

ISSUE 26 - FALL 2019

# 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





# SANDSCRIPT

ISSUE 26 - FALL 2019

The end of the year is definitely busy time, with one of the most emblematic desert animals – the addax -- amongst SCF's focal species. This beautiful antelope, nearly extinct in the wild although highly adapted to aridity, has been the focus of several reintroduction programmes in the Sahel and the Sahara. SCF participates in these efforts, either by assisting its partners with activities related to these operations (animal collaring, capture, ecological monitoring, etc...) or by taking the lead on translocations and addax releases on the ground. We can only rejoice at the scientific, political, and institutional mobilization in favor of the species as it's truly crucial to the addax's survival. In Chad, the "Oryx Reintroduction Project", whose purpose was primarily the reintroduction of the scimitar-horned oryx, is entering a promising "multi-species" second 5-year phase. As part of this, a first group of fifteen addax was transferred from our partners at the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi to Chad and put in a pre-release pen, next to the oryx. We hope this new addax dimension will grow, and conservation efforts around the species be intensified. In all cases, SCF will continue to work in the best interest of the reintroduced animals and facilitate their adaptation to their new living conditions and increase in population size.

More encouraging news from SCF is the smooth development of the "POROA" (French acronym of the Ouadi

Rimé-Ouadi Achim Project) project, which is now at the end of its first year of operation. Largely funded by the European Union, POROA capitalizes on the long-standing presence and experience of the organization to develop a unique management model adapted to the specificities of the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve (OROAGR). Improved management will eventually sustain the restoration of the reserve's biodiversity and the preservation of its existing resources. In line with the "landscape" approach promoted by SCF in its strategic action plan for 2018-2020, this model will be inclusive, dynamic, and involve participation of all relevant local and national stakeholders. In order to establish a solid baseline, one of POROA's first activities was the conduct a thorough socio-economic survey to assess the opportunities and challenges in the reserve. Major themes have been addressed through the survey, including perceptions on the status of the environment and natural resources, institutional frameworks, human and social dimensions, etc. Sandscript 26 outlines the outcomes of this study through a short debrief piece.

Finally, you will find in this issue a summary of the actions and results achieved by SCF in Niger as part of its ecological monitoring work on vultures, and especially the Egyptian vulture.

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1. Left page: an addax, recently fitted with a GPS tracking collar by the team, waits patiently to return to the wild.

2. On the right: under the enthusiastic eyes of the Chadians, the addax seem very happy to get back to wide-open spaces, rushing into the pre-release pen that will serve as their home for the next few months.



Photos © John Newby

PAR

**John Newby**

CONSERVATION BIOLOGIST

SENIOR ADVISOR OF THE SAHARA CONSERVATION

FUND

## Project Oryx Phase II

# Restoring Nature a Piece at a Time

FIFTY YEARS AGO, CHAD ESTABLISHED THE OUADI RIMÉ-OUADI ACHIM GAME RESERVE. AT THE TIME, THIS ENORMOUS PROTECTED AREA, OVER TWICE THE SIZE OF SWITZERLAND OR BELGIUM, WAS A WILD AND LARGELY WATERLESS GRASSLAND. DURING THE SHORT, THREE-MONTH RAINY SEASON THE RESERVE WAS OCCUPIED BY THOUSANDS OF MIGRATORY NOMADS AND THEIR HERDS OF CATTLE, SHEEP AND CAMELS. FOR THE REST OF THE YEAR IT WAS LARGELY A WILDERNESS, WHERE ONLY WILDLIFE COULD PROSPER. LARGE UNGULATES, LIKE SCIMITAR-HORNED ORYX, ADDAX, DORCAS AND DAMA GAZELLES WERE ABUNDANT. CARNIVORES RANGED FROM THE SMALL FENNEC AND PALE FOXES TO LARGER PREDATORS, SUCH AS THE STRIPED HYAENA, THE CHEETAH AND EVEN SMALL NUMBERS OF WILD HUNTING DOGS. IT WAS A VERITABLE WILDLIFE PARADISE.

Fast forward a few decades of expanding livestock numbers, the sinking of hundreds of permanent wells, bushfires, uncontrolled poaching, a murderous civil war and an almost total lack of money for conservation and the story today was until very recently a vastly different one. Less than a decade ago, most of the large species were either extinct or on the verge of extinction. Only the hardy little dorcas gazelles and the smaller carnivores remained in any number. The habitat, however, the vast seasonal grazing lands so attractive to wildlife and cattle alike, was still in good shape. Spurred on by tangible commitments from the Chadian authorities to control poaching and restore the country's remarkable protected areas system, SCF and its partner, the Environment Agency Abu Dhabi (EAD), decided to undertake an audacious programme to restore the reserve's iconic large mammal fauna.

