



Sandscript

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On foot and camel through Termit

This issue's evocative and passionate front page editorial is by SCF Board Member, Roseline Beudels. Roseline works at Belgium's Royal Institute for Natural Sciences and is the CMS Scientific Council's coordinator for the Concerted Action for Sahelo-Saharan Mega-Fauna of which the SCF implemented Termit/Tin Toumma project is a major contribution.

"In the first chilly hours of the early morning, sitting on a large block of basalt on top of a high black hill in the middle of Termit, we scan the many valleys at our feet and the steep rocky slopes of the surrounding hills. Searching this fabulous landscape with attentive eyes through our binoculars, we are trying to see those that do not wish to be seen. A few hundred meters away, nine Barbary sheep climb lazily on the tips of their hooves. A short yelp; a few dozen meters below us a dazzled Rüppell's fox stares at us in disbelief and runs away.

Following the ridgeline that merges into a high plateau, we come face to face with two dama gazelles. A few seconds of complete immobility and they are gone. Down in the valley, a lappet

-faced vulture struggles to lift itself into the air in the absence of thermals. But the temperature rises by the hour. Heading towards a large acacia tree, Cokie, our Toubou guide, leads our six camels to the shade. Day after day, we progress through the mountains, fascinating successions of dark and shiny rocks, dry riverbeds, expanses of thorn trees and sandy valleys. This combination of walking and camel riding is the perfect way to approach the secrets of the Termit, one of Niger's least known mountain ranges. Riding along with Cokie, from one valley to the next, is like reading through an open book. We come across many fresh tracks, including those of several cheetahs, striped hyenas and honey badgers. Fennec and jackals walk around us every night, sometime just a few meters away. Birds, as always, are a constant pleasure. How extraordinary it is to watch the little green bee-eater, the hoopoe, the larks, so much at ease in this environment. One morning, I discover the track of a small viper that had carefully avoided my sleeping mat.



This trip will be a succession of moments of high excitement and small pleasures. One glorious morning, in the northern part of the range, fourteen dama gazelles look at us and slowly walk away, one by one, in no hurry. A few days later, we have the immense privilege of watching a herd of twenty-eight addax in the dunes of Tin Toumma.

There is so much beauty around us that it is easy to forget how fragile it all is. Easy to forget the austere splendour of Termit and the harsh but peaceful environment of the dunes could so easily lose all these precious species that make them so much alive.

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The fruits of Grewia (top) and Ziziphus (bottom) are eaten by a wide variety of desert birds and even by small foxes and jackals.



This beautifully camouflaged sand cat flattens itself to avoid detection (Photo: Tim Wacher/SCF)

Termit (cont. from page 1)

At night, under the millions of stars, the sky now reflects the powerful lights from the Chinese oil company base camps. Tracks of huge prospecting trucks criss-cross the sand. Signs of disturbance are everywhere. And it does not take much imagination to see change is coming. The future pipeline, the traffic it will generate, workers, camps, garbage, flying plastic bags. The sudden noise and artificial light in such a peaceful and pristine haven.

And yet there is hope. At

the military camp in Kaoboul, the commander is proud to announce that military forces have been asked to help with wildlife conservation. Our only hope is to raise the profile of this unique Saharan natural heritage which Niger is one of the last countries to harbour, to transform destroyers into supporters, and to awake the interest of the Chinese developers in wildlife conservation. This is the major challenge our team has taken in hand.

The dream we had a few

years ago of setting up a protected area around Termit is taking shape. It is not that often in one's life one is blessed to see such a dream come true. We are still some way from a properly managed and fully-fledged protected area but things are well underway. I am so proud of all the good work that has been done so far by our great team on the ground.

It is an honour to be part of such a beautiful and promising enterprise."



Saharan carnivores

SCF's Saharan Carnivores project continues to shed new light on the amazingly diverse community of small canids and felids harboured by the Termit ecosystem of Niger. Since last August, Oxford University's Wild-CRU researcher, Seamus MacLennan, has been capturing and collaring fennec,

Rüppell's and pale foxes to better understand their ecology so they can be properly conserved. Our team in the field have recorded the sand cat (pictured above), as well as the wild cat (right), seen here in the company of an alert Sudan bustard.

