



Sandscript

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News from the frontline

It will have escaped no one's attention that much of the Sahara and Sahel is in turmoil. Long gone are the days when one could work and travel carefree north to south and east to west across this vast and fascinating region.

Already a significant challenge in more peaceful times, carrying out and maintaining support for critically important conservation work in times of open warfare, terrorism and general insecurity calls for enormous motivation and commitment on all sides.

It also requires tangible evidence that something productive can indeed be done and that achieving this is not only effective but sustainable.

In this issue of *Sandscript* we present such examples. And whether it be the Wild Foundation's project in Mali to conserve that country's unique population of elephants or our own program in Niger in support of the newly-established

Termit & Tin Toumma National Nature Reserve, there is a common and very strong thread connecting them all: capacity-building of our local partners and empowerment of the communities living closest to the wildlife we are all trying to conserve.

The 550 or so Mali elephants (photo below) are an internationally important population representing 12% of West African elephants. They are the northernmost African elephants and make a unique migration that covers over 32,000 km², the largest range recorded for the species.

Susan Canney reports on the strategy taken in Mali to protect the elephants in the midst of turmoil and insecurity.

It is a sad reality but it often takes a crisis to test the veracity (and the rhetoric) of certain commonly-held principles and practices. In times of peace it is easy to get distracted from the grittier issues of building true sustainability and the development of exit strategies

based on the transfer of roles and responsibilities away from external agencies and towards local institutions, host country nationals, and above all local communities.

On a brighter note, I am happy to report on significant progress in our discussions with the Chadian authorities and the Environment Agency of Abu Dhabi for the implementation of a truly unique and ambitious project to reintroduce the scimitar-horned oryx back into the wild.

Likewise, this issue of *Sandscript* sees the start of a new item called *Tales from the Bush*. And like the one featured on snake-eating snakes, there are so many fascinating stories to recount that never seem to make the headlines but which so graphically describe the unique and wonderful nature of the incredible region we work in.

Enjoy the read and many, many thanks for your continued support to SCF.

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The Northern White-faced Owl (top) and the Barn Owl (bottom) are rarely seen but often heard nocturnal predators of the sparsely wooded Sabelian grasslands of Africa.



© Carlton Ward, Jr.



The Termit Massif supports a significant population of tree-nesting lappet-faced vultures (Photo: John Newby/SCF)

Termit & Tin Toumma

When SCF first began its signature project in eastern Niger to establish the Termit and Tin Toumma National Nature Reserve and to protect some of the world's rarest species, like the addax, dama gazelle and desert cheetah, security was not an issue and one could work safely almost everywhere.

After a spate of kidnappings in Niger and Mali, however, and then the war in Libya and its aftermath, armed military escorts were deemed a sensible precaution when travelling in the desert and carrying out regular wildlife research, protection and monitoring work. Unfortunately, since the war in Mali began earlier this year, security has further deteriorated and the vast desert area we work in is now strictly forbidden to westerners, with access severely regulated for national staff.

In spite of all this, the project team has continued to work, liaise with the local communities, and monitor the exceptional wildlife to be found in the reserve. This is made largely possible thanks to the approach adopted by SCF

based on training and capacity-building of the local staff. Since 2012, the local project team is composed entirely of skilled and knowledgeable Nigeriens.

However well-trained and motivated the team is, carrying out successful conservation projects in remote and potentially unsafe areas would not be possible without the support of the local communities. They have played a crucial role in helping maintain the continuity of project activities. Indeed, the community game guards recruited by the project with help from the local leaders have developed a network which is both useful for anti-poaching patrols and to collect information on the security situation in the area. The trust between the local population and the project team is a key element in allowing critical conservation work to proceed. The relationship is based on the recognition that win-win solutions are required and that our sole interest is not wildlife but the development of the local community as well, with priorities set on education,

health and water supply.