Between 2016 and 2019, 200 scimitar-horned oryx were flown from Abu Dhabi to Chad and released into the reserve in what must surely be one of the most ambitious wildlife reintroductions ever undertaken. The oryx have prospered and in spite

of some losses, due mostly to disease and natural male-male aggression, there are now almost 300 oryx living freely in Chad for the first time in 50 years. Inspired by the success of the first 5-year phase of the programme, EAD confidently agreed to a second chapter. This time, however, in addition to the oryx, other lost or critically endangered species would be included; species like the addax, the dama gazelle and the ostrich.

In November 2019, the first fifteen addax arrived to the joyful acclaim of dignitaries from Chad's civil and military authorities. Due for release into the wild in January 2020, the addax will soon be joined by further shipments in the years to come. With so many habitats expunged of their larger wildlife, restoration and reintroduction are rapidly gathering importance in the conservation toolkit. Like a jigsaw puzzle missing major parts, our job is to put them back a piece at a time and pray that lessons have been learned that allow humanity to progress without squandering its irreplaceable natural capital.





**FREE AGAIN.** The Addax, this Saharan antelope on the verge of extinction in the wild (the remaining population is estimated at less than 100 individuals), is a highly migratory species, which can travel great distances in a few hours. This migratory nature is of course the mainspring of its subsistence in arid and semi-arid environments, enabling it to find food and water more easily. Before any release operation, a scrupulous preparation is therefore required, including the installation of a tracking collar equipped with a GPS transmitter to trace the animals' movements and evaluate their adaptive behaviour. Once the collars are put on and the last care given (vaccinations, measurements, etc.), the group of addax disappears quietly into the bushes.

*Photos © Thomas Rabeil*

## Addax reintroduction in Morocco

# The Long-Awaited Return of the Addax

IN MOROCCO, ADDAX USED TO ROAM FROM THE UPPER DRĀA REGION, WITH SIGHTINGS NEXT TO THE TOWN OF ZAGORA, TO THE ATLANTIC SAHARA IN THE DAKHLA REGION. THE LAST HERD WAS EXTERMINATED IN 1942 AND THE LAST KNOWN SIGHTING WAS IN 1963. AN ADDAX RESTORATION PROGRAM WAS INITIATED BY THE MOROCCAN AUTHORITIES IN 1994-1996 AND 70 ADDAX FROM SEVERAL EUROPEAN ZOOS WERE REINTRODUCED TO SOUSS MASSA NATIONAL PARK, CLOSE TO THE TOWN OF AGADIR. THIS SEMI-CAPTIVE BREEDING POPULATION DID VERY WELL AND IN EARLY 2019 THE POPULATION ESTIMATE WAS OF 400 INDIVIDUALS. IN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE NATIONAL ANTELOPE RESTORATION STRATEGY, 20 ADDAX WERE MOVED IN 2008 AND 2010 TO THE SAFIA ENCLOSURE NEAR THE MAURITANIAN BORDER. THE ADDAX GROUP IN SAFIA IS BREEDING AND THE POPULATION IS NOW AROUND 40 INDIVIDUALS.

This kind of operation was recently repeated and in March 2019, the Moroccan authorities translocated 20 addax from Souss Massa National Park to a 20 ha enclosure in M'Hamid Al Ghizlane Natural Reserve, near the city of Zagora. A further translocation of 12 addax from Souss Massa National Park to the enclosure was planned for early October, with a final release of the 32 individuals into the wild by the beginning of November.

Based on available funding, the Water & Forest Department in close collaboration with the Sahara Conservation Fund and the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute agreed to collar 10 addax during the capture operation in Souss Massa National Park before the translocation. Based on their experience with the scimitar-horned oryx reintroduction project in Chad, both organizations were very happy to contribute their expertise and participate in this operation, the first of its kind in Africa.

The transport phase started once all the animals were crated to minimize the stress due to engine noise. The two trucks left at 2:00 pm for an 18-hour journey from Souss Massa National Park to the M'Hamid Reserve, a 600-kilometre journey. Upon arrival, the 12 crates were lowered to the ground and aligned to avoid collision during the release. Each animal was then released one by one.

