to a complex combination of factors. Threats are multiple and differ from one region to another, putting pressure on the vultures on their breeding ground as well as along their migration routes. Within the framework of the Egyptian Vulture LIFE project, SCF is collecting data, mainly in Niger, to help save this endangered species.

Running a marathon, raising awareness in schools, releasing captive-bred birds, tackling bird poisoning... Our European colleagues from the Egyptian Vulture Life project had a very busy summer!

Some of these Egyptian Vultures are now back in Niger after having spent six months in Europe, in search of some heat again. It's now the turn of the SCF team in Niger to get ready for some intense activity in the field. The team is already hoping for a lot of sightings and photos.

During the winter, SCF will monitor the birds and investigate the main threats to them. Collecting useful and comprehensive data will improve the chances for effective conservation.



OBSERVING THE NESTS. Being a long-distance migratory bird, Egyptian vultures can easily fly from one continent to another. In Africa, the Sahelo-Saharan region is one of their destinations, flying 4,000 km from eastern Europe mainly.
Photo © Cloé Pourchier

NESTING. In addition to being an over-wintering area, Niger also constitutes a breeding area for Egyptian vultures. A small population of resident birds share with the migratory birds these same dry plains with very few but vital water points, and small scattered villages surrounded by reddish rocky cliffs. *Photo © Thomas Rabeil*



Fieldwork will be carried out in areas previously located by the project, such as the Koutous highlands near to Zinder in eastern Niger. This year, we will also focus on the Maradi area, known to be home to a significant concentration of Egyptian vultures that also spread into neighboring Nigeria. We will be monitoring nesting and congregation sites.

We will also be paying particular attention to power lines and their possible impact on vultures and other raptors. Fortunately, NIGELEC (Niger's electricity distribution company) has kindly provided us with a map of the main power lines in the country. We will be keeping a close watch on the lines inside our focal area, looking for possible victims of impacts or electrocution. Using mapping software, we have combined the distribution of the lines with the vultures' preferred areas to better prioritize our presence in the field.

A new smartphone application has been developed (thanks to the project team great work and efforts!) that will significantly help fieldwork. "Survey123" allows real-time recording of the data collected in the field which, greatly facilitates later reporting and distribution.

As for our investigative work, we have already received a lot of data from the authorities in Niger and are grateful for their cooperation. In the weeks to come, SCF will also be consulting members of the local communities. Speaking to local

stakeholders is not only instrumental to finding long-term conservation solutions but also provides an important additional source of information. Their knowledge and perception of the Egyptian vulture and more generally, information on the vultures' daily habits are of particular interest to the project.

Questionnaires on a series of topics, including the potential threats to the species, have been prepared. The aim is to query the farmers about their use of pesticides, and also the livestock owners about how they manage their livestock, how they protect them from carnivores, what drugs they would use as part of the veterinarian care, etc.

One of the questionnaires has been developed by behavioural experts and will be carried out on a representative sample of the population. This survey focuses on traditional beliefs, practices, and values surrounding the Egyptian vulture. Surveys like this are particularly relevant for the project. Not only do they provide immediate answers but also permit close engagement with stakeholders. The outcomes will pave the way for future outreach campaigns about the Egyptian vulture and the objectives of the Egyptian vulture project.

Stay tuned!

BY **Cloé Pourchier**
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SCF NIGER PROJECT OFFICER
Thomas Rabeil
SCF SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER



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.SAHARACONSERVATION.ORG/DONATE



www.saharaconservation.org | scf@saharaconservation.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!

SCF is grateful to Thomas Rabeil, Mark Stanley Price, John Newby, Cloé Pourchier, Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou, Clark Andres, Kateřina Gašparova, for their photos and contributions to this issue. Sandscript is edited by Yasmina Khaznawi, Communications Officer for SCF. You can reach her for any comments and feedback (contact informations above). We also 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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Photo © John Newby

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 on line at www.sahara-conservation.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.