The use of camera traps also

plays a major role in recording these largely nocturnal creatures. And while the cheetah has so far escaped our lenses, we have at last 'captured' some beautiful images of the extremely rare and wily striped hyena (top right).



Adult North African red-necked ostriches at the Kellé breeding centre in Niger (Photo: Newby/SCF)

The great escape

Did you know if placed correctly on its end an ostrich egg can support the weight of a full grown human being? Even more amazing, then, is the fact a hatchling ostrich weighing around a kilo can break its way out of the same egg. And breaking out they have been as SCF and its team in Niger enter a second year of incubating ostrich eggs as part of its programme to restore the critically endangered North African race of the bird to the wild.

So far, we have eleven young chicks on the ground, with a further 20 eggs under incubation. Raising young ostriches is a tricky business but thanks to partnerships, both locally and abroad, we are learning a lot about the critical husbandry, veterinarian and feeding issues. We are especially grateful to our colleagues at the Niamey Zoo, Mulhouse Zoo in France, to veterinarian, Pete Black, of St Louis Zoo, and to Sara

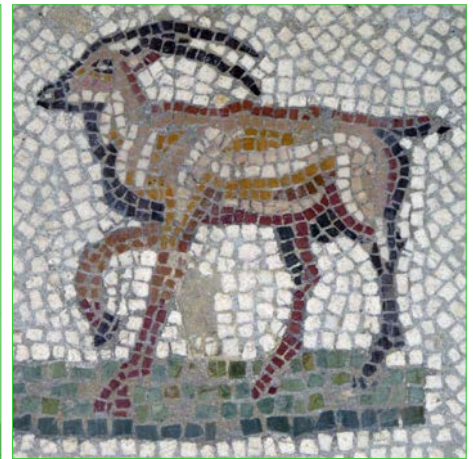
Hallager (Smithsonian Institution), Scott Tidmus (Disney's Animal Kingdom), Mike Mace (San Diego Wild Animal Park) and Ron Surratt (Fort Worth Zoo) for their constant support and excellent advice.

In 2009, we began a support programme to local ostrich breeders, which included incubation of their eggs, as well as provision of advice and funds for improving healthcare and the diet of their ostriches. In 2010, we are expanding this programme to include the Kellé ostrich breeding centre in eastern Niger. Kellé is run by our local Nigerien partner, CERNK (*Coopérative pour l'Exploitation des Ressources Naturelles du Koutous*), and we are gearing up for a major infrastructure development programme thanks to the very generous support we have received from the Exotic Wildlife Association, the AZA Conservation Endow-

ment Fund, St Louis Zoo, and the *Planète Sauvage* zoo in France for the purchase and transport of fencing materials to allow a complete renovation of Kellé's aging fences, holding pens and breeding enclosures.

To help with all this, SCF has been able to secure the support of the US Peace Corps in Niger, and it was with great pleasure we recently installed volunteer, Dylan Burruss (photo below right) to his new home and job in the tiny, traditional village of Kellé. Along with CERNK staff, and with support from the nearby SCF-implemented Termit/Tin Toumma project, Dylan will help with infrastructure development, management and monitoring of the Kellé site and its current resident population of eight North African ostriches. Our fingers are crossed this number will soon increase thanks to the eggs currently being laid inside the enclosure.





Scimitar-horned oryx workshop participants gather in Al Ain to discuss the species' conservation

Return of the Phoenix

At some unrecorded time towards the end of the 20th Century the scimitar-horned became extinct in the wild. North of the Sahara its fate had been sealed many centuries ago. Even to the south, in its mainstream Sahelian grassland habitats, proto-conservationists were already expressing concern for populations in many countries as early as the 1930s. The oryx has been a casualty of many different processes, including such natural phenomena as drought and desertification, but especially more modern human impacts, like overhunting, habitat-encroachment and competition with increasing numbers of cattle.

In November, 2009, a process was put in motion to gather support and information for a global recovery plan for this most charismatic desert antelope. In association with SCF, the Al Ain Wildlife Park & Resort of Abu Dhabi organ-

ized and most generously hosted a gathering of 26 experts from across the globe to discuss the critical issues of genetics, husbandry, captive-breeding, small population management and healthcare, as well as the bottlenecks that need to be addressed if a robust restoration programme for the species is to be designed and implemented. Although it is extinct in the wild, there are luckily still several thousand oryx in captivity, notably in the US, Europe and the Gulf.