To ensure the success of this operation, an awareness campaign, carried out by the Moroccan wildlife authorities with local communities and local administrative authorities, was initiated last year in the framework of the dorcas gazelle reintroduction in the same area. Sensitization is ongoing with the rural municipality of M'ha-

mid El-Ghizlane, national conservation NGOs, tourism partners (Provincial Council of tourism, tourism operators). In addition to the awareness campaign, the Moroccan wildlife authorities, supported by local stakeholders, will undertake more sensitization activities with a special focus on addax in the coming months, before the animals are released into the wild.

For the first time ever on this scale in Africa, and more specifically in Morocco, this operation will help better understand the spatial movements and habitat requirements of addax in their former historical range. This work will be critical for their long-term sustainability, especially considering increasing touristic development across the region.

BY **Thomas Rabeil**  
**BIOLOGY CONSERVATION EXPERT**  
SAHARA CONSERVATION FUND

BY **Zouhair Amhaouch**  
HEAD OF DIVISION  
DEPARTMENT OF WATER AND FORESTS OF MOROCCO

BY Latifa Sikli  
VETERINARIAN  
DEPARTMENT OF WATER AND FORESTS OF MOROCCO

BY Jared Stabach





**FIRST STEERING COMMITTEE OF THE PROJECT.** Terms of reference for a steering committee were developed in close collaboration with the Chadian Directorate of Wildlife Conservation and Protected Areas (DCFAP), which led to its creation by ministerial order on 21 August 2019. It is composed of 14 permanent members, including 5 representatives of local communities and 3 women.

## Project Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim

# POROA: Embarking on a Promising Journey

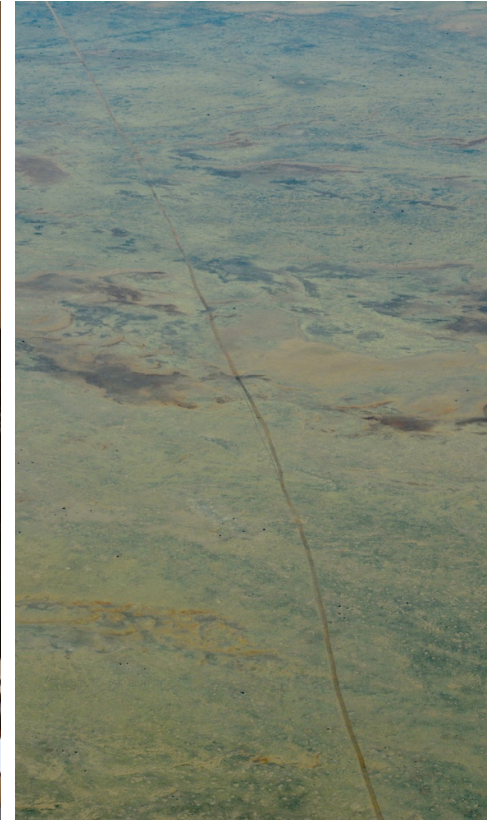
BY  
**Annabelle Honorez**  
PROJECT LEADER  
OUADI RIMÉ-OUADI ACHIM  
PROJECT (POROA)  
SAHARA CONSERVATION FUND

TOGETHER WITH THE CHAD ORYX REINTRODUCTION PROJECT, POROA IS ONE OF THE LARGEST AND MOST AMBITIOUS INITIATIVES EVER UNDERTAKEN BY THE SAHARA CONSERVATION FUND. IT HIGHLIGHTS THE INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AT SCF AND ALSO THE GROWING CONFIDENCE OF LARGE-SCALE INTERNATIONAL DONORS IN THE ORGANIZATION AND ITS RESULTS. POROA 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 VALUE OF THE OUADI RIME-OUADI ACHIM RESERVE IS BEING RECOGNIZED.

POROA started in central Chad in the fall of 2018. The first year of the project was largely devoted to setting it up in the field, with the recruitment of a team, the installation of offices in February 2019 near the entrance of the reserve in the town of Arada, purchase of vital equipment, and promotion of the project among its local, national and international stakeholders.

Since the beginning, the POROA team has worked closely with the Oryx Reintroduction Project, established in the reserve since

2015, notably through infrastructure development. Fifty-five kilometres of firebreak were maintained, and fire-fighting equipment was purchased. An enclosure to accommodate the first arrival of addax from Abu Dhabi was built with POROA support in September 2019. A technical assistance mission organized by the ECOFAC team in Gabon visited the POROA team at the beginning of the year to assess the project's startup and to witness firsthand the excellent synergy that exists between POROA and the Oryx Project.