Another key factor is the excellent relationship established with the army units located in and around the reserve. Through its regular fieldwork, the project team is often the only contact between the military and their home town of Zinder, where they are normally based. Every visit is welcomed and information is exchanged about the security in the area and news shared about the soldiers' families back in town. The team's itinerary in carrying out its fieldwork is shared so should anything go wrong rescue is possible.

Insecurity and the threat of terrorism in the Sahara have become increasing concerns over the years and look likely to continue for a while to come. Nonetheless, we should not give up. Well-implemented conservation projects are a vital tool for improving wellbeing and stability in these vast arid lands, promoting wise practices and the sustainable use of the scarce natural resources that are of benefit to both local people and wildlife alike.





Community workers clear firebreaks around vital elephant habitat in Mali (Photo: Susan Canney)

Protecting Mali's Elephants

Like everyone, we were taken by surprise by the coup and the subsequent events. All government presence vanished from our project area - it became lawless, guns proliferated and three elephants were killed. We had to think fast about how to protect the elephants while maintaining the momentum of the project.

Activities continued through using motor-bikes instead of vehicles, while a four-day community meeting enabled discussion of the community's main challenges and preoccupations, and the poached elephants. Food was an obvious concern, as was the recruitment of young men to the jihadist cause through giving them guns plus enormous payments of \$30/day for single man and \$50/day for a married man. Concern was also voiced for the elephants that made their area special, and were the focus of the project which was enabling the community to reverse the resource degradation that is undermining their livelihoods.

Our field team pledged to help the communities secure grain, while their leaders and

elders pledged to use the communication training they had received (how to explain the project to others) to spread an essential message throughout the elephant range and to the armed groups: that *killing elephants steals from the local people*. The Tuareg rebels are culturally constrained from disobeying their clan elders, while the jihadis want to maintain relations as they rely on the local population for food. By doing this, the community leaders were also able to prevent the jihadis from taking the project camels.

One major initiative involved mobilising 520 young volunteers to create "vigilance networks" across the elephant range. These networks discovered the identities of those responsible for the poaching; retrieved the project's stolen solar panels; undertook resource-protection activities in return for food; and saw themselves as project "animateurs", extending the understanding of resource management as a way to resolve conflict across the elephant range. No members of

the vigilance networks joined the armed groups, while in another area of the elephant range beyond the project's current reach, relatively large numbers of young men joined up. They regarded working for the project as more 'noble', and there was a strong sense of pride in being able to provide for themselves and their families, as well as benefit their community.

As a result of this community action, only six elephants have been killed, but the threat to the elephants continues. Now that the area has been secured by the ground forces, the vigilance networks will work together with a newly constituted anti-poaching unit composed of Mali's best foresters. The community patrols will be "the eyes and ears" thus widening the reach of the foresters, while the foresters provide the enforcement. See <http://www.wild.org/where-we-work/the-desert-elephants-of-mali/>.

Susan Canney, Mali Elephant Project Coordinator. Photos by Carlton Ward, Jr.





A family of dorcas gazelles roams free in Chad's Ouadi Rime-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve (Photo: John Newby/SCF)

Ouadi Rime – Ouadi Achim

At over twice the size of Belgium, Chad's Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve is one of the world's biggest protected areas and an increasingly unique haven for threatened desert wildlife. Spanning both Saharan and Sahelian habitats, the reserve caters for an amazing array of species, many of them listed as conservation dependent.

Survey work carried out by SCF and Chadian scientists continues to increase the list of birds and mammals present. And when night falls, camera trapping takes over, recording nocturnal species, like foxes, jackals and hyenas. On a recent trip we even managed to capture on video a termite-devouring aardvark. This and other nocturnal animals can be seen on SCF's Facebook page at www.facebook.com/saharacf

Created in 1969, the reserve is also home to a large human population of nomadic and semi-sedentary pastoralists, rearing camels, cattle, goats and sheep. Over the years, the human population and its impact on the reserve and its wildlife have increased, some-

thing largely made possible by the development of permanent, deep water, wells throughout. Where impact has been the lowest, significant populations of dorcas gazelles and bustards still exist. Also present is a small and exceptionally valuable population of the critically endangered dama gazelle (see photo on back page). Recognizing the value of areas like this, local community leaders are keen to see them preserved, foregoing it would seem further well development.