The workshop was very ably facilitated by Phil Miller (right) and his colleague, Caroline Lees (right at the computer) of IUCN's Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG). We are especially grateful for the strong range state support for this initiative and wish to thank the delegates from Tunisia, Morocco, Niger and Senegal for their invaluable input. Strong support, too, from the for-

mal captive breeding programmes in both Europe (EAZA) and the United States (AZA), as well as the IUCN Antelope Specialist Group.

Armed with the commitment and knowledge generated during the first workshop, a second is to be held in Algeria in April to address more closely the critical issues of captive-breeding and restoration in the oryx's former range states, both north and south of the Sahara. Building on what has already been achieved in countries such as Senegal, Morocco and Tunisia (see article on page 6), the meeting plans on producing a solid action plan for rolling out further initiatives while supporting those already in place. Key to this will be the identification of potential reintroduction sites, together with the criteria and pre-requisites for successful captive-breeding and reintroduction programmes.





Issaka Houdou (left), Halidou Amadou (centre) and Tim Wachter (right) collect weather data and coordinates during a PSWS survey of Termit

Pan Sahara Wildlife Survey

Sound science and training are cornerstones of SCF's Pan Sahara Wildlife Survey. In rolling out this exciting new initiative, PSWS project leader, Tim Wachter, was recently joined by Nigerien wildlife biologists to continue long term monitoring of the addax population of Termit and Tin Toumma (photo bottom). Findings indicate a more or less stable population of around 200, however, threats from increased petroleum activities in the addax's core range may have a significant impact on their distribution and access to grazing. It is only through long term monitoring of developments that trends can be identified, measured and addressed through wild-

life or protected area management.

With its strong field focus, PSWS is also a valuable capacity-building and training tool. Survey and monitoring methods are taught to local co-workers, as well as use of the tools of the trade, data collection and analysis. In Termit this included collection of dama gazelle dung samples for genetic analysis, identification of birds and monitoring of nesting lap-pet-faced vultures.

Following the Termit mission, Tim and SCF director, John Newby, headed to Algeria and Tunisia to discuss potential PSWS sites. Partnership and relevancy are also key PSWS concepts. The closer we work with

local partners, the better the chances we will be working in high priority areas with strong likelihood of follow up to recommendations springing from PSWS work. PSWS may also be catalytic in bringing about stronger trans-boundary ties and action to conserve shared ecosystems. A good example is the biodiverse Grand Erg Oriental, shared by Algeria and Tunisia. There is no doubt conservation of the remaining slender-horned gazelle populations would benefit from closer cooperation. Similarly, the issue of reintroduction of addax into the erg from populations currently held in captivity in the Tunisian parks of Jbil and Senghar.



Sandscript is the twice-yearly newsletter of SCF, the **Sahara Conservation Fund**. It is written and edited by SCF CEO John Newby. To subscribe to or sponsor **Sandscript** please click [here](#). SCF is grateful to Roseline Beudels, Thomas Rabeil and Tim Wachter for text and images used in this issue.

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

Our vision is of a Sahara that is well conserved and managed, in which ecological processes function naturally, with plants and animals existing in healthy numbers across their historical range; a Sahara that benefits all its inhabitants and where support for its conservation comes from stakeholders across all sectors of society.

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](#). We would love to hear from you!

Desert All Stars



Abdelkader Chetoui (right in the years, Abdelkader and his above photo) is a man with a team have reclaimed this land from over-grazing. Native plants have been seeded, watershed management put in place and water resources increased through the construction of a small dam, which today is visited by many birds and the park's small population of Barbary

sheep and dorcas gazelles.

Seen here with Forestry Department conservationist and veterinarian, Khaled Zahzah, Abdelkader and Khaled recently showed SCF director, John Newby, and SCF board member from Hanover Zoo, Dr. Heiner Engel, the beautiful herd of oryx reintroduced into the park. In 2007 and

2008, Dghoumes was chosen to receive oryx from Tunisia's Bou Hedma NP and from stock brought in from zoos in the US and Europe. Thanks to the reinvigorated habitat and Abdelkader's care, the oryx are thriving, demonstrating that with commitment and hard work progress is possible.