**AERIAL VIEW OF THE RESERVE.** In September 2019, a tractor and equipment were acquired in collaboration with the "Oryx" team to reinforce the bush fire-fighting system. The route has been revised and partly follows the tracks of traffickers driving across the reserve, a cause for more than 50% of the fires in previous years. Nearly 180 kilometres of firebreaks were built in 2019.

**OFFICIAL PROJECT KICK-OFF WORKSHOP.** Above and to the right are images of the official launch of the POROA on June 20, 2019. APROCOFF, a local environmental awareness NGO and SCF partners on the POROA, was present. APROCOFF provided TV media coverage of the workshop, which was held under the patronage of the local governorates (Wadi Fira and Batha) and the Representative of the European Union

*Photos double page © Annabelle Honorez*



The POROA team participated in meetings of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership and the International Conference of Ministers in charge of Defence to discuss conservation and security in protected areas and the fight against poaching and other cross-border criminal activities. There were also two Monitoring and Orientation Committees organized by the Support Programme for the management of Chad's Protected Areas and Fragile Ecosystems (APEF) within the framework of ECOFAC VI. Following a preliminary survey of the socio-cultural context of the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim reserve, to identify the challenges and opportunities related to the project's work, the team also organized

several events to share the survey's findings. A major event was also held to launch the POROA project and to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve's creation in 1969. Alongside regular steering committee meetings, POROA also organized with African Parks Network and Chad's wildlife department a meeting to develop a national strategy for the conservation of the North African ostrich.

It's been an intense but very fruitful year for the POROA team as it gets to grips with its mission.





**MEETING THE LOCAL POPULATION.** Image of a meeting with leaders of traditional authorities in the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve held as part of the diagnostic study conducted by POROA.

## Project Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim

# Challenges and Work Opportunities in the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve

BY  
**Annabelle Honorez**  
PROJECT LEADER  
OUADI RIMÉ-OUADI ACHIM  
PROJECT (POROA)  
SAHARA CONSERVATION  
FUND

Article written on the basis of the conclusions of the report "Etude diagnostique du contexte socio-économique et culturel de la réserve de faune de Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim - République du Tchad" written by Bertrand Duhem and Florian Cornu of the

AS A LOGICAL PREREQUISITE TO THE LAUNCH OF THE POROA PROJECT, A MAJOR, INDEPENDENT, SOCIO-CULTURAL SURVEY WAS CARRIED OUT IN THE OUADI RIME-OUADI ACHIM GAME RESERVE DURING EARLY 2019. THE PURPOSE OF THE SURVEY WAS TO PROVIDE BOTH AN OVERVIEW AND A BASELINE AT THE TIME THE PROJECT STARTED. THANKS TO THE MANY CONTACTS MADE AND INTERVIEWS HELD WITH THE RESERVE'S STAKEHOLDERS, A NUMBER OF CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR POROA WERE IDENTIFIED., TOGETHER WITH RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO PROCEED.

The survey highlighted complexity and dynamic nature of the reserve and its inhabitants. Overall, the natural environment was deemed extremely well suited to the work of conservation and species reintroduction. Pastoralism was recognised as an optimal way of exploiting the reserve's natural grazing resources. In theory, pastoralism need not impact the environment too strongly, since use is largely seasonal and spread over large areas. Nevertheless, climate change and increased use will change this. Once only present seasonally, nomads are becoming more and more sedentarized and livestock numbers are growing rapidly. Agriculture and

forest clearance are also having an impact on sensitive wadi habitats. The notion of "untouched" areas, where species conservation and reintroduction activities are conducted is increasingly being called into question.

POROA, whose mission is help develop a system of mutually-beneficial cohabitation between wildlife and human land-use, comes at a pivotal moment in the history of the reserve and of the reintroductions being carried out there. The project will have to take unprecedented measures to create awareness and develop a functional co-management system in the reserve involving the area's many



**SEDENTARIZATION.** In the reserve, increasing signs of sedentary or semi-sedentary agricultural exploitation (sorghum, millet) can be seen, especially in the wadis or temporary watercourses.



**BUSHFIRES: A SEASONAL CHALLENGE.** If the reserve is first known for its numerous wild habitats favourable to many species (the photo above shows a typical landscape for the dama gazelle), numerous bush fires episodically harm its flora, thus impacting the fauna. POROA has therefore made bush fire control one of its priorities, and is working on it in collaboration with the Oryx Project.