Core areas of the reserve will be the focus of the scimitar-horned oryx project currently under development in partnership with the Chadian authorities and the Environment Agency of Abu Dhabi (EAD). Initial meetings in Chad's capital, N'Djaména, have been extremely positive and EAD staff have recently joined forces with SCF in the field to locate suitable areas for pre-release and acclimation pens.

Neighbourhood surveys have also been carried with assistance from Tim Wachter of the Zoological Society of

London. We want to learn as much as possible about the ecology and land-use of the areas the released oryx are likely to move into first. The aim now is to put a full proposal forward to the governments of both Chad and Abu Dhabi. While this is making its way through the system, further fieldwork will be carried out, including a wet season survey this summer to assess both ecological conditions and land occupancy as the reserve becomes home temporarily to several thousand nomadic pastoralists from the southern Chad.

It is clear that a successful reintroduction project will call not only for significant technical skills and funding but also a sincere attempt to build a project based on strong stakeholder support and participation from all the reserve's interest groups. The reserve is large enough for win-win solutions to be worked out for the benefit of both people and wildlife.

Funding for this project is generously provided by EAD and the Addax & Oryx Foundation.





Left: horned viper ready to strike (Marie Petretto); Right: Ernesto wrangles an Egyptian cobra (Marvell Wildlife)

Tales from the bush: cobra vs. viper!

Biological monitoring of Dghoumes National Park in Tunisia is being carried out to help understand the long term impacts of reintroduced oryx and other management interventions on the local ecosystem. Reptiles have been included in the suite of regular surveys because of their sensitivity to changes in vegetation structure which affects availability of shelter and foraging opportunities. So far 15 species of reptiles have been recorded, including snakes and various lizards, ranging from skinks and geckos to desert monitors (below).

One or two surprises have emerged, including evidence of ophiophagy (snake eating) which involves Egyptian cobras *Naja haje* apparently hunting another venomous snake, the horned viper

Cerastes cerastes. Early one morning the team discovered an adult cobra about two metres long, entwined with a smaller adult female horned viper. The disturbed cobra let go of its prey and vanished into a bush. The partially paralysed viper, which died soon after, was just under 70cm long. A second recently killed horned viper was found a month later by two of the park's eco-guards. The dead snake was surrounded by tracks of a much larger snake that could only have been a cobra. Again, it is likely that the predator was disturbed and fled.

The Egyptian cobra is a large and aggressive snake that is widespread across the Saharan region. The diet of this species is known largely from anecdotal reports, but includes a variety of small

mammals, reptiles, birds and eggs. The horned viper is also widespread but is a specialised semi-fossorial snake which ambushes rodents and lizards whilst partially buried in soft sand. The snakes' reddish-brown colours provide camouflage, working in their favour as both predator and prey. They have few natural enemies but as this species is quite abundant in Dghoumes National Park, it may be common prey for an active predator like the Egyptian cobra.

Novel observations of interactions between cobras and horned vipers in Dghoumes National Park are due for scientific publication.

This article was kindly written by Ernesto Filippi (Herpetologist) & Marie Petretto (Field Biologist), Marvell Wildlife.



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

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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 at scf@saharacconservation.org We would love to hear from you!

The world's largest and rarest gazelle



John Newby/SCF

The Dama Gazelle is one of the rarest antelopes on earth. This magnificent, critically endangered species can now only be found in three or four isolated places in Niger and Chad. Their overall numbers probably amount to less than 300 animals. Together with its partners, SCF is working to save this beautiful animal from extinction. Please help us do this by [donating to SCF](#).