The very existence of the reserve, its purpose, legal aspects and boundaries are still not known by many of the people living in and around the vast reserve. The development and rolling out of a coherent and clear development and management plan for the reserve is one of the biggest priorities for POROA.

With the support of the European Union, the involvement of the Chadian government, the assistance of the best international scientists, and a highly skilled and passionate team on the ground, the POROA has many assets to carry out its mission.

*Photos double page © John Newby*



IN THE GADABEJI BIOSPHERE RESERVE, NIGER. The team visited the reserve's main pond during their Spring and Summer monitoring missions, but no vultures had been seen there.

In addition to the migratory birds, there is also a small population of resident Egyptian vultures. While regular monitoring of nests achieved over the last few years have allowed for the development of good knowledge about their breeding period, their behavior during the winter remains so far not very well known. Initially assumed erratic during this period, some Egyptian vultures were however observed repeatedly (at the beginning and end of the day) near their nest, showing thus limited mobility. Unlike their European counterparts, they seem to spend the whole year on the same territory, close to their nesting grounds. Evidence of breeding were also collected during the same mission, at the beginning of winter – which is a first in Niger!



Photos double page © Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou @ Cloé Pour-



**RÜPPELL'S VULTURES.** During this mission, Rüppell's vultures have also been observed repeatedly near a breeding pair of Egyptian vultures. According to the collected testimonies from local populations, Rüppell's vultures (photos on the right) were once present in the area but have been extinct for years. However, since May 2019, SCF team have made repeated observations of these scavengers, indicating their possible return to the area.

## Vulture Conservation

BY **Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou**  
SCF PROJECT OFFICER

# On the Tracks of Sahelian Vultures

BY **Cloé Pourchier**  
SCF PROJECT MANAGER

OF THE THREE CONTINENTS WHERE EGYPTIAN VULTURES CAN BE FOUND, IT IS PROBABLY IN AFRICA THEY ARE THE LEAST KNOWN AND STUDIED. IN 2015, OUR NIGER TEAM BEGAN MONITORING EGYPTIAN VULTURE NESTS. FURTHER ACTIVITIES ON THE SPECIES WERE THEN CONDUCTED IN 2018 WITH THE EU-FUNDED "EGYPTIAN VULTURE NEW LIFE" PROJECT, UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE BULGARIAN SOCIETY FOR THE PROTECTION OF BIRDS, AND IN ASSOCIATION WITH NUMEROUS PARTNERS GLOBALLY. THE AIM OF THIS INTERNATIONAL PROJECT IS TO STRENGTHEN AND ACHIEVE A SUSTAINABLE INCREASE IN THE EGYPTIAN VULTURE POPULATION COMING FROM EASTERN EUROPE BY IMPLEMENTING URGENT CONSERVATION MEASURES IN BREEDING AND MIGRATORY AREAS OF NIGER.

The Sahelo-Saharan region and Niger in particular are important wintering area for many Egyptian vultures breeding in Europe. Egyptian vultures from Italy can be found in western Niger, close to the border with Mali, while birds from Eastern Europe have been observed in the east of the country, with wintering areas extending as far as Ethiopia. Contributing to vital vulture monitoring work, SCF's team in Niger focusses its efforts on the Zinder region of eastern Niger.

During winter, several months after the brief rainy season, Egyptian vultures can often be seen at the few remaining waterholes that haven't already dried up. Of major importance is the largest waterhole in the heart of the Kutous Mountains. The lake provides water for the area's large herds of cattle as well as the region's birdlife. At the beginning of December, SCF's team spotted eight Egyptian vultures of different ages, from immature

to adult, sharing the lake with pied crows and cattle egrets. However, despite these encouraging observations, vultures are particularly endangered and SCF is investigating threats to these birds. Poaching and the use of vultures in traditional beliefs and medicine is strongly suspected to be the main threat. Numerous testimonies have been collected, and carcasses and vulture parts found in the markets around Zinder, confirm the role of traditional use and related poaching as serious threats. Awareness-raising activities have been initiated to discourage the use of vultures in traditional practices, hopefully leading to a reduction in these unsustainable and largely illegal practices.





## 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, inclu-

ding 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  
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[WWW.SAHARACONSERVATION.ORG/DONATE](http://WWW.SAHARACONSERVATION.ORG/DONATE)



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*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 John Newby, Thomas Rabeil, Cloé Pourchier, Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou, Annabelle Honorez, 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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# SANDSCRIPT

**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.saharaconservation.org](http://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.

